

Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, *The Dispute between Philanthropinism and Humanism in the Theory of Educational Instruction in our Time* (1808)

Abstract

Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer's (1766–1848) programmatic work on educational theory was conceived as an accompaniment to his reform of the Bavarian school system following Bavaria's transformation from an electorate into a kingdom in 1806. In the first section, Niethammer lays out a history of "enlightened" practical education, describing how it turned away from humanistic language study. He simplifies the conflict between humanism and pragmatic education (called "philanthropine" after Johann Bernhard Basedow's school), making clear that his sympathies lie with the former. But he does not exclude practical education completely. Instead, he seeks a middle ground between the two, even while leaning more toward an intellectual/spiritual [*geistig*] variant of humanism.

Source

[....]

Friedrich II was the great initiator of his time. A new educational epoch for Germany actually begins with him, and he also prompted the transformation of educational theory here at home [in Prussia]. In the realm that he created with his powerful spirit, German culture acquired, for the first time, a predominant orientation toward industry and industriousness. The requirement for real utility was now the order of the day, but real utility meant only profitability, material production. The loud praise emanating from the government itself and the distinctive favoring of agriculture, the factory system, trade, industry, etc., inevitably caused mechanical and technical skill to be held in the highest regard. However, it is not only mechanical productivity, industry in commerce and the applied arts, trade, and every kind of activity that visibly emanates from the greatly stimulated hustle and bustle: The same spirit, the same tendency, the same animation is evident in all branches of thinking and education in general. In education, in religion, in philosophy, in the entire sphere of intellectual activity, "practical" was now the watchword; only that which directly affected [everyday] life and was beneficial in application was valued. As a result, the entire field of knowledge took on a new life and a new form; the sciences were reworked with intense zeal in order to present them from their practical side and to make them useful in practice.

What the great reformer, through this outwardly oriented and frenzied general activity, initially brought about in his people at the time amazed the world back then and must still command admiration in posterity. But he did not transform only his empire with his powerful spirit; an unmistakable impulse from him gradually brought about the total reform of German culture. It was the capital of his empire that set the tone in the German writers' world, just as it was his army that was taken as a model everywhere and his art of governance that was eagerly imitated. History will gratefully characterize his time as the epoch of a highly necessary and highly beneficial revolution of the mind through which the spirit of inertia and idle speculation was banished, the realm of superstition shaken, the fetters of supra-naturalistic and to-the-letter authority broken, the latent power awakened, and thinking made

free.

But even these brilliant benefits will not blind the historian and prevent him from also designating this epoch as that point in time when the Earth Spirit [*Erdgeist*] began its pernicious reign among us.

As the worldly orientation of the spirit [*Geist*] became more and more pronounced in its frenzied outward appearance, the drive for money and profit from the lucrativeness of all kinds of material production was increasingly stimulated, and in this way the entire nation was overwhelmingly steered in that direction, and intellectual/spiritual [*geistig*] activity increasingly shared this tendency as well. The branches of knowledge that are more closely related to material production, for example, mathematics, physics, and chemistry, became decidedly dominant, more sought after, and better paid to the degree to which they excelled in discovering real innovations for trade and industry, whereas purely academic treatment of the same branches of knowledge found fewer and fewer friends. In addition, even the purely intellectual sphere did not remain completely free of the [material] spirit's influence. Even the purest and most sublime did not go untarnished: Religion was debased to common moralism, Christianity to eudaimonism, theology to naturalism, philosophy to syncretism and materialism [...], science to the generation of pulses. Thus, in the intellectual revolution of that time, the unmistakable progress of multifaceted education was accompanied in the name of enlightenment by the onset of a simultaneous retrogression in true culture, a hatred of everything purely intellectual and of ideals in art and science, causing any elevation above the earthly to fall into disrepute as crazy mystical superstition. Living at all in a world of ideas was derided as acting like a wild enthusiast.

Anyone who finds this description of the dark side of that remarkable period in the development of German culture too glaring should remember the loud complaints of the "better people" in those times, who dug in their heels in vain against the lauded enlightenment, which they viewed as truly destructive to the nation's spirit.

In such a realm, with the majority thus disposed and that way of thinking predominating, it is easy to imagine what direction education would have to take, and how, retroactively, it would have to double the speed of the general trend.

On the one hand, the merits of the general tendency are also evident in pedagogy. More industriousness and activity also came about in instruction; the old aimless meandering was jolted out of its comfortable lethargy. Increasingly, one worked out what actually needed to be done, what one wanted to accomplish, and how one could best achieve that. Shortcomings and defects of the traditional educational methods were boldly attacked; abuses of the simple character and alphabet system in educational instruction were exposed to well-deserved disparagement. A broader scope of instructional subjects and a more multifaceted treatment were demanded as essential. At the same time, consequently, it became all the more necessary to think about improving methods in order to accomplish more in a shorter time.

On the other hand, however, the disadvantages of the general tendency are just as unmistakably evident in pedagogy. As the impetus for culture came from the real, from the interest aroused in the outside world and in the gain that could be made in and for that outside world, that alone had to point pedagogy outward, to elevate knowledge of the outside world to the first requirement of instruction and, by contrast, to discredit any engagement of the student with intellectual subjects related to the inner world. Yet, if the demand for general education, which is the main task of the school, could perhaps have been combined with [the practical], much time could have been gained for the newly required school subjects from the improved teaching methods and the intense industry of the teachers and students. But because the constitution of the newly created realm added to the demands from all sides, increased their financial burdens, heightened the need for quick earnings, and drove

[the king's] subjects to exert all their efforts for their subsistence, and because for just that purpose even children had to be forced to work earlier in their lives, and everyone was rushing to attain a position and income, not only was their time in school shortened, but it was also used directly for vocational purposes and the science of breadwinning. Real-world matters became the order of the day in schools. The main emphasis had to be placed, above all, on material knowledge, and lessons on intellectual subjects were moved to last place. In this atmosphere, it also had to soon become very clear that understanding living languages was a bigger help to moving forward in the world than knowing dead ones, which came to be viewed as dead capital without advantage. It can hardly be surprising that disparagement of the study of ancient languages increased to such a degree that in the end learning those languages was even loudly and publicly declared dispensable. Even men of substance who took issue with that one-sided pronouncement could not prevent the ever-growing neglect in schools of ancient language learning, philosophical studies, and the old classical world. In the end, such subjects almost only found quiet refuge in some monastery schools—which for that very reason were considered models of pedantry.

In this ferment of old and new instructional methods, with first one then the other preponderant, philanthropinism suddenly emerged as a first attempt at a complete statement of modern theory.

If this approach had already been partially attempted in individual schools, silently undermining the old way of teaching and gradually replacing old teaching materials without causing a great stir, it nonetheless caused astonishment now because the opposition [i.e., the new ideas] appeared as a coherent theory in a completely new kind of institution. By the same token, the acclaim that greeted the new institution did not last long, and the phenomenon passed quickly enough.

On the whole, however, even just the transience of the phenomenon is misleading with regard to the strange course that it took. Actually, only the name of the Philanthropine disappeared, but the system itself, in which philanthropinism's makeup, needs, and prevailing thought paths were rooted, continued to spread in all directions. Anyone who looks at the events more closely sees the system of philanthropinism, with the name renounced because it had become suspicious, not only persisting in its own schools but more and more passing over into public and private educational establishments, and even prevailing in pedagogical scribbling—from multivolume revisionist works down to the most childish of the numerous writings on children that have been produced since.

Philanthropinism can be seen taking the same course that German culture in general took from the empire of the great German king to the other states of our fatherland. It deserves to be singled out as a remarkable phenomenon that those modern educational methods found increased favor with governments the more that they—true to the example of the great model—also mainly favored so-called land improvement, namely, agriculture, industry, and applied arts of all kinds.

[....]

There are two perspectives from which the dispute between the two opposed teaching systems must be grasped: One relates to the purpose of educational instruction, the other to the means to that end. Considering both reveals a great difference between the two systems, which is described here with the greatest possible certainty, but not in their offensive extremes, which are easy to refute, albeit not in a satisfactory manner. Instead, the difference will be shown in the most refined form possible.

In order to more easily see the difference between the two systems, the main principles of each are juxtaposed.

I. Principles of humanism regarding the purpose of educational instruction	I. Principles of philanthropinism regarding the purpose of educational instruction
1. Educational instruction has its own purpose that exists for itself, the general education of the person.	1. Educational instruction has no purpose of its own existing for itself but rather only a relative purpose of educating the person for his future destiny in the world.
2. The main purpose of education is not to acquire knowledge but rather to develop the mind.	2. It is not so much a question of developing the mind per se as of equipping the mind with the greatest possible amount of useful knowledge.
3. Education trains the mind of the student, not to make him skilled for certain occupations but rather for the sake of cultivating the mind.	3. Cultivating the mind cannot be the purpose of education. On the contrary, education is pointless unless the mind is prepared for certain occupations.
4. The purpose of education is not at all to educate the student for this world, for which he will find sufficient time and opportunity in later years of his life, but rather to educate him for the higher world of the mind; if he does not lay a firm mental foundation in his youth, it will often be entirely lost to him because what he must learn and do for his occupation later in life will usually leave no time to work seriously and successfully on the higher cultivation of the mind for another realm.	4. It is inappropriate to educate the student for the higher world of the mind; he will only achieve the required maturity of mind for that in the later years of his life. By contrast, it is all the more necessary to start his education for this world in time; to acquaint him with things, lest education pursued merely in words leave him unfamiliar with the world, render him incapable of acting, and lead him down the primrose path of quixotic ideas and, consequently, an idle life.

II. Principles of humanism regarding the means of educational instruction	II. Principles of philanthropinism regarding the means of educational instruction
a. Concerning the subjects for instruction	a. Concerning the subjects for instruction
1. Education does not, for its purpose, require many subjects; too many will only distract the student and prevent him from learning in a thorough manner. At the same time, the student must continue with the smaller number of subjects to the highest level of knowledge and skill.	1. In view of the constantly expanding realm of knowledge, education can no longer be confined to occupying the student with a few subjects for the duration of his education; on the contrary, the group of subjects to be taught must be widened as much as possible in order to provide the child with the greatest range of knowledge possible.
2. To train the mind, as can be demanded of educational instruction, not things but ideas are suitable, not material but intellectual/spiritual subjects, in order to allow the student to partake in the highest human virtue, a life in ideas, or free awareness, to the extent possible, so that he does not become lost later in life in the region of commonplace breadwinning knowledge.	2. To train the mind, as should be accomplished by educational instruction, not ideas, which are strictly speaking only words, but things are suitable, not intellectual/spiritual subjects but material ones so that the mind does not stray into the region of empty word knowledge as a result of being solely occupied with letters and meaningless words and become entirely useless for an active life.

Source: Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, *Der Streit des Philanthropinismus und Humanismus in der Theorie des Erziehungs-Unterrichts unsrer Zeit*. Jena, 1808, pp. 15–22, 75–79. Available online at:

https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/show/niethammer_philantropinismus_1808

Translation: Kathleen Dell'Orto

Recommended Citation: Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer, The Dispute between Philanthropinism and Humanism in the Theory of Educational Instruction in our Time (1808), published in: German History Intersections, <<https://germanhistory-intersections.org/en/knowledge-and-education/ghis:document-132>> [June 15, 2026].