Journal of Philosophical Investigations
Print ISSN: 2251-7960 Online ISSN: 2423-4419
Homepage: https://philosophy.tabrizu.ac.ir

A Reflection on Iran's Current Philosophy of Education

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Article Info

Article type:
Research Article

Article history:
Received 05 December 2025
Received in revised form 10 December 2025
Accepted 10 December 2025
Published online 20 January 2026

Keywords:
Philosophy of Education, Iran, Tradition, Modernism, Pragmatism, Islam, Constructivism.

ABSTRACT

The present article seeks to critically examine the process through which philosophy of education emerged in modern Iran. Philosophy of education may be approached either implicitly or explicitly. This study primarily focuses on the explicit form of philosophy of education as an academic discipline, while also briefly considering its implicit forms—both before and after the establishment of the Dār al-Funūn—in order to shed light on the background that made the explicit discipline possible. The method employed is historical and philosophical analysis. The findings indicate that, due to the country's overall backwardness, not only the implicit philosophy of education during the period of modernization but also the emergence of its explicit academic form by its founders developed in a state of intellectual passivity toward modern Western philosophies of education. The major orientations in Iranian philosophy of education have stemmed from three Western sources—German, Swiss, and American. The German orientation was introduced by Mohammad-Bāgher Hushyar; the Swiss orientation by Gholām-Hossein Shokuhi; and the American orientation by Ali Shari 'atmadari. Without committing a fallacy of anachronism, these founders' views are criticized. It may nonetheless be argued that their passive orientation prevented them from a critical engagement with the Westen perspectives and thus hindered the development of a philosophy of education suited to Iran's own context. It appears that such an effort must proceed critically at the center of a triangle whose three sides consist of Iranian culture, Islamic culture, and modern culture. For my part, I have sought to contribute to this endeavor by offering a critique of pragmatist and constructivist approaches and, at the same time, by advancing an interpretation of Islamic culture grounded in an account of human agency. This approach to human agency leads—ontologically, epistemologically, and anthropologically—to a form of constructive realism, and axiologically to transformative traditionalism. Based on its own conceptual space, it places certain educational guidelines at the forefront, such as the notion of asymmetric interaction**,** which is distinct from both the traditional teacher-centered view and the modern learner-centered view.

Cite this article: Bagheri Noaparast, K. (2026). A Reflection on Iran's Current Philosophy of Education. *Journal of Philosophical Investigations*, 19(53), 267-284. https://doi.org/10.22034/jpiut.2025.70919.4387

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Publisher: University of Tabriz.

Intruduction

In Iran's cultural history, great philosophers and thinkers—such as Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) in the realm of theoretical reason and Shaykh Ṭūsī in the realm of practical reason and ethics—have made profound contributions, and scattered throughout their works one may also find occasional remarks on education. However, due both to the brevity of these references and to the considerable gap between these thinkers and the actual practice of traditional, Sharia-centered education, their thought did not exert any significant influence on the practical course of educational activity. Yet, without doubt, behind every practical and concrete educational process there always lies an implicit philosophy, whether or not its practitioners are aware of it. In this implicit sense, both globally and in Iran, a tacit philosophy has always accompanied educational efforts.

Philosophy of education, however, as an academic discipline specializing in the phenomenon of education, is relatively new both in the world and in Iran. The term, as used in the present text, refers specifically to this academic and specialized meaning. What follows first outlines the early implicit foundations of philosophical thinking about education in Iran, and then examines how the formal discipline took shape in the country, offering a critical review of the perspectives advanced by its founding scholars. Finally, I will point to the path that philosophy of education in Iran needs to pursue, as well as the contribution I myself have attempted to make in this direction.

1. Backgrounds of philosophy of education

If we wish to point to the implicit philosophy of education in Iran's modern history, we may look at the period before and after the establishment of *Dār al-Fonūn* (1268 AH / 1851 CE). Prior to the founding of this modern institution, education took place in its traditional forms: *maktab-khānehs* for children and *madāris-e 'ilmiyya* for higher levels. After its establishment, however, education gradually assumed a modern character, modelled on the educational systems of Western modern countries.

Ali Shariati (1979), in a work that is exceptional given his specialization in sociology, titled *The Philosophy of Education*, offers a comparison between the implicit philosophy of education in the traditional period and that of modern Iranian education. In his view, the traditional approach was primarily oriented toward cultivating morality, spirituality, and forming the essential character of learners as "good human beings." Consequently, the prevailing pedagogical methods included imitating the teacher as a moral exemplar and the free choice of both lesson and instructor. In contrast, according to Shariati, modern Iranian education has been guided by a philosophy aimed at shaping citizens endowed with "competence". Such citizens acquire the ability to perform specific skills and are incorporated into the dominant structure of society. Therefore, the pedagogical methods required for this modern orientation involved compulsory schooling and a focus on technical skills.

The competence-based and skills-oriented tendency in post–*Dār al-Fonūn* education stemmed from two sources. On the one hand, it emerged out of the scarcity of skill-based components in the traditional system. True, in the *madāris-e 'ilmiyya*, besides religious subjects such as jurisprudence, legal theory, Arabic literature, and theology, disciplines like mathematics, astronomy, and medicine—in their traditional forms—were also taught to some degree. However, these traditional sciences were unable to meet the technical and engineering needs of the country, and to address these demands, from the reign of Fath-Ali Shah to that of Mohammad Shah Qajar, reliance was primarily placed on Russian and British advisors as well as experts from other European countries.

On the other hand, Iran's military defeats in the wars with Russia (1218–1228 AH / 1804–1813 CE and 1241–1243 AH / 1826–1828 CE) created a strong incentive for the modernization of the country's military system, which ultimately led to the establishment of the *Dār al-Fonūn*, based on the French models, by Amir Kabir. The "grandes écoles" in France are grounded in a policy of elitism inherent in the country's culture a policy that regards the cultivation of elites as essential for progress, even as it seeks to create fair conditions through competitive entrance examinations for selecting such elites. Given Iran's backwardness in relation to global developments, the founding of this advanced school testified to Amir Kabir's remarkable foresight. During his stay in Arzan al-Rūm, he undertook the collection of several significant European works and oversaw their translation into two volumes titled *Jahān-namā-ye Jadīd* ("The New World Survey"), which presented the geographical, historical, political, and economic conditions of the world at that time. Regarding this, Fereydoun Adamiyyat writes:

> Even if Mirza Taqi Khan had acquired no knowledge from any other source and his awareness of world affairs were assumed to be limited to that very book, one must say that the scope of his thought, relative to his era, was enlightened (Adamiyyat, 1969, 185).

Nonetheless, although the establishment of *Dār al-Fonūn* was, for its time, a wise and prudent measure, the country's general backwardness meant that this quasi-academic institution—focused on military and technical reconstruction—rested upon an implicit philosophy of education that may be described as simultaneously *shock-driven* and *skills-oriented*. It was shock-driven because it arose in response to military defeats and the nation's passive condition, and skills-oriented because it aimed to remedy the country's most evident Achilles' heel—its military and technical weakness—by producing specialized personnel for government service.

The founding of *Dār al-Fonūn* coincided with the Second French Republic (1848–1852), and like the educational philosophy of that republic, it emphasized training technical experts for the state and the military. *Dār al-Fonūn* remained an independent educational institution for roughly eighty years (1851–1934 CE / 1230–1310 SH). During this period, in terms of educational philosophy, it was influenced by both the Second (1848–1852) and Third French

Republics (1870–1940). In the Third Republic, Jules Ferry—Minister of Education and later Prime Minister—was the chief architect of compulsory education laws, establishing free, compulsory, and secular (laïque) schooling with an emphasis on cultivating republican citizens who were patriotic and law-abiding.

When the University of Tehran was founded in 1932 (1311 SH), *Dār al-Fonūn* lost its function as a higher-education institution and effectively became a secondary school. In its early period, *Dār al-Fonūn* was primarily a technical institute; however, from roughly 1911 to 1931 CE (1290–1310 SH), as new modern secondary schools expanded, it came to resemble the French *lycées*. Its educational philosophy shifted from technical to general education, introducing the humanities, history, geography, and general mathematics, and following the model of schools in the Third French Republic. During this same period, Iran's Ministry of Education drafted regulations closely resembling the laws of Jules Ferry (providing free, compulsory, and universal education).

As we can see, the implicit philosophy of education in the so-called modern period emerged passively, largely under the influence of European countries—especially France and Austria—due to Iran's backwardness. This passivity was evident not only in comparison with European states but even relative to the Ottoman Empire, which had embarked on imitating European educational models earlier than Iran. The idea of modern schools in the form of *Dār al-Fonūn* had first been approved in the Ottoman Empire in 1846, five years before the establishment of *Dār al-Fonūn* in Iran (1851). It is worth noting that the name *Dār al-Fonūn* is a translation of "Polytechnic," derived from the titles of French and Viennese higher institutions (*École Polytechnique*), and was rendered into Arabic by the Ottomans. In Iran, this school was initially referred to by titles such as "Royal School" (*Maktab-khāneh-ye Pādshāhī*), "Military School" (*Madreseh-ye Neẓāmīyeh*), and "Instruction House" (*Ta 'līm-khāneh*). Both "Royal School," modeled on the Ottoman *Maktab-ı Sultānī*, and *Dār al-Fonūn*, the Ottoman translation of "Polytechnic," were borrowed from Ottoman usage (Roshani Zafarānlu, 1975, 187).

Similarly, the *Rushdiyya* schools established in Iran by Mirza Hassan Tabrizi after *Dār al-Fonūn* also took their name from Ottoman *Rushdiyye* schools. The titles "Supreme Council of Education" (*Shorā-ye 'Ālī-ye Ma 'āref*) and "Ministry of Education" (*Wezārat-e Ma 'āref*) for Iran's educational administration after the rise of *Dār al-Fonūn* and the *Rushdiyya* schools were likewise borrowed from Ottoman institutions, such as the Ottoman "Ministry of Public Education" (*Ma 'ārif-i 'Umūmiyye*). Moreover, Reza Shah pursued Iran's modernization largely by following the reformist initiatives of Atatürk.

Approximately eighty years ago (1950 CE / 1328 SH), a serious assessment of the state of philosophy of education in Iran was conducted. This assessment was commissioned by Iranian Plan Organization (*Sāzmān-e Barnāmeh*) and carried out by the Overseas Consultants, Inc. The study produced three principal conclusions: the weakness of philosophy of education in Iran; an undesirable elitism arising from the influence of French culture; and the recommendation to

democratize Iranian education following the model of the United States (Tusi, 1961). In reality, however, this report was less concerned with democracy than with preparing the ground for replacing the long-standing French influence—dating back to the establishment of *Dār al-Fonūn*—with the American model.

2. The explicit emergence of philosophy of education

In the 1950s and 1960s (1330s–1340s SH), scattered courses in philosophy of education—such as "Principles of Education"—were offered at the Higher Teacher Training College (*Dāneshsarā-ye ʻĀlī*). However, the philosophy of education specialization was formally established at the University of Tehran during the 1970s (1350–1356 SH). With the onset of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 (1357 SH), this development was interrupted, but in 1982 (1361 SH) the master's program in philosophy of education was reintroduced at Tarbiat Modarres University and the University of Tehran. Doctoral programs have been offered at various universities since the 1990s (1370s SH) up to the present.

From the outset, the major approaches in Iranian philosophy of education have stemmed from two European sources (German and Swiss) and one American source. The German lineage emerged through Mohammad-Bagher Houshyar (1283–1336 SH), influenced by the ideas of Georg Kerschensteiner (1854–1932). Houshyar (1937/1316 SH) had philosophical interests, and in his seminal work *Principles of Education* (Houshyar, 1956/1335 SH), he elaborated the principles advocated by Kerschensteiner.

The Swiss lineage developed through Ali-Mohammad Kardan (1306–1386 SH) (Translator of Debesse's book, 1957/1972) and Gholam-Hossein Shokouhi (1305–1395 SH), both influenced by Jean Piaget's (1896–1980) ideas. This tendency was characterized by a psycho-philosophical quality and cannot be considered purely philosophical. Its philosophical dimension was directed toward constructivism. Piaget's approach was predominantly constructivist and, implicitly, structuralist. Shokouhi (1984/1363 SH), in his book *Methods of Teaching Arithmetic and Geometry*, employed Piagetian constructivism extensively. The translation of Piaget's book into Persian could also be mentioned here (Piaget, 1988). In this book, Piaget takes a constructivist stance with regard to learning. That is why in its English translation, this title is used for the book: To understand is to invent: The future of education (Piaget, 1973).

The American source of philosophy of education took shape through Ali Shariatmadari (1302–1395 SH), influenced by the ideas of John Dewey (1859–1952). Shari ʻatmadari (1976) translated John Dewey's important book *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938) into Persian and regarded pragmatism as a suitable philosophical foundation for education. Accordingly, problem-solving–oriented thinking became, in his view, the central axis around which all aspects of education should be organized.

There have also been efforts in educational official documents to derive educational implications from Islamic viewpoint (In particular, *The Theoretical Foundations* in *Foundational Transformation Document*, Ministry of Education, 2011/1390 SH).

In what follows, I will offer a critical account of the approaches of the founding figures of philosophy of education in Iran and highlight the traces of passivity in their engagement with modern thinkers. Such critical examination is a historical necessity for understanding the patterns of our past and future intellectual practices—without committing the fallacy of anachronism or disregarding the contextual conditions under which these thinkers formed their ideas.

2-1. A critical review of Hyshyar's thoughts

Hushyar can, in fact, be regarded as one of the Iranian critical thinkers of the Western tradition of philosophy of education. This is a necessary—yet rare—form of engagement that we have always needed: an engagement that allows us to arrive at sound ideas without imitation or unquestioning adherence to dominant perspectives, and that guards us against a kind of intellectual trend-following. Hushyar consciously critiques prominent Western philosophers from the standpoint of the tension between collectivism and individualism.

In his critique of French educational thinkers, Hushyar notes that Auguste Comte, through his teacher Saint-Simon, was influenced by Hegel's social and historical philosophy, thereby adopting a society-centered approach that paid insufficient attention to the individual dimensions of education. On the other hand, in his critique of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, he argues that Rousseau, influenced by the prevalent freedoms in England and by the ideas of Hobbes and Locke, fell into an extreme form of individualism, criticized society and civilization, and called for a return to nature (Hushyar, 1956, 26). Although Hushyar was deeply influenced by Kerschensteiner, he did not refrain from criticizing the latter's dominant individualism either (Hushyar, 1956, 37).

There are two surprising points concerning Hushyar's positions. First, although he criticizes Hegel's communitarian—indeed, statist—views, he had previously, in another work, appealed to Hegel's philosophy in praising Reza Shah, portraying him as the embodiment of the society's rational faculty and takes the aims of education as subordinates to, and rather identified with, the aims of his government:

> The appearance of a guide and an eminent individual shattered the former world—which, on the whole, may be called a world of stagnation and despair—and prepared the ground for another world for us… In short, all our national and spiritual spheres and stages were set into motion. It is at this point that one is naturally drawn to the philosophy of the German 'Hegel.' Hegel considers government and the state to be the greatest product of civilization; he regards it as the manifestation of supreme law and order and

> the embodiment of pure reason, and he states that the state contains all the aspects of a nation… The belief of some educationists, whose thought is nourished by Hegel's philosophy, is that education must align its aims with those of the state and government—to the extent that the goals of both should become one and the same—because this important institution, namely the state, considers the welfare and good of society and individuals from every angle. Fortunately, in this respect as well, our needs are fully met. (Hushyar, 1937, 155–156)

The second surprising point is that when Hushyar turns to the modern schools of his time—pragmatism, behaviorism, and phenomenology—he abandons his critical stance and assumes that these new perspectives, free from the limitations of earlier outlooks, have attained the desired comprehensiveness:

> Fortunately, today, analytical thought, through new schools such as pragmatism, behaviorism, and phenomenology, has explained and interpreted the course of human life—both as individual and as member of society, both in terms of morality and reason, and both in terms of economic life—in such a way that the aforementioned aims, in the view of the researcher, no longer rest on inductive judgments that lack certainty and cannot be generalized (Hushyar, 1956, 30).

Hushyar's most important work in the philosophy of education is *The Principles of Education*, in which he substantially elaborates Kerschensteiner's ideas. It is now appropriate to reflect on this work. His position—following Kerschensteiner—consists of the following negative and positive elements:

1. **A principle, unlike belief or conviction, is not conventional.**
   Hushyar distinguishes principles from value-laden and social conventions on the grounds that conventions possess a subjective character:

   > A doctrine or creed may have value for an individual, a society, or a particular era—that is, it is conventional (Hushyar, 1956, 17).

2. **A principle is not the same as a scientific law.**
   A scientific law enjoys far-reaching and universal generalizations, whereas a principle does not have such broad applicability and may reach its limit under changing conditions. For this reason, certain principles may even conflict with one another:

   > In any case, the boundary between a principle and a law lies in the absence of generalizability in a principle—across all times and all individuals. It may even happen that certain preliminary conditions render the application of one

> principle impossible in the face of another, or that one principle contradicts another (Hushyar, 1956, 18).

3. **A principle is the source of human behavior.**
   Hushyar understands "principle" in its ancient Greek philosophical sense, that is, as the origin of beings, and argues that educational thinkers have adopted the term from that context and applied it to the origins of human behavior (Hushyar, 1956, 8). In another formulation, he considers a principle to be the source of voluntary behavior: "The principles of teaching and education, as we have seen, are behavioral principles and, consequently, principles of volition" (Hushyar, 1956, 19).
4. **A principle is objective and real.**
   Although an educational principle does not possess the objectivity and universal generalizability of a scientific law, it is nonetheless objective within its limited and specific scope:

> A principle is something objective and real, in the sense that it exists with respect to the thing itself… The relationship between student and teacher requires that the teacher possess authority and credibility. This is a principle that is always and everywhere present whenever educational conditions exist—for example, whenever you want to learn something from someone, that person must know the subject and be a credible source. (Hushyar, 1956, 17)

5. **A principle is to be discoverable, not conventional.**
   Given that a principle is objective and real, Hushyar concludes that the principles of education cannot be arbitrarily established, because they are not conventional; rather, they must be discovered, as they are considered objective and real (Hushyar, 1956, 8).

It can be said that Hushyar introduces principles according to his core concern to reconcile individualism and collectivism. Although this tension is most explicitly evident in his last two principles, it permeates the other principles as well. In other words, he introduces six principles, grouped into three pairs, each consisting of one principle oriented toward the individual and one toward the social or civil dimension. These three pairs are: the activity with regard to the present "moment" versus perfection; freedom versus teacher credibility; and individuality versus society.

Several critical reflections can be made on Hushyar's and Kerschensteiner's viewpoints:

1. **Principles have multiple meanings.**
   Contrary to Hushyar's view, a principle does not need to carry the same meaning in education as it does in other fields of knowledge. Each discipline may apply the term according to its own domain, although the literal meaning of "principle" as origin can be retained. In Greek philosophy, where the origin of beings was at stake, a principle refered to

existential origin. In the natural and human sciences, which seek to explain and discover laws, a principle may mean a *law*. For instance, the principles of physics or psychology indicate the laws discovered in these sciences, which underlie phenomena.

2. **A principle in education is prescriptive**
   Given the context-specific meaning of principles in applied fields, in practical and applied sciences—such as education and management—principles serve as general rules or guidelines that form the basis for methods and detailed instructions aimed at effecting desired changes.
3. **A principle in education is prescriptive**
   If educational principles are understood as general rules or guidelines for modifying behavior and conditions, then they are prescriptive, not descriptive and discoverable. Nonetheless, there exist discoverable foundations for these principles, which can be referred to as the *foundations of education*. These foundations may be philosophical, theological, or scientific, and the derivation of principles within each domain occurs through practical syllogism.
4. **Educational principles are not limited to anthropology**
   Hushyar's principles are largely confined to the domain of anthropology, focusing primarily on the relationship between the individual and society. However, educational principles can also be sought in broader domains, such as ontology, epistemology, and axiology, where they can serve as the basis for deriving educational methods.
5. **Objective and conventional matters should not be conflated in educational principles**.
   While Hushyar emphasizes the objectivity of principles and cautions against mixing them with conventional or value-laden matters, he falls into this very error in practice. In each of the three pairs, the first principle is objective and real, while the second is conventional and prescriptive. For example, in the first pair, the first principle—*the child's activity in the moment*—is the real source of a child's behavior, focused solely on the present without consideration of the future. The second principle, *perfection*, assumes a prescriptive form, indicating that one should strive toward perfection. In the second pair, the first principle—*freedom*—is objective, meaning that liberty and choice are the sources of individual behavior. The second principle, *teacher credibility*, is prescriptive. Hushyar, of course, attempts to express this principle objectively in this way:

> As long as a student attends school, this principle is felt and enacted, by virtue of the teacher's authority and credibility. Once the relevant conditions no longer exist, however, this principle ceases to be the source of the student's actions and interactions. In any part of the world, under certain conditions—specifically, with the establishment of a school environment—the principle of authority, credibility, and legitimacy between teacher and student is in

> effect. As soon as the teacher-student relationship is severed, this principle no longer governs their behavior or interactions (Hushyar, 1956, 18).

This statement, suggesting that teacher authority is universally operative under educational conditions, indicates a tendency to present the principle objectively. Yet it should not be forgotten that teacher authority reflects cultural values and normative considerations indicating that in certain cultural contexts, this authority may be viewed negatively and is, thus, diminished, or set aside. Modern educational slogans, for example, emphasize the teacher as "the guide on the side" rather than as the traditional slogan, "the sage on the stage".

3.2. A critical review on Shokouhi's thoughts

Shokouhi, who studied under Jean Piaget during his doctoral program, employed Piaget's views—emphasizing their constructivist dimension—to develop his dissertation titled *Methods of Teaching Arithmetic and Geometry*. Shokouhi referred to this perspective as the "school of action and experience." Regarding Piaget's position, he writes:

> The efforts of this great psychologist are directed toward uncovering the nature and reality of mental logical concepts and operations, including the concept of number and mathematical operations… From many years of experience, Piaget has concluded that the logical concepts and operations of the mind, and human intelligence in general, are the product of action. (Shokouhi, 1984, 59).

Thus, in his view, human effort is directed toward solving practical problems. Accordingly, with respect to the individual, he states: "If he reflects, it is because he faces a knot that has interrupted a practical activity which interests him" (Shokouhi, 1984, 57).

This practical orientation that Shokouhi identifies in Piaget's thought leads him to highlight its compatibility with other pragmatist thinkers. Concerning Claparède, he writes: "The value of a mathematical formula depends on whether we can use it to compute, and whether the results of such computation can guide our own behavior or help us control the behavior of others." (Shokouhi, 1984, 58–59) In the same vein, referring to Dewey, he notes: "According to Dewey, number and measurement are completely interdependent" (Shokouhi, 1984, 61). From this, he concludes: "Arithmetic instruction must begin with the very activity that, throughout human history, led humankind to recognize the need for numbers and consequently to form the concept of number. This activity is nothing other than the act of measuring" (Shokouhi, 1984, 61).

Although Piaget's theory is strongly constructivist and places great emphasis on individual action, this does not eliminate the presence of a structuralist or realist dimension in his thought. Piaget himself described his position as *constructivist structuralism*. Accordingly, in his discussions of mathematics, Piaget sometimes adopts realist criteria, including the notion of correspondence to reality (Bagheri & Khosravi, 2008). However, Shokouhi pays no attention

to this realist dimension in Piaget's thought and employs only the constructivist aspect, which he refers to as the school of experience and action.

Shokouhi has also authored a book on the foundations and principles of education (Shokouhi, 2015). Like Hushyar, he relies in this discussion on Kerschensteiner's views regarding the principles of education. His difference from Hushyar, however, is that he clearly distinguishes between the *foundations* and the *principles* of education, giving due attention to the descriptive dimension of foundations and the prescriptive dimension of principles.

2.3. A critical review on Shari'atmadari's thoughts

Shari 'atmadari, who earned his doctorate in the United States, adopted pragmatism as his philosophical outlook and understood and analyzed the philosophy of education within the framework of this philosophy. Shari'atmadari (1976) translated John Dewey's important book *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938) into Persian, without offering any reflection or critique on it. This is noteworthy given that more than thirty years before Shari 'atmadari's translation, Bertrand Russell (1945), in a precise critique of Dewey's theory of inquiry, had argued that Dewey had effectively replaced *truth* with *inquiry*. That is, instead of viewing inquiry as directed toward the discovery of truth, he made it dependent on questions and problems, orienting it toward utility and problem-solving.

Furthermore, although interpreters of Dewey's thought maintain that the scientistic, problem-solving orientation represents an early phase of his thinking and that he later emphasized the importance of culture (Rorty, 1999), Shari 'atmadari continued to rely on that early, scientistic reading of Dewey's problem-solving approach. Pragmatism in its problem-solving form has rightly been understood as a method-centered approach. Three important questions therefore arise for pragmatism.

The first question concerns the extent to which method can be separated from content. Excessive abstraction of the problem-solving method leads to the assumption that the method of thinking and inquiry is identical across all domains of knowledge. But if we reduce the level of such abstraction, the result is an acknowledgment that the methods of thinking and inquiry in different fields of knowledge possess distinctive characteristics. Is it reasonable, then, to regard the method of problem-solving as identical across all intellectual domains—such as natural empirical science, human empirical science, philosophy, art, and literature? This methodological monism is, in fact, the result of the dominance of the model of empirical science over other fields of knowledge—a dominance that reflects an excessive scientism.

The second question is that in the educational process—especially in the early years of childhood—*content*, not method, is primary and of greater importance. Enculturation is not only unavoidable but necessary if the individual is to acquire a way of life. Even Richard Rorty, who refers to Dewey as his intellectual hero, holds that Dewey neglected the importance of enculturation, whereas in Rorty's view even the critique of culture requires prior enculturation;

for unless something has first been absorbed and understood, critique becomes impossible (Rorty, 1999).

The third question is whether, in the course of life and education, the human being is confronted *only* with problems—such that educators should devote their efforts exclusively to equipping students with methods for solving them. Contrary to the view of Dewey, and also of Karl Popper (1999), who considered life to be entirely a matter of problem-solving, some thinkers have rightly distinguished between *problems* and *mysteries*. They have shown that human life also contains mysteries that cannot be solved—because they are not problems—but rather evoke a kind of wonder-laden contemplation. For instance, Wittgenstein writes: "The mystical is not how the world is, but that it is (is mystical) ... We feel that even if all possible scientific questions were answered, the problems of life would remain completely untouched." (Wittgenstein, 1922, 187). This dimension of existence and life leads the human being toward a form of Socratic ignorance, and this—alongside the elevated, problem-solving kind of knowledge—constitutes the other face of the Janus-like duality of human life and education.

3. Why and how to formulate a philosophy of education for Iran

The philosophy of education in Iran must take shape within the triangle formed by Iranian culture, Islamic culture, and modern culture, for these three cultural spheres have become inextricably intertwined in our country's present condition (Bagheri, 2008). Yet it is both striking and regrettable that these three sides of the triangle have continually been marked by divergences.

In the history of Iranian thought and practice, two types of debilitating confrontations have existed confrontations that have drained the country's capacities in general, and in the fields of education and the philosophy of education in particular. The first is the confrontation of tradition against tradition**,** an intra-cultural tension. The second is the confrontation of tradition against modernism, a tension that is external or inter-cultural in nature. In what follows, I will further elaborate on these two forms of confrontation.

3.1. Internal tension: The confrontation of Iranian and Islamic traditions

In the first type of confrontation, the two traditions—Iranian and Islamic—have stood opposed to one another, generating an intra-cultural tension. What we observe here is a pendular movement: at times the Iranian tradition gains dominance over the Islamic tradition, and at other times the Islamic tradition prevails over the Iranian.

If we limit ourselves to the more recent historical periods, we see that from the Safavid era (16th–17th centuries CE / 10^{th}–11^{th} centuries AH) up to the present, Iranian identity has swung between two poles: cultural Iran-centrism and politico-religious Islamism. The Safavids, by making Shi 'ism the official religion and formalizing the authority of the clerical establishment, elevated Shi 'i Islamic identity over pre-Islamic Iranian identity, to the extent that they reconstructed Iran's epic cultural heritage in religious terms.

Subsequently, during the Afsharid and Zand periods (18th century CE / 12th century AH), one observes a form of political Iran-centrism reasserting itself against the state-sponsored Islamism of the Safavid era. Nader Shah, in an effort that was primarily political—and intended to eliminate the Iran-Ottoman conflict known as "rapprochement of the sects"—sought to recognize Shi 'ism as a *fifth* school alongside the four Sunni schools, thereby distancing Iran from the strongly Shi 'i Islamic atmosphere of the Safavid period.

In the Qajar era (19th–20th centuries CE / 13th–14th centuries AH), and especially during the Mashrute Revolution, the confrontation between neo-Iranianism (inspired by modern nations) and the Islamic tradition rose to theoretical and social prominence. Intellectuals such as Talibov and Mirza Malkom Khan helped drive this movement, and they even gained the support of some clerical figures (such as Behbahani and Tabataba'i). Yet a deep rift emerged in the form of the conflict between the *national constitutionalism* and the *religiously sanctioned constitutionalism*, the latter supported by Mirza Shirazi and Shaykh Fazlullah Nouri.

The Pahlavi state (20th century CE / 14th century SH), relying on a form of revivalist nationalism, sought to reconstruct national identity on the basis of pre-Islamic Iran. But with the 1979 Revolution, the Shi 'i Islamic identity once again prevailed in the official political and cultural sphere. Nonetheless, a new trend of cultural Iran-centrism has been emerging in society, running parallel to the weakening of the Islamic ideological orientation.

3.2. External tension: The confrontation of tradition and modernism

In the second type of confrontation, our social tradition has stood opposed to the modern outlook. In the encounter between Iranian society and the modern era, two major currents have generally emerged—both of which have spilled over into the field of philosophy of education. One current has adopted a stance of *passivity* toward modernism, while the other has attempted, conversely, to *discredit* modernism and champion a return to tradition.

Regarding the passive stance, it must be said that the backwardness Iran—including the field of philosophy of education—naturally contributed to the emergence of such an attitude. As noted earlier in the critical review, the earliest attempts to introduce discussions in this domain were shaped, somewhat passively, under the influence of Western thinkers and with a degree of fascination toward them. Without committing the fallacy of anachronism or criticizing the efforts of earlier scholars on the basis of our present understanding, we may still observe that this kind of intellectual passivity toward the ideas of others is undesirable. Such passivity prevents the identification of intellectual weaknesses and leads to negative consequences in educational thought and practice. This issue is particularly noteworthy because we still observe this type of passive attitude toward Western thinkers today. Many of our researchers—often unconsciously—remain eager yet passive in the face of newly emerging Western ideas. The result is that powerful indigenous perspectives fail to emerge, even though one expects any thinking society to engage meaningfully with other intellectual traditions *and* contribute its own distinctive insights to the relevant field of knowledge.

On the other side, traditionalists argue that the modern era—including modern education—is fundamentally flawed. They seek to highlight the weaknesses of modern times while ignoring its strengths. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1996) is among the staunch defenders of traditionalism. What traditionalists often overlook is that had our society—with its traditional forms of education—continued to move at its former slow pace and with its inherent shortcomings, the consequences would have been far from desirable. Social traditions are undoubtedly valuable, but clinging rigidly to them without recognizing the necessity of transformation amounts to social and cultural stagnation.

Beyond these two currents of *love and hate* toward the modern era, what we truly need—and have long needed—is active dialogue with modern thought. Through such active engagement, both strengths and weaknesses can be identified; the strengths may be adopted, and the weaknesses avoided.

4. A horizon in front of Iran's philosophy of education

As noted earlier, in my view, an appropriate formulation of an Iranian philosophy of education must reach a balanced point at the center of the triangle formed by Iranian culture, Islamic culture, and modern culture. Along this path, we must also consider resolving the two kinds of tensions—intra-cultural and extra-cultural—discussed above. In what follows, I will explain the options I have considered regarding these two tensions.

4.1. Transformative traditionalism

With regard to the first tension—between the Iranian and Islamic cultural elements—its long history has been marked by a wearing friction between these two components, and it is an urgent necessity for the intellectuals of our society to think seriously about resolving it and to avoid reigniting it. To address this intra-cultural tension between Iranian and Islamic culture, I have appealed to the idea of transformative traditionalism (Bagheri, 1987, 1989). If we adopt a fixed and static traditionalism, we will remain confined to the conditions of the past; and if we think only of change and innovation, we will be deprived of the experiences and lessons of the past, and moreover, a people without history and tradition will also be emptied of authenticity.

On this path, it is necessary to identify the positive elements of both Iranian and Islamic cultures and weave them together in a convergent harmony. Of course, such an interweaving has already taken shape to some extent throughout Iran's history, but extremists on both sides, whether Iranian or Islamic, have sought to tear apart this fusion or prevent its continuation, each insisting exclusively on one pole.

There are elements in ancient Iranian culture that resonate with Islamic discourse, and it is essential to emphasize these convergences and avoid creating rifts between them. Addressing this subject in depth would require an independent article, but here I will briefly mention three examples of such convergences.

First example: On the one hand, we may consider the significant element of *martial heroism* in ancient Iranian culture, arising from Iran's historical experience of continual invasions by foreign powers. Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is the clearest example of this heroism. On the other hand, *jihad against aggressors* is also a central value in Islamic culture, preventing people from bowing before unjust invaders and, for those slain in this path, assigning the noble rank of *martyr*.

Second example: On the one hand, we may refer to the element of *ethical orientation* in ancient Iranian culture, manifested in qualities such as chivalry, altruism, and compassion. Mythical heroes in ancient Iranian tradition are fundamentally moral figures. Rostam symbolizes the defense of the innocent, loyalty, and the keeping of covenants; Siyāvash embodies chastity, loyalty, innocence, and unjust suffering; and Fereydun represents justice in opposition to Zahhāk, while Kāveh stands for a moral uprising against tyranny. In ancient Iranian culture, the human being is conceived as a moral agent responsible for supporting *asha* (arta; cosmic order and justice) and avoiding *druj* (falsehood). Likewise, in Islamic culture, ethics holds a central place and is manifested in ideals such as altruism, self-sacrifice, and the protection of the oppressed. The heroic figures of Islamic sacred narrative are also moral exemplars. the Prophet of Islam is the symbol of compassion, protection of the weak, and covenant-keeping; Joseph (Yūsuf) represents chastity, loyalty, and innocence; Imam ʿAlī exemplifies justice, courage and sincerity; and Imam Ḥusayn stands as the embodiment of a moral uprising against injustice and the violation of covenants. Human moral agency is also one of the pivotal doctrines of Islam. (see also: Mostafa, 2024)

Third example: On the one hand, the religious and spiritual element in Iranian culture is noteworthy. Religion has had a prominent presence throughout Iran's long history. The concept of *farr-e-izadi* (divine glory, *khvarenah*) in ancient Iran signified the legitimacy of the ruler and was regarded as the divine selection of the king to administer justice. For example, during the Achaemenid period, the king was considered the representative of God. Particularly in the Sassanian era, religion held an even more prominent position, as Ardeshir Babakan had a priestly lineage and was himself devout, and Zoroastrianism was recognized in this era as the official religion. On the other hand, the element of spirituality in Islamic culture is also highly prominent, and politically, the justice of rulers has been considered a fundamental criterion of governance. As Imam Ali says:

> Justice puts things in their proper places, whereas generosity removes them from their natural positions. Justice governs universally, while generosity is an exceptional and particular occurrence. Therefore, justice is the nobler and superior of the two (Sālih, 1967, 553).

Identifying such convergent points between the two cultural strands of this land is a task arising from historical necessity. However, both Iranian and Islamic cultures also have weaknesses that

must be critically examined. In Iranian culture, for instance, the despotism of kings was a notable weakness and had a negative impact on education. For example, during the reign of Nasser al-Din Shah, the darkness of ignorance and governmental despotism was so profound that the existence of a great reformer like Amir Kabir was perceived as dangerous and ultimately led to his assassination. Eduard Polak, an Austrian professor invited to Iran by Amir Kabir who arrived after Amir Kabir had been murdered, wrote in his travelogue:

> A despotic ruler, because all laws emanate from his personal will, interprets even the slightest deviation from them as a form of rebellion against his laws and punishes it as a crime akin to treason against the homeland. (Polak, 1982, 294)

In Islamic culture, one of the weaknesses has been the spread of hypocrisy and duplicity. Superficiality and ritualism are factors that contribute to the decline in religious practice and lead to this moral vice. Throughout various periods of Islamic rule, this weakness has been evident. The deepest critique of this social and educational vice is manifested in the poetry of Hafez. Regarding the weaknesses of rigid religious traditionalism, I have attempted to clarify the need for its reconsideration in my book *A Renewed Look at Religion and Religiosity* (Bagheri, 2024).

The scope of transformative traditionalism extends beyond the tension between Iranian and Islamic cultures to encompass part of the inter-cultural tension with modernity, particularly given that modernity, in the form of the Enlightenment, has often disregarded tradition and emphasized novelty (the modern) over the antiquity of the traditional. Transformative traditionalism not only critiques modernity from this perspective but is also open to its innovations, welcoming them in the path of transformation with a critical and discerning approach.

4.2. Constructive realism

On the other hand, to resolve the inter-cultural tension between tradition and modernity, I have concluded that the emphasis of contemporary Western philosophies on human action—whether in their European forms, such as Kantian constructivism and Nietzsche's will-to-power, or in American pragmatism—is a strength that should be acknowledged. Their weakness, however, lies in the fact that they either place so much weight on human constructs that they neglect the human being's entanglement in the inescapable realities of existence and its hidden mysteries.

Therefore, in my reading of human agency, in addition to the aspect of transformative traditionalism, I have proposed another essential aspect, which I call constructive realism**.** In this regard, I have sought to demonstrate the shortcomings of extreme constructivist views from the perspective of realism (Bagheri, 2020). In this compound term, realism signifies that human knowledge is always directed toward reality—i.e., cognition is always the cognition *of something*. However, in this cognitive process, human agency is also at work, manifesting as

the processing of mental constructs to apprehend reality. If we rely solely on realism and ignore our mental constructs, we fall into the trap of mistaking our own ideas for reality. Conversely, if we rely solely on constructivism, we not only fall into subjectivism but also remain unaware of the bounding power of existential realities over our mental constructs and are thus shocked by them. I have also examined this reading of human agency in Islamic sources and offered an interpretation consistent with Islamic texts (Bagheri, 2020).

I have further attempted to extend these cultural and philosophical perspectives to the realm of education, examining their implications for educational principles and methods (Bagheri, 2016). For instance, the implication of asymmetrical interaction in teacher-student relationships, while avoiding both strict teacher-centeredness and student-centeredness, reflects the need to preserve the authority of the teacher derived from both global and local culture and knowledge while simultaneously recognizing the agency of the student and granting legitimacy to the challenges the student faces in confronting traditional, cultural, and scientific heritage, thereby providing a pathway for transformation.

Conclusion

The trajectory of educational philosophy in Iran reflects an imbalanced interplay among the three elements of Iranian historical tradition, Islamic thought, and modern influences. From its implicit roots in pre-modern Iranian and Islamic scholarship, education evolved through the establishment of *Dār al-Fonūn*, which introduced Western-inspired, skill- and competence-oriented approaches. In the 20th century, formal educational philosophy drew from European and American thought, including Houshyar's German-influenced vocational pedagogy, Shokouhi's Piagetian constructivism, and Shariatmadari's Deweyan pragmatism. While these contributions expanded intellectual horizons, they also exhibited limitations, particularly in balancing intra-cultural tensions, on the one hand, and extra-cultural tensions on the other hand. I think Iranian educational philosophy must navigate a triangular intersection of Iranian, Islamic, and modern elements. Historical tensions exist both within culture between Iranian and Islamic traditions and between country's culture and modernity. Addressing these requires a framework of transformative traditionalism, integrating the strengths of both Iranian and Islamic heritage while critically engaging with modern innovations, alongside constructive realism**,** recognizing both the constraints of reality and the active, constructive role of the learner.

A balanced educational philosophy thus preserves the cultural and moral insights of tradition, critically embraces the innovations of modernity, and affirms the interplay of teacher authority and learner agency.

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