Questions regarding the origin and status of a philosophy of education are accepted as perennial. Yet recent discussions emerge clearly as more than the products of a natural desire for intellectual satisfaction. They express a fundamental hunger for well-founded theory arising from the recognition, more widespread than ever before, that education devoid of a philosophy may become simply "a bag of tricks".

G. H. Bantock (1) has recently pointed out that although societies change and so do systems of education, it is invalid to assume a necessary connection between these events, and from this to argue a moral obligation on the part of education today to respond to what the author terms "vacillating social pressures". We have to ask ourselves again what we take to be the distinctive features of a philosophy of education properly so-called.

The word "philosophy" has itself fallen into a measure of disrepute. Professional philosophers are disinclined to the construction of systems: analysis rather than synthesis is often taken to be the mark of philosophic maturity as the contrast between Wittgenstein's earlier and later work clearly shows.

If we further exclude the case where the phrase philosophy of education is employed simply as a more pretentious way of stating an opinion, we come to the crux of the problem. People do, by reflection, arrive at a series of what they believe to be desirable goals which imply certain curricula and particular class-room methods. Implicit in this kind of thinking is the idea that desirable is to mean more than that something could, as a matter of fact, be desired. To establish compulsively, bindingly, the obrigatoriness of these aims, one must have recourse to the possibility of deducing one’s educational philosophy A) from a logically prior system or B) according to an intrinsic discipline. I shall now examine the first possibility.

A

The deducibility of a social ethic from the study of history has exercised an irresistible attraction upon several philosophers. The detection of a real direction in human events would, it was thought, permit the deduction of particular courses of action from general truths.

In this sense, a philosophy of history could claim a universality of relevance to all aspects of the human condition. In this sense, too, it might
hope to press the categorical right to inform one’s thinking in the field of education.

The basis of this claim, whether urged by St. Augustine or Hegel, has never been a rigid Determinism. Such an account of the history of man might render certain principles intelligible only at the expense of abolishing the possibility of choice and hence the idea of moral obligation.

The intention has been to dissolve the problem by underlining the secondary influence of human agency. In K. R. Popper’s (2) words: “It (historicism) does not teach that nothing can be brought about, it only predicts that neither your dreams nor what your reason constructs will ever be brought about according to plan. Only such plans as fit in with the main current of history can be effective.” The wise will be those who discern and perform their role as “social midwives”.

It would not be too difficult to show the basic philosophic difficulties in such a position. Even if an account of history remarks only general characteristics and thus preserves the case for human libertarianism, it is hard to see how an ethical obligation is to be derived from a series of general statements about the relatively small part of the past which is known to us.

This general defect in historicism is aggravated in the hands of certain of its classic exponents. Having surveyed the Hegelian premises and conclusions, Jacques Maritain (3) rejects them as the work of “a kind of philosopher-God re-creating not only history but the whole universe”. Other critics have concentrated on Hegel’s imprecision in language, the chauvinism of his predictions, the conniving at unpalatable fact. The only significant refutation however, of Hegel or of the historicist position in general, is the criticism that to apply to history a selectivity demanded by a theory which is itself selectively derived, is doubly invalid.

It is true that present-day philosophers of history such as Toynbee and Maritain reject such approaches but their avoidance of rigidity relies on qualifications for every short step taken. One feels their caution rather than conviction. They provide a properly academic corrective rather than a doctrinal basis for a philosophy of education.

The basic inadequacies of “millennium” theories, Hegelian, Marxian or otherwise have always been obscured by their emotional contagion, their remarkable power of presenting life as a clear challenge in which all the mental and physical energies of man are to be harnessed now to create a new society. I think it wrong to argue that this fervour of creation, of experimentation, is an illusory emotional accompaniment to such a plan. It is a tertiary quality always experienced by man as system-builder, creator of a new order. It is the thrill of entering into an understanding,