



# Encyclopedia of Educational Theory and Philosophy

## Jewish Educational Philosophy

Contributors: Jon A. Levisohn

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What is Jewish educational philosophy? The adjective *Jewish*, like *Christian*, *Hindu*, or *Muslim*, is particular, suggesting a basis in or relevance to a particular ethnic or religious community and its traditions of thought and practice. *Philosophy*, on the other hand, is universal, suggesting a field of inquiry with universal applicability. So the term *Jewish educational philosophy* may seem as confused as “Jewish philosophy of physics.” But there are a number of defensible conceptions of the field, which can be thought of as distinct modes of Jewish educational philosophy.

First, some scholars pursue an excavation of the educational ideas within the Jewish literary and legal tradition. Second, somewhat more narrowly, scholars excavate those educational ideas from within the tradition of Jewish philosophy, in particular. Both of these efforts to identify and examine ideas about education are descriptive or expository in nature, rather than normative. That is, they ask, “What does this idea mean?” and “What would education look like if we took this idea seriously?” rather than asking, “*Should* one follow or try to implement this idea?”

In a third mode of Jewish educational philosophy, scholars pursue a kind of normatively oriented dialogue with sources from within the Jewish tradition. The fourth mode is the scholarly effort to articulate and examine the aims or purposes of Jewish education. Finally, in a fifth mode, Jewish educational philosophy strives to illuminate and even provide guidance regarding problems of Jewish educational practice.

This entry will discuss each of these modes in turn, providing examples from Jewish tradition, philosophy, and educational practice as the discussion proceeds. An added benefit of framing the entry in terms of these five modes is that no claims need to be made about what all Jewish educational theorists believe. Philosophers are not generally known for their ability to reach agreement, and scholars in this field are no exception.

## Mode 1: The Excavation of Ideas From the Jewish Tradition

Jewish educational philosophy may be taken to be an inquiry into what Jewish texts say about important educational issues (keeping in mind, of course, that the Jewish tradition encompasses multiple voices on just about any topic that can be thought of). Thus, scholars might (and do) ask, What do the traditions found in the Hebrew Bible, the rabbinic texts of the 1st to 6th centuries, the medieval Jewish philosophical texts, the early modern Jewish mystical texts, or any other identifiably Jewish sources say about the purposes of education, about the essential content of education (curriculum), about pedagogy, about access to education (who gets to be a student in formal education settings), and about the centrality of education within Jewish culture? Nor must the discussion be restricted to written texts. Jewish educational philosophy might also be developed out of the *practices* of Judaism, even if—or especially if—they do not conform to the central texts on the topic. Regardless of what the texts say, how do those practices testify to a set of beliefs or understandings about education?

An example here is the question of girls’ and women’s access to traditional Jewish education. The central legal texts of the Jewish tradition are ambivalent at best about providing educational access to girls and women. But recent scholarship has documented a substantial presence of girls in East European Jewish *cheders* (primary schools) in the 18th and 19th centuries. In other words, apparently, the practice in that place and that time did not conform to the dominant voice in the textual tradition.

However, it needs to be emphasized that this kind of intellectual project—the project of excavation of ideas from texts or practices of the past—is descriptive or expository in nature, rather than normative. So whether the texts under consideration are opposed to women’s education, and whether the actual practice in Eastern Europe indicates support for women’s education, tells us nothing about what *ought* to be the case (without, of course, some corollary argument about why anyone ought to take the text, or the practice, as a norm for their own educational decision making).

## Mode 2: Educational Implications of Jewish Philosophical Texts

Sometimes, the Jewish texts to which scholars turn are explicitly philosophical, where “philosophical” simply means that the text advances a set of claims on the basis of arguments about the good life, or the good society, or the nature of being or of knowledge, or more narrowly, about why Jews ought to do or believe whatever they ought to do or believe. In this sense, Bible and Talmud are not philosophical. But the category does include classical texts, such as *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* by Sa’adia Gaon (882–942) and *The Guide for the Perplexed* by Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), and contemporary texts, such as *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics* by Rachel Adler (1943–) and *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* by Michael Fishbane (1943–).

When scholars turn to texts such as these to excavate the ideas about Jewish education embedded within them or to discern their educational implications—when they ask, among other things, “What would it look like if we took this idea seriously in Jewish education?”—then they are pursuing Jewish educational philosophy in Mode 2. But even in these cases, discovering that a particular Jewish philosopher once wrote something about educational processes or purposes tells us little about what anyone *ought* to do or say in the educational sphere. The *object* of inquiry may be normative, but the *mode* of inquiry is descriptive or expository.

Consider, for example, the argument by Maimonides, the greatest medieval Jewish philosopher, that all of Jewish law and practice is designed to develop the intellectual, spiritual, and moral character of the individual. For philosophers of education, this is intriguing. If all of Judaism is educational, then what is Jewish education? How might we think differently about the purposes of Jewish education in light of this educational purpose of all of Judaism? Pursuing this inquiry falls squarely into what we are calling Mode 2 of Jewish educational philosophy. If we take Maimonides’s claim seriously, it might have profound implications for how we conceptualize Jewish education and its purposes—but the inquiry itself does not provide an argument that we actually *ought* to take it seriously, that Maimonides ought to guide anyone’s educational decision making.

Whatever the object of inquiry—whether it is a biblical text, a classical legal text, a Jewish practice in a particular time and place, or a philosophical text—the observation that Modes 1 and 2 are descriptive rather than normative is not intended as a criticism. In fact, scholarship in this mode can often be extremely valuable to practitioners, in an indirect way. Rather than claiming to prescribe Jewish educational ideals, Jewish educational philosophy in Modes 1 and 2 has the potential to broaden horizons and to improve practice simply by inviting practitioners to imagine possibilities and to explore alternatives that are radically different from the ones that they know.

## Mode 3: Normative Dialogues With the Jewish Tradition

Not surprisingly, some scholars are not satisfied with a descriptive excavation of Jewish educational ideas. They are motivated in their inquiries by the desire to provide guidance to contemporary Jewish educators and sometimes to others as well. Doing Jewish educational philosophy in Mode 3 presumes that the texts to which a scholar turns have some authority—that they are worth listening to. Outsiders to the Jewish tradition (or other religious traditions) sometimes imagine that this process is a straightforward one: If you grant the texts some kind of authority, then presumably you have committed yourself to doing whatever the text tells you to do. But this is more complicated than it may seem.

Consider Proverbs 22:6, “Educate each child according to his own path.” This seems to be an endorsement of differentiated instruction! And so, we can assume that the normative philosopher of Jewish education must affirm a policy of differentiated instruction on the basis of this verse. But this is naive in at least three ways.

First, Jews (and others) have been reading and interpreting this verse for a long time, whereas the idea of differentiated instruction—and thus the interpretation of the verse in the preceding paragraph—is rather recent. Second, the tradition hardly ever speaks with one voice about an issue; when the focus is on a particular text,

one short passage is being selected from a complicated tradition stretching over centuries. (In this case, note might be taken of a verse that is decidedly less popular in contemporary progressive circles, from Proverbs 13:24: “The one who spares his rod, hates his son.”) And third, not all texts look like Proverbs, with its pithy sayings that seem to be telling us what to do; the Jewish tradition includes narratives, legal material, poetry, commentary, philosophy, mystical writings, and more—all of which make a claim to normativity (a claim that they *ought* to be taken as authoritative) in their own particular ways.

The conclusion to be drawn from these observations is that the (normative) encounter with the (normative) texts of a tradition always takes on the character of a dialogue. The texts have a voice, but the inquirer has a voice as well. In fact, this dialogic quality is explicit in much of the work of Michael Rosenak (1938–2013), the leading philosopher of Jewish education in the past generation. Rosenak seeks not merely to discern beliefs or ideas that are implicit in classical Jewish texts; rather, he often brings those texts into a purposeful dialogue with texts and ideas from general philosophy of education, all for the constructive purpose of providing guidance to contemporary Jewish educators.

## Mode 4: Aims of Jewish Education

The preceding mode of Jewish educational philosophy moved from the descriptive to the normative. But, actually, the most basic normative stance is to pursue fundamental questions about the aims of Jewish education, whether it takes place in schools or summer camps, synagogues or universities. How can we articulate a principled view about what Jewish education is *for*?

There are a number of ways of taking up the question of the aims of education. But in recent years, this mode of Jewish educational philosophy has been identified with Seymour Fox (1929–2006) and his work promoting visions of Jewish education. The premise of this approach is that we can and should articulate the appropriate aims of Jewish education in terms of an image of the ideal educated Jew, that is, the ideal “product” of Jewish education. How does one construct such an image, such a vision? Not, interestingly, on the basis of conceptual or linguistic analysis, the kind of philosophical inquiry into the “educated man” pursued by R. S. Peters and others. Instead, Fox argues that such an image ought to be developed out of the sources of the Jewish tradition.

To demonstrate his idea, Fox called on a set of scholars of Jewish history and religion to construct the visions that he believed were necessary to reinvigorate Jewish educational practice. Four scholars formed the core of the project: Menachem Brinker, Moshe Greenberg, Michael Meyer, and Isidore Twersky. According to Fox, the visions that scholars such as these would produce would answer the questions about the aims of Jewish education by painting a picture of the ideal product of Jewish education that emerged from certain aspects of the Jewish tradition (as understood by these scholars). Note that this normative project was also, at the same time, explicitly pluralistic; Fox embraced and celebrated the diversity of perspectives that the scholars represented.

The visions that the scholars produced are creative and insightful, providing much food for thought. What is notable, however, is that they lack systematic argumentation of the kind that Jewish educational philosophy ought to represent. Moreover, in drawing on sources within the Jewish tradition, they lack substantive engagement with other philosophical explorations of the topics that they raise (topics, e.g., autonomy, about which there is a voluminous literature). In these respects, the project fell short of the mark.

On the other hand, as an effort to raise the question of vision to a place of prominence on the intellectual landscape, it was a significant success. Others, including especially Daniel Pekarsky, have also contributed to the meta-inquiry about vision in Jewish education—that is, not only the conversation about what are the appropriate aims in Jewish education but also the conversation about what we mean by “vision” and how we go about constructing and defending our conceptions of purposes.

## Mode 5: Exploring Problems of Jewish Educational Practice

In general, the rise and fall of analytic philosophy of education had little direct influence in Jewish education. But at its best, analytic philosophy of education emerges from practice and has the capacity to hold up a critical mirror to practice—to help the practitioner go beyond “reflective practice” to a deeper understanding of the educational choices that must be made on a daily basis. Analytic philosophy of education, that is, can help practitioners answer the question of why they do what they choose to do or whether they ought to be doing something else. (In other words, analytic philosophy of education is also normative, not merely descriptive.)

In this sense, Mode 5 of Jewish educational philosophy—the exploration of issues or problems that emerge from Jewish educational practice—can be understood to represent a continuation of the legacy of analytic philosophy of education within the particular context of Jewish education.

Consider the organization of the Jewish day school into two parallel sets of subjects: “Jewish” subjects on the one hand (study of classical Jewish texts, practices, and history, as well as Hebrew language and literature) and “general” or “secular” subjects on the other (math, science, history, English language, and literature). For many educators, the separation of the two realms is a problem. Some propose that students should have the experience of going back and forth, a class in science followed by a class in Jewish texts. Some propose that students ought to consider topics from multiple perspectives (“Jewish” and “Western”) or from multiple disciplines. For still others, what is important is the intentional forging of connections between classes wherever possible.

Each of these proposals rests on a set of assumptions—about the nature of subjects, about the nature of Judaism (is Judaism “non-Western,” or “nonsecular,” or “nongeneral”?), and especially about what ideas and attitudes ought to be cultivated in the students. Philosophical inquiry can play a role (and has played a role) in exploring these ideas, shedding light on these assumptions, and even recommending certain alternatives as more conceptually coherent and compelling.

This is just one example of a problem that emerges from Jewish educational practice. Consider that, if Jewish education is engaged in the interpretation of Jewish texts, this effort opens up a range of questions in hermeneutics. Or, more specifically, how might educators integrate the insights of the best contemporary critical scholarship on classical Jewish texts? Or if Jewish education is engaged in the promotion of commitments—commitments to a set of ideals, to an *ethnos*, or to a set of beliefs and practices—how might it simultaneously avoid indoctrination and promote autonomy?

These examples also point to two other important features of this fifth mode of Jewish educational philosophy. First, the philosophical study of problems of Jewish educational practice ought to engage parallel relevant inquiries elsewhere (in the first example above, the literature on curricular integration). And second, relatedly, this kind of philosophical inquiry frequently coexists comfortably with empirical educational research. Because the philosopher is focused on problems of practice, she benefits from understanding the nuances of the empirical educational realities (e.g., What actually happens when students study classical Jewish texts critically?). And conversely, the empirical researcher relies on the development of theories of the practice in question. So the philosopher and the empirical researcher may pursue their inquiries with dramatically different methodologies—but participate in a shared conversation about practice.

### A Challenge for the Field

Healthy, robust fields of inquiry are sustained by multiple people tackling common problems and questions. The conclusions that are reached by one inquirer are subjected to reexamination and critique, if not immediately then over time. But given the very small size of the field of Jewish educational philosophy, this rarely occurs. A challenge for the future of the field, then, is to develop a place for critical inquiry into the scholarship of colleagues—not to undermine one’s colleagues but to build up a shared understanding. This would not

entail a sixth mode of Jewish educational philosophy; rather, it would entail a deepening of inquiry within the modes that already exist.

**See also** [Character Development](#); [Hermeneutics](#); [Indian Religious and Philosophical Traditions and Education](#); [Indoctrination](#); [Muslim Educational Traditions](#); [Peters, R. S.](#); [Religious Education and Spirituality](#); [Values Education](#)

Jon A. Levisohn  
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## Further Readings

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