

Introduction

Educational philosophy has always been an organic synthesis of human wisdom in connection with its ever changing and dynamic environment, be it natural, social, cultural, political, or economic. As we are gathering at the first conference of the Taiwan Philosophy of Education Society (TPES), it seems appropriate to take a look at the recent landscape and environment of the world. Among numerous occurrences in the past year on earth, perhaps what has dominated the attention of educators, the general public, and the media in the US and the world, has been the election and inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th American President.

For some, Trump's election campaign and final success have raised serious questions regarding American freedom and democracy, placing these profound philosophical concepts into the spotlight and having implications for the entire world. President Roosevelt (1907) described America as a nation of immigrants with a celebration of its ethnic, religious, and social diversity and its notable tolerance for divergent views. With plans looming to build the wall along the Mexican board, many question if we are not reverting back to a nationalistic and ethnocentric country. How might we nurture and nourish the ethical principles of tolerance, freedom of expression, and democratic engagement within the current reality? Who would decide what is ethical?

While there are infinite approaches and perspectives to address such issues, this paper will focus on another American, John Dewey and his pragmatic educational philosophy as the primary lens to examine the daunting questions and challenges above. Like many educational philosophers before him such as Plato, Rousseau, and Locke, Dewey (1916: 10) viewed education as a "social function" for a nation and humanity as a whole. In *My Pedagogic Creed*,

Dewey (1964: 437) wrote that “education is the fundamental method of social progress.” This paper will first discuss ethics and then democracy from the context of education’s role in society within today’s complex social and political realities. Afterwards, it will seek to draw out meaningful insights for educational philosophers and practitioners about teaching and learning. While it is not our intention to provide solutions to such a challenge of complexity and scope, we hope this paper will raise significant questions to examine the polarized discourse and current educational practices with a fresh angle and perspective.

Ethics: Whose or What?

The famous ancient Chinese Daoist philosopher Laozi (1999) stated that if we need to talk about ethics, then it has already been lost. That is, if all are following the Dao, or the universal way, naturally and consistently, there would be no need to dwell on ethics, or to develop and reinforce any principles among human society. Perhaps it is too difficult to pinpoint scientifically and verify such a natural state on Earth except through myths and fables. Nevertheless, human kind has constantly sought to grapple with understanding its actions and ethical decisions long before Laozi’s time, 2,500 or 3,000 years ago in the documented history. Works by philosophers from the East (Han, 2003; Laozi, 1999; Mozi, 2003; Tu, 2010; Waley, 1938), the West (Aristotle, 1975; Locke, 1964; Plato, 1941; Whitehead, 1929), and elsewhere have focused on ethics and morality as the goals, processes, and outcomes of education and life.

Ethics: Definition & Complexity

What, then, is ethics? For the purpose of this paper, ethics in the English definition can be traced to ancient Greek word “ἠθικός *ethikos*,” derived from the word “ἦθος *ethos*,” meaning a habit or custom. According to *Webster*