

CHAPTER – 3

ON PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

THE PHILOSOPHIC BASE OF PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION

The meaning of “progressive education” depends on the meaning assigned to the word ‘progress’. Primitive sense of logic suggests that, whatever else the concept of progress may suggest, it incorporates, at least, the ideas of change and direction. Progress implies movement and movement involves changes in some direction. And to affirm that to change in any way is to progress is to say that a given situation is the worst of all possible situations and any change is an improvement. Most would assume that while some changes are progressive, others are regressive. But in any case, it seems quite clear that the concept of progress inevitably involves the ideas of change and direction; and from this we can identify the most elementary definition of progress: progress is change in a desirable direction.

The word ‘desirable’ indicates that there is an axiological, or value, implicit in the concept of progress. Thus we see that the concept of the comparative idea of ‘changes for the better’ plays an integral role in the concept of progress. However, this definition gives us no information as to which changes in which directions are to be desired at what times under which circumstances. Only when we have adduced the criteria to give us a sense of desirable direction will we grasp the full meaning of ‘progress’. And, as the concept ‘progress’ is used as a modifier in the term ‘progressive education’ the desirable directions will necessarily refer to the means and ends of education.

The Grecian Era : The pre-Socratics generally considered change to be characteristic of reality; indeed, for some, reality was change and change was reality. Anaximander saw reality as changing and pluralistic; Protagoras argued that nothing is fixed and final; and Heraclitus affirmed that all things are in flux.

But these early theories of change did not come to characterize Greek thought. Plato negated the reality of change and Aristotle encapsulated change in a changeless cycle of reality. So, owing partially to the lack of pre-Socratic writings and partially to Plato's beautiful language and Aristotle's persuasive logic, the particular segment of Greek thought we call "Greek Philosophy" considered change a superficial and unwelcome cover that obscured reality. To penetrate beyond 'appearances', where change was obvious, they sought to discover regions where nothing changed.

Plato went so far as to deny the reality of change by insisting that whatever changed was merely apparent, or phenomenological, hence unreal, while the truly real could not change because it had to be perfect, fixed, and final. Plato's student Aristotle disagreed that change was unreal or impossible for, as an empiricist, he had the testimony of his senses that changes occurred even in living things and, as a rationalist, he had the logic of his reason to confirm the reality of such changes. So, Aristotle compromised by admitting the reality of physical change and growth and then encapsulated it in metaphysics by insisting that change occurred only within changeless cycles of reality.

According to the Greek thought immutability and stability are the essential components of reality, and what actually changes is something less than real, for the truly real is represented by teleological end points. They may be conceptual atoms called essences or universals. Change thus came to mean, for the pre-Socratic Greeks, little

more than the ebb and flow of events on the surface of the fixed and regular cycles of ultimate reality. They sought fixed patterns beyond observable events. The ancient Greeks cared as little about the direction of change among appearances as we might care about the sequence of events in a dream. Though Aristotle spent much of his life describing the details of biological specimens he fitted his accounts of their make up to a static though cyclical view of life within a fixed framework from earth, air, fire, and water at the base to the unmoved mover on the top.

The Christian Era : With the development of Christianity some few hundred years later, the Platonic idea of an immutable, immortal world of reality beyond the mutable, mortal world of appearance and the Aristotelian idea of teleological ends were amended to provide the intellectual substance for the idea that fruitless change on earth could be arranged in a chain that led to the final end of otherworld immortality. The concept of change as reworked by the primitive Christianity of Peter, Paul, and others, as well as the more formalized Christianity of Augustine, Aquinas, and others took on a directional characteristic. One of the great Christian improvements over Greek thought was the ideas that change need not be considered only aimless movements, among appearances, but that meaningful change toward a fixed and real end was possible and desirable. The Christian metaphysics and the Christian ethics did provide all the ingredients necessary to a theory of progress : change, direction, and meliorism. Indeed, given that man on earth hopes to achieve salvation in part by his own efforts, the concept of progress becomes indispensable.

So, 'progress' is defined as change or movement in the direction of the end; and, conversely, movement in any other direction toward any other end is regressive. With the expansion of the concept of society beyond two dimensional modes the suspicion

grew that the shortest path between points might not be a straight line. The reality of change was thus incorporated into the Christian metaphysics, and progress came to represent changes or movements towards certain fixed and perfect ends. The nature of those ends was defined by criteria laid down by the prophets and priests of Christianity and their perfection was guaranteed by supernatural authority. So, the ultimately 'real' of Greek thought had become the Christian supernatural, still fixed, final, and eternal.

The Enlightenment : Because the Greeks and the Christians rooted the ends and benefits of progress in an afterlife that denigrated the meaningfulness of earthly change, these early theories of progress could not survive the intellectual ferment brought on by the Reformation. Under the stimulant of Post Reformation thought, thought now freed from a church-imposed interpretation of the Aristotelian frame of reference, the belief arose that the improvement of the human condition need not await our arrival at an afterlife but might well be realized on this planet in a temporal future if the fixed ideals could be tempered. For this the two-dimensional analysis-body and soul, good and bad had to give way to more complex maps.

Men like Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Voltaire undertook to discover "the natural laws of society and social organization" that must reside in the natural order of things. Their search convinced them that, among other things, progress was one of the important natural social laws. Progress took on a concreteness, inevitability, and force. According to this view the concept of progress was elevated to the status of a natural law for the continual improvement of life on this planet and the eventual perfectibility of man.

The idea that deliberate human efforts might change and improve human efforts might change and improve human environing conditions slowly throttled the earlier idea that human suffering, poverty, illness were part of God's plan to test our fitness for

eventual residence in His mansion. Out of this metamorphosis of the Greco-Christian conception of progress arose several new concepts of progress. Perhaps the most notable was that of the German social scientist Karl Marx who, formulated a theory of change and progress called dialectical materialism.

In its simplest form the dialectic is physical analysis of what happens in argumentation on the grand scale of the combat among ideas. Three principles are involved : (1) the generation of opposites; (2) the vector-like force of ideas, and (3) the balanced resolution of vectors. Dialectic is the inevitable conflict among ideas.

According to Hegel, change and progress result from and can be explained by a dialectical logic. Dialectic states that neither the thesis nor the anti-thesis 'wins' the contest, for the synthesis represents elements of both thesis and anti-thesis merged in some new situation, some new thesis and out of this new thesis grows an anti-thesis, resulting in yet another synthesis which becomes yet another new thesis.

Seizing upon the dialectic as method, but rejecting Hegelian content, Marx made materialism the content-and gave us a theory of progress called dialectical materialism. For Marx the economic thesis of feudalism yielded its own antithesis, which resulted in a synthesis and a new thesis called mercantile capitalism; in turn, capitalism has produced a series of contradictions which will result in socialism, the next synthesis-thesis; and this in turn will yield to the ultimate thesis, pure communism. In less abstract term, Marx says that the precondition of progress, and communism will represent the terminal point of economic progress when there will be neither exploiters nor exploited in the one-class society.

The idea of progress, from the ancient Greeks up to and including Marx, has thus been distinguished by two beliefs; first that progress consists of changes or motion in the

direction of a final and fixed end; and second, that the absolute value of the end vouchsafes for the validity of the means used to reach it. Additionally, progress was seen as inevitable, for in the Greco-Christian formulation eventual arrival at the ends set is assured by God : in the formulations of Enlightenment philosophers, progress is part of nature and assured by natural law; in Marxist formulation the give and take of the dialectic predicts and promises progress toward the fixed ends set by the course of history. In all these instances progress is closed-ended, with a terminal point fixed in advance and guaranteed by a force or power beyond, and independent of human action.

THE DARWINIAN ERA : Darwin in his book on evolution provided not only a contemporary alternative to the Marxist theory of change and progress, but offered a serious challenge to the Greco-Christian approach to progress. The old idea of changeless forms and fixed cycles and creation by God's executive fiat had to be stretched beyond the elastic limits of credulity to fit the facts of geology, biology, paleontology, and archeology adduced by Lyle, Linnseus, Darwin, Mendeleev, and others. In the classical and Christian traditions each cycle, or eternal prototype of reality, required a separate act of creation. Darwin offered the suggestion that possibly these cycles of ordered change might have a natural origin, that cycles of ordered change grow out of each other. The implication of Darwin's theory of evolution was that not only was there change within the cycle, but that the cycle itself might change.

If this be true, then nothing is permanently fixed, or final or ultimate and perfect as the Aristotelian and Christian conceptions would have us believe nor is there any good reason to assert, as do Marxists, that evolution has an impossible limit represented by a perfected man in a perfected society, as supposedly guaranteed by the dialectic of

history. Rather, variances, mutations, aberrations and accidents are as real and as meaningful as the regular, the fixed and the routine.

The impact of Darwinian thought on the concept of progress cannot be overstated. If flux is the essential characteristic of existence and reality, then the ends of life or of education can not be fixed and final. If the ends of life and education are not assured beforehand by God, or by 'natural social law', or by the historical dialectic, or by the nature of the species, then it can only follow that man and society inherit the obligation to create their own purposes, their own ends and progress becomes contingent upon man.

According to this dynamic theory of progress, the modifiability of socially created ends provides for shifts in direction as conditions change, so that progress is always specific and related to some desired end-in-view. Since it is open-ended, with ends changing as circumstances change, there can be no general formula for progress; man must create, out of the unrealized potentials at his command, both his ends and his means. Progress, therefore, depends on man and his condition, his hopes and his fears, his needs and his desires. Man invents his own goals as surely as he invented his own language. Given the social animal man, language evolves. Given the linguistic animal social man, stated goals evolve. Goal seeking behaviour comes late in the history of consciousness.

Thus, the philosophic meaning of 'progressive education' depends on the definition attached to the concept of progress. And, there is no 'one' or 'correct' philosophic meaning of progress. To insist that the ultimate ends of education are the same for all men at all times and everywhere is to argue that there are at least some ends of life. So the ends of education are fixed and final. On this basis progress in education

is represented by those activities or undertakings or changes that are harmonious with and lead to eternal verities and ultimate values. And as a practical matter, preparation for living, the essential aspects of it, remains basically much the same from culture to culture and man to man.

To deny that ends are universal is to insist that no end is immutable and, therefore, that all of the ends of life and education grow out of the activities of living and educating and it is consequently contingent upon specific sets of time, place, cultural conditions, and even peculiar circumstances. According to this view ends are relative. Progress in education is here represented by those activities or changes that direct the cause of subsequent experiences toward specified and desired objectives. These are not objectives declared by some authority to be desirable, but rather what men, of their own accord, desire or need. On this basis progress in education cannot be defined wholesale for it is contingent upon the nature of specific educational activities, conducted at specific times and places for specified purposes. Yet in general terms it can be said, that progressive education involves that "reconstruction or recognition of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience. Man's first and last obligation is to serve men."*¹

If, by 'progressive education', we mean that body of educational thought that found its intellectual seeds in the facts of evolution produced by Darwin and nourished in the fertile mind of John Dewey, then the differentia of progressive education is that it views change and chance as empirical realities and defines progress in education in terms of producing men and societies that are increasingly able to be self-directive.

So, the questions concerning progressive education are essentially axiological, because education is inescapably a value-laden activity. The many practical questions

about the ends and means of education are fully understood only in an axiological context, for the range of possible answers will be determined by one's theory of value. But which theory of value should be accepted ?

The major issue in axiological debate concerns the source and status of values. Are all value social creations and therefore relative to human culture? Or are some the discovery of transcendental will and therefore absolute? The responses to this question separate realists from absolutists.

VALUES AS ABSOLUTE : The basic case for absolutism in value theory believes that 'some values have the status of ultimate existence. Such values have this status not because they are independent realities, but because they are in and of the nature of God, who alone has ultimate and absolute existence. For some idealists, then, absolute values exist because God exists and he is the personification of absolute existence*²; and man comes to know these values through the idealists episteme of reason combined with intuition for only logical thought coupled with a spirit attuned to the divine can come to know the values that exist in the moral order that is independent of man.

Other idealists, while agreeing that some values are absolute and thus binding upon all men, root value more in spiritual man than in a personal God. The path to such knowledge leads us to a harmonic blend of reason and intuition. Expression just as strong an absolutistic view point in value theory, and arguing that absolute values are the only true and reliable guides to the educational endeavor, states a Thomistic viewpoint, that 'the final evaluation of education, its data and first principle, must be founded on scale of values. Values are deduced from the application of the fundamental principles of the true philosophy to human life and conduct. No system of education built solely on

natural sources can ever reach a complete and satisfactory explanation of the nature of man, his origin, and his destiny. The full light of positive revelation thrown on man's nature and destiny is needed, if man is to arrive at a complete and certain knowledge of himself. Such knowledge must be free from the errors and limitations of human reasoning. *³

The similarity between Idealism and Thomism is that both firmly state that the proper conduct of education depends on the discovery of an absolute set of values which transcend the human animal and his social arrangements. The difference lies in how these absolute values are identified. The idealist is content to rely upon the human mind, believing that if it is properly tuned to a divine mind it can achieve intuitive knowledge of perfect value. The Thomist however, while willing to give full credit to the achievements of human rationality, in the end doubts the ability of reason alone, however trued, to yield and confirm such powerful knowledge, and therefore insists that only when we rely upon supernatural revelation can we feel perfectly sure that we have indeed discovered those absolute values that are God's own magnificent creation.

The 'traditional' view is that there are at least some values, some ends, whose source transcend man and society, and these values are therefore eternal, immutable, antecedent, independent of man, absolute and a-priori. According to this view the proper ends of life, and therefore of education, morally obligate man to discover, recognize and accept the supremacy of such values and to regulate his behaviour in conformity with them, for morality can be defined in no other terms than those of conformity to absolute values. Conformity thus becomes synonymous with congruence between behaviour and fixed principles.

Values as relative : The instrumental, or pragmatic, point of view places value in a social rather than a metaphysical frame of reference. This is to say, first and most importantly, that the ordinary experiences of ordinary men in day-to-day circumstances provide the necessary and sufficient ground for the construction of values to guide our lives and educational activities. This attitude reflected that men should not ignore experience as the source of all values. Since values are not to be found ready-made in the order of things man must create his own values out of the ingredients of human experience. On the basis of human experience men do form interests that may become values, and men do not forth efforts to realize these interests.

From the instrumental point of view, then, a value represents an interest that has been subjected to the critical scrutiny of human intelligence, adjudged to be an act or idea that will enrich the human community, and tested in the crucible of experience. "Values are judgements about the conditions and results of experienced objects; judgements about that which should regulate the formation of our desires, affections and enjoyments."*⁴

The instrumentalist is affirming that in the construction of values to guide our individual and social endeavors, we draw upon experience to formulate value hypothesis by reference to our needs and wants, desires and enjoyments; and that the final test of a value lies in whether it leads to a consummatory or an experience in itself instrumental to other experiences that continuously extend, promote, and enrich the life of the individual and the human community. Man sets the standards of evaluation at all levels. He may set standards even where he has not yet had experience but these will be the most arbitrary and hence suspect.

To the instrumentalist view, values are, therefore temporal, mutable, consequent, dependent on man, relative and a a-posteriori. According to this view the proper ends of life, and therefore of education, place a moral obligation upon man to use his intelligence critically in formulating values and, having acted on his value judgements, to accept the consequences of his human authorship. Here morality is not defined in terms of conformity but in terms of critical thought before acting, the acceptance of responsibility after acting, the evaluation of consequences of the act as to whether or not it achieved what was expected of it, and finally, the overall assessment as to whether or not the thing achieved yielded the satisfaction previously ascribed to it as an object of desire.

Education becomes a way of taking a hand in what has gone on without conscious attention. The purpose of life is to create purposes. Progress in creating purposes involves the minimization of random trial and error. In so doing he must consider as many dimensions of himself, his problems, his society, and his surroundings as possible. "Progress" is more complex in the Greco-Christian or Hegelian-Marxian models. Its end is not salvation, material gain, or the classless society. Its end is its means : the unlocking of human potential. The adventure is in becoming, not in being. Unhappy with the majority whip of moral monarchism the progressives are eager to find out what will result from unrestrained becoming. The first step lies in a deep appreciation of the necessity for diversity that goes beyond mere tolerance of difference.

1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, (New York : The Macmillan Company, 1961), pp. 89-90.
2. J. Donald Butler, *Four Philosophies*, rev. ed., (New York : Harper & Row, Publishes, 1957), p.566
3. John D. Redden and Francies A. Ryan, *A Catholic Philosophy of Education*, (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1942), pp. 48-49.
4. John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, (New York : G.P. Patnam's Sons, 1960), p.265.