

## Chapter 6

# The Emperor's Weavers: S.M.A.R.T. Objectives and the Ethical Hazard of Doing Bad Philosophy

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter addresses the general lack of emphasis on philosophical thought in the field of education within colleges and universities. Since all human enterprise is guided by philosophical premise, whether conscious or not, the only options for those who consider themselves educators is to engage in strong philosophical practice or to engage in low-quality philosophy. Failing to engage in philosophy is not a real option. The infatuation with quantitative measurement in education, by educators, is an example of the negative effect of failing to engage in educational philosophy as a part of practice, and the uncritical acceptance of S.M.A.R.T. objectives in curricular matters serves as a particularly stark example. These measurement practices result in having an ascribed rather than achieved identity in the field. Three things that can be done to reverse this situation in higher education are (1) begin to engage philosophically as a part of practice, (2) change the terminology used to discuss philosophy, and (3) teach the practice of philosophy across the curriculum, rather than in isolated courses.*

### INTRODUCTION

There are decisions we are permitted to make in the human landscape and those which are made for us. It takes a certain degree of wisdom to discern between the two, as the oft-repeated *Serenity Prayer* would indicate. This chapter is about both of these types of decisions and about the choices we make in how we see each.

With regards to philosophical matters, there are a limited number of options one can choose from when deciding to engage in education. On the face of it, the three choices we have in relation to philosophy are to (a) ignore philosophy and don't engage in it at all, (b) engage in philosophy poorly, and (c) engage in philosophy well. Unfortunately, this taxonomy is a bit of a façade and one that does not serve

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us particularly well. The reason these are false choices is that the very definition of philosophy entirely removes from us the ability to avoid engaging in it.

Philosophy has been defined in many ways but one of the more broad and clear definitions can be found in the Oxford Companion to Philosophy. Philosophy is said to be “Rationally critical thinking, of a more or less systematic kind, about the general nature of the world (metaphysics of theory of existence), the justification of belief (epistemology or theory of knowledge), and the conduct of life (ethics or theory of value)” (Honderich, 1995, p. 666).

Before going further, it is probably fair to point out that anyone who might be already questioning the definition I have chosen and the way I am using it here is making the point. The moment one starts thinking about what it might mean to define something, who has the power to do so, and how that definition might or might not align with the real world, one begins to engage in philosophy. Not everyone enjoys being philosophical, but everyone *is* philosophical. It is inescapable since the moment one rises to the occasion and makes an argument to the contrary, one is engaging in the very activity being denigrated.

This takes us to the uncomfortable position of having then only two philosophically-related choices: Doing *good* philosophy, or doing *low-quality* philosophy. Failing to purposefully do it at all is simply doing it poorly.

The point I am hoping to make in this chapter is that on the whole we are being unethical in our practice. But then again, this would depend entirely on what we agree that being ethical means, and to determine that, well, we need to be philosophical. To make these points, I will be focusing on measurement and standardization in education, but it is important that the reader understand that these are simply examples of what I call “the underneath.” The underneath of our problem is poor philosophy. The particular brand of poor philosophy I am referring to here, is to pretend that we don’t need it; to pretend that we can simply *act* well without *thinking* well. My indictment here is directed wholly toward the idea that action is better than thought; that success drives merit; that neither one of those two phenomena need to be elucidated.

For those with a philosophical mindset, or solid training in the field, it might seem as though I am getting ready to make a push for the analytic tradition itself. In fact, I would be pleased for someone to object, philosophically, to the analytic tradition even though I am dabbling in it here. I would be pleased to have anyone be philosophical at all. That, ultimately is my point here – we have, for one reason or another, as a collective, stepped away from formal philosophical conversations, instead hoping to make a difference *doing* stuff. Inevitably we have simply and perhaps inadvertently taken “door number two” and subsequently engaged in a weak, mindless philosophy.

Lastly, I write this with some degree of frustration but no amount of arrogance. I participate much like everyone else and my purpose here is to foster conversation and thought, not to cast dispersion on others. Yes, I can see the emperor’s fine clothes too and I often shout about how great they are, right along with everyone else.

In order to clarify and expand on this line of thinking, in the following pages I will be working backwards from an example of a specific issue in higher education – measurement – and then providing an analysis of how our somewhat indiscriminate acceptance of a measurement focus has allowed the identity of education to be ascribed *to* us rather than *by* us. This example is meant to serve the greater purpose of this chapter, which is to point out a weakness in our practice, and to suggest some changes that can strengthen our work.

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