

Copyright © 2010 by Walter G. Moss

E. F. Schumacher on Wisdom and Education¹

Walter G. Moss

E. F. Schumacher (1911-1977) thought that “more education can help us only if it produces more wisdom.” He also said about education that people had to “sift it, sort it out, keep the good and jettison the bad” in order to form their own conclusions.² And this applies to his ideas, as it does to those of all thinkers. But by sifting through his writings many valuable nuggets can be found. Regarding education, they can be discovered primarily in three chapters or essays. The first, “The Greatest Resource—Education,” is in his classic *Small Is Beautiful*; the second and third, “The Party’s Over” and “Education for Good Work,” are in his posthumous collection *Good Work*.³

In these selections, as well as in other less concentrated passages, Schumacher faulted the education most people received because it did not give them much help in going beyond “mere training, something more than mere knowledge of facts, and something more than a mere diversion.”⁴ He was very critical of what eventually became the dominant purpose of higher education—career preparation for work in our modern industrial societies, which were “incessantly stimulating greed, envy, and avarice.” How, he asked, do you prepare people for work in such societies—“for becoming efficient servants, machines, ‘systems,’ and bureaucracies?”⁵ He granted that the dominant educational systems might help people obtain jobs that made them richer and able to afford more consumer goods and services—at least for a while. But he also believed that their education was preparing them to live in unhealthy economic systems and societies that were facing three crises.

First, human nature revolts against inhuman technological, organisational, and political patterns, which it experiences as suffocating and debilitating; second, the living environment which supports human life aches and groans and gives signs of partial breakdown; and, third, it is clear to anyone fully knowledgeable in the subject matter that the inroads being made into the world's non-renewable resources, particularly those of fossil fuels, are such that serious bottlenecks and virtual exhaustion loom ahead in the quite foreseeable future.⁶

The main problem he perceived with modern education was that it had abandoned the incorporation and guidance of traditional wisdom, which helped us answer questions like “What is our purpose in life?” and “What are our ethical obligations?” He thought that education had become “worse now because the ever more rigorous application of the scientific method to all subjects and disciplines has destroyed even the last remnants of ancient wisdom—at least in the

¹ This essay, in a shortened and revised form, will be incorporated into a longer essay on “The Wisdom of E. F. Schumacher” that will appear later on the Wisdom Page.

² *Small Is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Perennial Library, 1975), 82; *Good Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 115.

³ *Small Is Beautiful* is available online at

<http://www.ee.iitb.ac.in/student/~pdarshan/SmallIsBeautifulSchumacher.pdf>; all web sites were accessed in March 2010.

⁴ *Small*, 84.

⁵ *Good Work*, 27, 123.

⁶ *Small*, 147.

Western world. It is being loudly proclaimed *in the name of scientific objectivity* that ‘values and meanings are nothing but defence mechanisms and reaction formations.’”⁷

Schumacher maintained that what people really needed were “ideas that would make the world, and their own lives, intelligible to them. . . . If the mind cannot bring to the world a set—or, shall we say, a tool-box—of powerful ideas, the world must appear to it as a chaos, a mass of unrelated phenomena, of meaningless events.” He believed that traditional philosophy before the seventeenth century, attempted “to create an orderly system of ideas by which to live and to interpret the world,” but that “in modern times all too little attention has been paid to the study of the ideas which form the very instruments by which thought and observation proceed.”⁸ What was being taught, Schumacher contended, could not provide the metaphysical overview that people needed to make sense of their lives and the world beyond.

Our task--and the task of all education--is to understand the present world, the world in which we live and make our choices.

The problems of education are merely reflections of the deepest problems of our age. They cannot be solved by organization, administration, or the expenditure of money, even though the importance of all these is not denied. We are suffering from a metaphysical disease, and the cure must therefore be metaphysical. Education which fails to clarify our central convictions is mere training or indulgence. For it is our central convictions that are in disorder, and, as long as the present anti-metaphysical temper persists, the disorder will grow worse. Education, far from ranking as man's greatest resource, will then be an agent of destruction.⁹

Science, he wrote, “cannot produce ideas by which we could live,” and it was “being taught without any awareness of the . . . place occupied by the natural sciences within the whole cosmos of human thought.” Although he recognized that the sciences conveyed important information “about how things work in nature or in engineering,” they conveyed “nothing about the meaning of life.” They dealt “only with ideas of know-how, whereas we need to understand why things are as they are and what we are to do with our lives.”

There is no doubt also the need to transmit know-how but this must take second place, for it is obviously somewhat foolhardy to put great powers into the hands of people without making sure that they have a reasonable idea of what to do with them. At present, there can be little doubt that the whole of mankind is in mortal danger, not because we are short of scientific and technological know-how, but because we tend to use it destructively, without wisdom.

In regard to two “social sciences,” he wrote that economics was “being taught without any awareness of the view of human nature that underlies present-day economic theory,” and politics without considering the “metaphysical and ethical problems involved” in dealing with human interaction.¹⁰

At first glance the humanities seemed to offer some hope—“here indeed he [the student] can find, if he is lucky, great and vital ideas to fill his mind, ideas with which to think and through which to make the world, society, and his own life intelligible.”¹¹ Schumacher

⁷ *A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 4-5.

⁸ *Small*, 83, 84, 85.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 82, 87, 91, 94. For a greater appreciation of what science can contribute to wisdom, see my section on “The Role of Science” in [“The Wisdom of Andrei Sakharov.”](#)

¹¹ *Small*, 88. See my [“Do the Humanities Matter in Hard Times?”](#) for more on the significance of the arts and humanities.

mentioned “a work by Shakespeare: teeming with the most vital ideas about the *inner* development of man, showing the whole grandeur and misery of a human existence.” And he quoted from Darwin’s autobiography, where the scientist wrote about how when he was younger he greatly enjoyed poetry and Shakespeare’s plays, as well as painting and music, but that after about age thirty he lost his taste for such enjoyments. Instead, Darwin wrote:

My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of fact, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive. . . . The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.

Schumacher’s comment was that “this impoverishment, so movingly described by Darwin, will overwhelm our entire civilisation if we permit the current tendencies to continue.”¹²

Unfortunately, however, “even in the humanities we may get bogged down in a mass of specialised scholarship furnishing our minds with lots of small ideas just as unsuitable as the ideas which we might pick up from the natural sciences.” Or the humanities might present to us “a view of the world as a wasteland in which there is no meaning or purpose, in which man’s consciousness is an unfortunate cosmic accident, in which anguish and despair are the only final realities.”¹³

For education to help us develop the greatest wisdom, Schumacher thought it had to assist us in developing our values.

Education cannot help us as long as it accords no place to metaphysics. Whether the subjects taught are subjects of science or of the humanities, if the teaching does not lead to a clarification of metaphysics, that is to say, of our fundamental convictions, it cannot educate a man and, consequently, cannot be of real value to society.¹⁴

His viewpoint was similar to one more recently expressed by one of America’s leading wisdom scholars, Robert Sternberg, in an essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, entitled “[It’s Not What You Know, but How You Use It: Teaching for Wisdom](#).” In this essay, Sternberg writes that “teaching for wisdom recognizes that there are certain values—honesty, sincerity, doing toward others as you would have them do toward you—that are shared the world over by the great ethical systems of many cultures.” But that the goal of such teaching should not be propagandizing for such values, but rather helping students “develop positive values of their own that promote social welfare.” Sternberg also writes that “people are wise to the extent that they use their intelligence to seek a common good. They do so by balancing, in their courses of action, their own interests with those of others and those of larger entities, like their school, their community, their country, even God.” Another important goal he argues is to teach students to see “things from others’ perspectives as well as one’s own,” to tolerate “other people’s points of view, whether or not one agrees with such views.”¹⁵

¹² *Small*, 87, 98.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁵ In addition to Sternberg’s essay, two other essays that emphasize the importance of values for education and developing wisdom are Cophorne Macdonald’s, “[The Centrality of Wisdom](#)”; and my “[Goals, Values, and Wisdom: Unsolicited Advice to Young College Students](#).”

Similarly, Schumacher continually emphasized the traditional values taught by the great world religions, or what Sternberg calls “the great ethical systems of many cultures.” Schumacher also emphasized that although the “essence of education . . . is the transmission of values,” these “values do not help us to pick our way through life unless they have become our own, a part, so to say, of our mental make-up.” He added that individuals had to interiorize what they were taught, they had to “sift it, sort it out, keep the good and jettison the bad” in order to become inner directed. Education for wisdom, however, still had to help an individual accomplish one more task—“dying to oneself . . . to all one's egocentric preoccupations.” Schumacher went on to say that to be happy and wise there were three things that people “most need to do and education ought to prepare them for these things: To act as spiritual beings, that is to say, to act in accordance with their moral impulses. . . . To act as neighbors, to render service . . . [and] to act as persons, as autonomous centers of power and responsibility, that is, to be creatively engaged, using and developing the gifts that we have been blessed with.”¹⁶ Although Schumacher did not emphasize tolerance as much as Sternberg does, he did recognize the essential similarity of the values taught by all the major religions. This was true even after converting to Catholicism following an earlier period of atheism and then a strong interest in Eastern religions. He also had in his personal library several books reflecting the ecumenical ideas and tolerance of the Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviev (Solovyev).¹⁷

To Schumacher our values lie at the core of our being, affecting how we approach all subjects. As he writes,

All subjects, no matter how specialised, are connected with a centre; they are like rays emanating from a sun. The centre is constituted by our most basic convictions, by those ideas which really have the power to move us. In other words, the centre consists of metaphysics and ethics, of ideas that—whether we like it or not—transcend the world of facts. Because they transcend the world of facts, they cannot be proved or disproved by ordinary scientific method. But that does not mean that they are purely “subjective” or “relative” or mere arbitrary conventions. They must be true to reality, although they transcend the world of facts. . . .

Education can help us only if it produces “whole men.” The truly educated man is not a man who knows a bit of everything . . . *but he will be truly in touch with the centre.* He will not be in doubt about his basic convictions, about his view on the meaning and purpose of his life. He may not be able to explain these matters in words, but the conduct of his life will show a certain sureness of touch which stems from his inner clarity.¹⁸

To Schumacher’s mind our study of all subjects should be penetrated by the rays of our values, of our wisdom. “Unless that person has sorted out and coordinated his manifold urges, impulses, and desires, his strivings are likely to be confused, contradictory, self-defeating, and possibly highly destructive. The ‘centre,’ obviously, is the place where he has to create for himself an orderly system of ideas about himself and the world, which can regulate the direction of his various strivings.”¹⁹

Rather than ignoring traditional wisdom, he believed that science and technology “have to open their doors to wisdom and, in fact, have to incorporate wisdom into their very structure.”

¹⁶ *Small* 82, *Good Work*, 115-17.

¹⁷ Solovyev books in Schumacher’s personal library can be found by searching the catalog found at <http://www.smallisbeautiful.org/library.html>. For an example of the Russian philosopher’s emphasis on tolerance, see my “Vladimir Soloviev and the Jews in Russia,” *Russian Review* 29, no. 2 (1970): 181-91.

¹⁸ *Small*, 94-95.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

He wrote that “every science is beneficial within its proper limits, but becomes evil and destructive as soon as it transgresses them,” and that “the best scientists know that science deals only with small isolated systems, showing how they work, and provides no basis whatsoever for comprehensive metaphysical doctrines.” He also believed that such was mainly true with other branches of learning. He wrote that “great damage to human dignity has resulted from the misguided attempt of the social sciences to adopt and imitate the methods of the natural sciences,” and that “economics, and even more so applied economics, is not an exact science; it is in fact, or ought to be, something much greater: a branch of wisdom.”²⁰ Again, Sternberg seems to adopt a similar view when he writes that **“teaching for wisdom can be made part of any subject matter, because wisdom is a way of looking at the world.”**

Thus, rather than educating people to fit into modern economic systems that were unsustainable, Schumacher hoped that “higher education could be designed to lead to a *different* world of work.” It could help students “distinguish between good work and bad work and encourage them *not to accept* the latter. That is to say, they should be encouraged to *reject* meaningless, boring, stultifying, or nerve-racking work in which a man (or woman) is made the servant of a machine or a system. They should be taught that work is the joy of life and is *needed* for our development, but that meaningless work is an abomination.” They should be taught “that the function of work is at heart threefold: (1) to give a person a chance to utilize and develop his faculties; (2) to enable him to overcome his inborn egocentricity by joining with other people in a common task; and (3) to bring forth the goods and services needed by all of us for a decent existence.”²¹

Such statements reflect Schumacher’s idealism and often do not address the practical problems of how to implement them in the economic and political systems of the modern industrial world. But he was not a political revolutionary. He believed strongly in democracy and in a mixed economy—the U. S. State Department in 2001 declared that though “the United States is often described as a ‘capitalist’ economy,” it “is perhaps better described as a ‘mixed’ economy, with government playing an important role along with private enterprise.”²² He followed in the tradition of twentieth-century progressives in the United States and Europe who wanted “to limit the socially destructive effects of morally unhindered capitalism, to extract from those [capitalist] markets the tasks they had demonstrably bungled, to counterbalance the markets’ atomizing social effects with a counter calculus of the public weal [well-being].”²³

Schumacher was a hero in the 1970s to many of what remained of the counter-cultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and most of the selections in *Good Work* were based on 1970’s lectures that he gave in the United States, often before students. Indeed, Theodore Roszak, an advocate of the youthful counter culture who wrote *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969), wrote the Introduction to *Small Is Beautiful*. As I hope to indicate in a future essay, Schumacher believed that individuals had to apply wisdom to many other areas besides education, especially to scientific and technological development, differing economic approaches, and the environment. Passages such as the following hint at this broader vision and help explain his extensive appeal to the counter culture of his time.

²⁰ Ibid., 33-34, 46, 239; *Good Work*, 121.

²¹ *Good Work*, 118-19, 123.

²² For the original web source, which is no longer available, see my *An Age of Progress?: Clashing Twentieth-Century Global Forces* (London; New York: Anthem Press, 2008), 274, n. 4.

²³ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 210. For a brief summary of progressivism, see my *An Age of Progress?*, 75-80.

The exclusion of wisdom from economics, science, and technology was something which we could perhaps get away with for a little while, as long as we were relatively unsuccessful; but now that we have become very successful, the problem of spiritual and moral truth moves into the central position. . . .

The cultivation and expansion of needs is the antithesis of wisdom. It is also the antithesis of freedom and peace. Every increase of needs tends to increase one's dependence on outside forces over which one cannot have control. . . . Only by a reduction of needs can one promote a genuine reduction in those tensions which are the ultimate causes of strife and war. . . .

. . . Ever-bigger machines, entailing ever-bigger concentrations of economic power and exerting ever-greater violence against the environment, do not represent progress: they are a denial of wisdom. Wisdom demands a new orientation of science and technology towards the organic, the gentle, the nonviolent, the elegant and beautiful.²⁴

In the 1967 film *The Graduate* many college student viewers of it laughed at the advice the recent college graduate Benjamin (played by Dustin Hoffman) received from an older friend of the family: [“I just want to say one word to you. Just one word.” “Plastics.” “There’s a great future in plastics.”](#) At that time a smaller percentage of college students than today majored in business programs, and many of them hoped for much more in their futures than just well-paid jobs, whether in plastics or some other field. They wanted to challenge and change “the system,” not be absorbed by it. But they underestimated the resiliency of the consumer society and culture of which they were a part.

Today, after a financial crisis fueled in part by the “greed, envy, and avarice” that Schumacher believed our economic system “incessantly” stimulated; after the likes of Bernie Madoff; after corporate interests and their lobbying efforts seem to have as much influence as ever in the U. S. Congress, it seems that education has not followed much of Schumacher’s advice. In general, it has not taught students much wisdom or how to “distinguish between good work and bad work and encourage them *not to accept* the latter.” It has not done much to help them develop and clarify worthwhile values or prepare them to seek the common good. Quite often it has not even challenged them to ask, “What Is the Common Good?” Instead, in order to attract more students, the tendency in universities has been to water down or reduce the type of liberal arts courses required that might actually help them develop wisdom, while at the same time emphasizing more career preparation, preparation that often prepares students better to fit into “the system,” rather than challenge it to evolve in a more humane and sustainable direction.

The picture, however, is not all bleak. Since Schumacher’s death in 1977, some forward steps have occurred, encouraged in part by his writings and lectures. In a 1999 book entitled *Ethics and the University* Michael Davis wrote of the emergence of university practical ethics courses.²⁵ He is presently a Senior Fellow at the [Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions](#) and a professor of philosophy at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Another professor at North Carolina State University wrote words in 2002 that would have gladdened Schumacher’s heart:

In the past two decades, many changes have been made in engineering education, including a growing awareness of the importance of ethics and social responsibility to engineering. Prompted in part by political controversy over the social implications of technology and the changing educational standards promoted by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), engineering educators have begun to

²⁴ *Small*, 33-34.

²⁵ Michael Davis, *Ethics and the University* (London: Routledge, 1999).

take seriously the challenge of preparing professionals who are both technically competent and ethically sensitive.²⁶

Similar centers exist in many other universities. At Yale, for example, there is the [Center for Bioethics](#), which co-sponsors, among other programs, “the [Forum on Religion and Ecology](#), [which] is the largest international multireligious project of its kind. With its conferences, publications, and website it is engaged in exploring religious worldviews, texts, and ethics in order to broaden understanding of the complex nature of current environmental concerns.”

Some universities have bucked the general trend of watering down any consideration of metaphysics or ethics in their general education requirements. For example, Xavier University in Ohio (a Catholic Jesuit institution) adopted a new undergraduate core curriculum in 1992. According to a university web site, “The major significant innovation of [it] . . . is a concentrated area of study called the [Ethics/Religion and Society Focus](#). The goal of this carefully structured sequence of courses is to foster students' understanding of socially significant issues from the perspectives of the humanities, especially literature, philosophy, and theology, as well as the perspectives of the social and natural sciences.”

These developments and programs demonstrate that the type of concerns that Schumacher wrote about can be incorporated into university curricula and programs without professors or religious groups dogmatically insisting on their own narrow set of beliefs. Courses in comparative religions, for example, that would expose students to some of the “traditional wisdom” that Schumacher wrote about can be taught in an objective, scholarly fashion without any professorial preaching about what is “right” and what is “wrong.” The ideas of the great religions can simply be presented to students the same way as Marx’s or Darwin’s ideas might be taught. In fact, I know of one comparative religions course that included a segment on atheistic ideas, attempting—again in an objective manner—to summarize some of the chief arguments of atheists.

University administrators are currently under tremendous financial, as well as public and governing-board, pressures to help prepare students for jobs, and their emphasis on career preparation, on giving the consumers (students and their parents) what they think they want is understandable, if not fully excusable. Nevertheless, Schumacher is certainly correct that a higher education should help students develop and clarify their values, help them “distinguish between good work and bad work,” help prepare them to explore and serve the common good. College administrators would do well to ask themselves if their efforts are more in keeping with such Schumacher goals or with preparing students to be unquestioning cogs in our consumer culture. As busy and frazzled as many college officials are in these hard economic times, taking some time to read and consider Schumacher’s thoughts on education might be worthwhile.

²⁶ Joseph R. Herkert, “Continuing and Emerging Issues in Engineering Ethics Education,” <http://www.nae.edu/Publications/TheBridge/Archives/V32-3EngineeringEthics/ContinuingandEmergingIssuesinEngineeringEthicsEducation.aspx#Author>.