CHAPTER 12

Shariati on Islamic and Western Philosophy of Education

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Introduction

This chapter concentrates on a rare work of Ali Shariati titled Philosophy of Education (1979). This book is a comparative study of education philosophies in which the traditional Islamic system of education is compared to modern western forms of education. In this study, I argue that Shariati was an advocate of traditional Islamic education and additionally was a critic of modern western education.

In the first part of what follows, classifications are suggested pertaining to the specific characteristics Shariati assigns to the two philosophies of education. These classifications make it possible to systematize his views. In addition, having been borrowed from systematic orientations in philosophy of education, this classification gives a façade to his views more suited to the specific vocabulary of philosophy of education. These classifications include two sections of (1) philosophical foundations and, (2) educational implications. The philosophical foundations of education include the ontological, anthropological, epistemological, and axiological, while the educational implications include the aims, principles and slogans of education and educational activities.

In the second part of the chapter, an evaluation of Shariati’s view is advanced. In evaluating Shariati’s work, this chapter takes three steps. In the first step, it is argued that the sharp contrast between Islamic and Western philosophy of education is too sharp. There are many overlaps between the two education philosophies that need to be taken into account. In the second step, it is argued that “the West” is not a unified whole; but at most, it is an anomalous monism. In the third step, Shariati’s attempt to revive traditional Islamic education is appreciated, but the difficulties in doing so will be highlighted.

Classification of Islamic and Western Philosophies of Education

Shariati emphasizes certain characteristics that pertain to Islamic and Western philosophies of education, arguing that such characteristics need to be
classified. As I previously alluded, these classifications are comprised of philosophical foundations and educational implications.

**Philosophical Foundations**

The philosophical characteristics Shariati mentions as the underlying parts of Islamic and Western educational systems are introduced here in terms of the ontological, anthropological, epistemological, and axiological foundations of education. In a comparative manner, these foundations are as follows: From an ontological foundation, Shariati holds that the Islamic view deals with the universe while the western view concentrates on nature, which is often associated with materialism. From the Islamic perspective, the monotheistic worldview is the pivotal point according to which the universe is understood as being God’s unique creation and under his guidance. Even though nature and its observable realities matter, and are dealt with in this view, the whole universe is not confined to nature, rather nature is subordinated to the divine sphere of the world. Thus, Shariati refers to this Islamic ontology as being idealism, and in a more comprehensive phrase, as a ‘realism based on idealism.’ By realism, he refers to the realm of nature and its objective and empirical entities. By idealism, as the building block or core of Islamic ontology, he means the divine sphere. Thus, according to him, the Islamic view does not deal with spirituality at the cost of rejecting the material world, nor does it concern itself with the material world by ignoring the spiritual or divine sphere. The latter position, namely naturalism, is exactly what Shariati takes as the western view. As such, he refers to this view interchangeably as realism, naturalism, and materialism.

In his anthropological foundation, Shariati argues that the central concern of the Islamic view is the human being, whereas the hallmark of the modern western view is society. In other words, in the Islamic view, humans are humans in terms of their basic characteristics, and are thus not confined to any particular society. These basic characteristics define the humanity of the human; and consequently such characteristics are not dependent on any particular sort of society. Rationality, truth-seeking, and moral consciousness might be mentioned as prime examples of such characteristics. Yet society, as the pivotal point of anthropology in the modern Western view, takes the human to be a member of modern society. In this functional view, people are defined in terms of the function they play in the whole of society. Engineers, teachers, and workers each have their own functions in the organism of the society and

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2 Ibid.