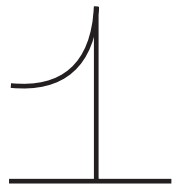




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# Věnování

## *Dedication*

Toto číslo je s úctou věnováno prof. Tomáši Kasperovi, šéfredaktovi časopisu *Historia scholastica*, k jeho životnímu jubileu.

*Redakce časopisu Historia scholastica*

This issue is respectfully dedicated to Prof. Tomáš Kasper, editor-in-chief of *Historia scholastica* Journal, on the occasion of his jubilee.

*The editors of Historia scholastica*

# Educational Studies in Wartime: How War and Dictatorship influenced the Educational Theory of Philipp Abraham Kohnstamm (1875–1951)

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**Abstract** Between the two World Wars, the Amsterdam physicist Philipp Abraham Kohnstamm (1875–1951) became one of the founders of Dutch academic pedagogy. In the theory developed by Kohnstamm in the 1920s, the war played a significant role in the background. Kohnstamm's philosophy of personalism was intended as a defense against fascist tendencies towards Gleichschaltung and dictatorship. With his educational ideas, Kohnstamm wanted to strengthen democratic citizenship and the emancipation of the lower classes. In the 1930s, Kohnstamm entered into a debate with National Socialism and emerged

as a principled proponent of democracy and democratic education. As a German and Jew of origin, who later became Dutch and Christian, the rise of National Socialism strongly influenced Kohnstamm and it caused that he only finished three of the seven planned volumes of his magnum opus. In this paper, in which Kohnstamm's resistance against war and dictatorship is further elaborated, the Dutch scholar is presented as a case of educational studies in wartime.

**Keywords** wartime, dictatorship, educational theory, Netherlands, democratic citizenship

In this contribution, I aim to examine how war and dictatorship have influenced the development of educational theories. In this regard, we can think of academic pedagogues who aligned themselves with the dictatorship in their work. However, I discuss a case study of a pedagogue

who contrarily resisted the dictatorship, and, as I will argue, whose educational theorizing cannot be separated from a context of danger and threat of war, repression and dictatorship. Although the case study pertains to the neutral Netherlands during the First World War, I will argue that even in this context a culture emerged in which war left a significant mark. This became true for the Second World War and especially for the Jewish pedagogue I want to introduce.

I will accomplish this by outlining the intellectual development of the Dutch scholar Philipp Abraham Kohnstamm (1875–1951). He became one of the pioneers of Dutch educational studies in the 1920s, drawing from the German tradition of *geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*. Kohnstamm formulated his theory between the two World Wars, and his ideas can only be understood in the context of war and dictatorship. In three consecutive paragraphs, I will outline Kohnstamm's intellectual development by analyzing his most important publications, which shed light on the questions of war and dictatorship.

The effects of war on education and the pedagogical domain have received considerable attention in historiography, particularly regarding the First and Second World Wars, both within and beyond Europe. Recent literature also addresses wartime memories of schoolchildren, alongside the influence war has had on the schooling process (cf. Liu, 2024; McCulloch & Brewis, 2016; Vošahlíková, Rochet & Weiss, 2007). However, comparatively less attention has been devoted to the effects of war on the formation of pedagogical theories, as this aspect is often more challenging to discern. Simultaneously, examples such as the well-known case of Maria Montessori illustrate that functioning under a fascist regime requires various adaptations that may ultimately lead to a rupture with such a regime, while the pedagogical ideological system may continue to exist without its intellectual mother – in this regard, Quarfood refers to the 'fascistisation' of Italian Montessorism (Quarfood, 2022; Leenders, 2001). Kohnstamm, who had a personal acquaintance with Montessori, made different choices.

### Revolt against Positivism

Philipp Abraham Kohnstamm was born in Bonn on June 17, 1875. His father, Max Kohnstamm, a German Jewish banker, was employed at a bank in Amsterdam. In 1867, he married Sarah Wertheim, also of Jewish descent. Around 1870, Max had to resign from his position due to a chronic form of manic depression, leading to his care in German sanatoriums. In 1883, Sarah Wertheim returned to Amsterdam with her three children, among whom Philipp was the youngest.

Following his education at the Hoogere Burgerschool, a novel type of school emphasizing modern languages and sciences, Philipp Kohnstamm enrolled at the University of Amsterdam in 1893. He pursued studies in natural sciences under the guidance of the esteemed physicist Johannes Diderik van der Waals (1837–1923). Additionally, Kohnstamm attended lectures by the neo-Kantian philosopher Cornelis Bellaar Spruyt (1842–1901), whose teachings prompted a shift from materialism to Kantianism. In 1901, Kohnstamm completed his studies with a Ph.D., defended under the supervision of Van der Waals. Subsequently, his supervisor appointed him as an assistant at the Physics Laboratory, where he contributed to high-pressure measurements. Concurrently, he compiled the lecture notes of the late Bellaar Spruyt into the *Geschiedenis der Wijsbegeerte* (1905), a history of philosophy (for his biography, see Mulder, 1989, pp. 89–127; Exalto, Groenendijk & Miedema, 2015).

In 1907, Kohnstamm became a *privaatdocent* (unpaid lecturer) in logic and the theory of knowledge. In the opening lecture *Transcendentel idealisme* he discussed the relationship between physics and metaphysics. He sought to connect with Heinrich Rickert's ideas about the limitations of natural science and the right of a philosophy which takes into account transcendent values (Kohnstamm, 1907). Kohnstamm held this position only for one year because, in 1908, he was appointed extra-ordinary professor in thermodynamics as one of Van der Waals' successors. In his inaugural address *Determinisme en natuurwetenschap*, Kohnstamm opposed closed natural causality and, in his view, the untenable determinism of natural science. He illustrated this



with his field of expertise, thermodynamics. As far as experience goes, the laws of nature are only highly probable and provide no strict proof for or against determinism (Kohnstamm, 1908). He continued to hold this chair in physics until 1928.

Kohnstamm's education and initial steps on the path of science took place in the decade 1890–1900, a period often referred to as the revolt against positivism (cf. the classic study of Hughes, 1958). The revolution was instigated by scientists such as Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, Ernst Troeltsch, and Henri Bergson. Between 1890 and 1930, a shift occurred in science, broadly characterized as a crisis of positivism: resistance against the dominance of the natural sciences and their materialistic explanatory models, recognition of the significance of the irrational and the subjective, and an awareness that the ideals of the Enlightenment – knowledge is power – had encountered their limits. In Kohnstamm's generation of natural scientists, this shift became apparent at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century (Eigner & Van Lunteren, 2011; Klomp, 1997).

Kohnstamm was educated with the idea that natural science and technology were the engines of progress, ultimately leading to greater control of reality and, consequently, a better future for humanity and society. The Hogere Burgerschool was a significant channel through which this so-called bourgeois scientism was disseminated. However, for Kohnstamm, positivism began to wane early on, as evidenced by his lectures *Transcendenteel idealisme* and *Determinisme en natuurwetenschap*. As his inaugural lecture revealed, Kohnstamm had a profound interest in the foundations of natural science, particularly focusing on the question of causality, a theme that occupied him for an extended period. In 1947, his study *Vrije wil of determinisme* was published, in which he attempted to elucidate the problem area for a broad audience. In 1908, he wrote that his opposition to determinism was considered 'a dangerous heresy'. Thus, Kohnstamm was also part of the revolt against positivism, primarily conducted by him with philosophical arguments.

Kohnstamm opposed the causality dogma of natural science – the compelling determinism of every event by a preceding cause – and also took aim at the psychological monism of the Groningen philosopher

and psychologist Gerard Heymans (1857–1930). According to Heymans, there is only one mode of existence, and it is best explained from the consciousness of humans. In his psychology, Heymans aimed to investigate that consciousness on a scientific basis. Kohnstamm sought to safeguard the autonomy of the human mind in relation to the laws of natural science; he wanted to leave room for the religious mystery as well. According to Kohnstamm, humans possess free will; it is inherent in their nature to have the freedom of choice, or else they would become mere machines. The iron laws of nature chain humans to a world without prospects, a world where there is no room for religion and morality. However, these iron laws have been broken by philosophy, revealing that the world is more complex than a mere calculation (Kohnstamm, 1923, pp. 70–71). The unspeakable truth is best described through the metaphor of a person, whom one can encounter but never possess. In 1922, Kohnstamm expressed, ‘My whole soul rebels against this doctrine, that the personality of one is fundamentally nothing more than that of another, that this spatial-temporal-sensory world in its particularization and concreteness is only an illusion through which we must see to behold the one, undifferentiated, true essence of the Idea’ (Kohnstamm, 1922, p. 308).

The revolution against positivism led various scientists on a quest for a philosophy of life as a supplement to a science that turned out to be more uncertain than initially thought. This uncertainty was reinforced by two factors: the discoveries of Albert Einstein, which shook the belief in absolute time and space to its core, and the First World War, which signaled the end of the progress faith based on natural science – the war revealed the devastating consequences of the hailed technological progress. Among the intellectual elite, this resulted, on the one hand, in conservative cultural pessimism (as seen in Heymans), and on the other hand, in an intensified search for a synthetic philosophy of life. Kohnstamm utilized the arguments of relativity theory and quantum mechanics to support his resistance against determinism and the absolute status of natural laws. His crusade against determinism began in 1908, a time when he was not yet acquainted with Einstein’s theories; it was not Einstein but independent reflection on

humanity and the world, guided by an orientation towards Christianity, that led Kohnstamm to his position (Kohnstamm, 1926, index sub voce *Quantentheorie* and *Relativiteitstheorie*).

Kohnstamm sought a new balance, acknowledging that the old standpoint of causality was no longer tenable, and he did not wish to fall into complete indeterminism. After a meeting with Einstein in 1921, Kohnstamm argued to Heymans that life should be compared to a game: every game is bound by rules that restrict freedom (the laws of nature), but these rules can never determine the precise course of the game, or else the game will lose its character: “All life, especially all human actions, is a freedom restricted by rules.” According to Kohnstamm, nothing less than a new era in European thought had begun because the determinism of the nineteenth century and absolute laws of nature were outdated (Klomp, 1997, pp. 127–129). In 1933, he wrote that we are living in the throes of a new era, “which must bring a new and universally accepted synthesis, or humanity will witness its demise in chaos”. The issue of the relationship between constraint and freedom threatens to disrupt society, wrote Kohnstamm, primarily referring to the advancing National Socialism, but his speech indicates that he also contemplated the ongoing discourse in the natural sciences (Kohnstamm, 1933).

Kohnstamm was thus part of the revolt against positivism and evolved during the shift in the natural sciences between 1890 and 1930 from a materialist and idealist to a biblically inspired personalist. Philosophically, he became an advocate of indeterminism and a defender of human freedom of choice. His transition from the natural sciences to the human sciences can be seen as a more or less logical consequence of this evolution. However, before making that shift in 1919, he emerged as a champion of democratization.

### **War and Democracy**

The bankruptcy of the belief in progress resulting from the First World War led the liberal elite to cultural pessimism and fear of popular rule. This elite was highly skeptical of expanding suffrage, fearing social leveling and expressing concern about the preservation of civilization.

Heymans was a spokesperson for this old liberal tradition, which sought to link suffrage to intellectual competence, arguing that only the educated are capable of independent judgment and making the right decisions. Kohnstamm had parted ways with this positivistic liberalism, and for that reason, he strongly supported democratization and suffrage expansion. He argued for this based on his conviction of the fundamental equality of all humans, simultaneously rejecting revolutionary socialism. He deemed the position that intellectuals who possess the ideal truth are better equipped for objective moral judgments and therefore have more right to political decision-making authority as a dangerous standpoint. In 1905 he became member of the Vrijzinnig Democratische Bond (Liberal Democratic League) and in 1911 he was a candidate for the Tweede Kamer (House of Commons). During the campaign in Weststellingwerf, he had experienced that even the common man who had not received a bourgeois upbringing proved to resonate with shared values. As an advocate for democratization, Kohnstamm realized that this entailed a significant obligation towards popular education and educational reform (Kohnstamm, 1934, pp. 27–28).

After the outbreak of the First World War, Kohnstamm deeply reflected on the phenomenon of democracy. In 1914, he, along with the theologian Arthur Joseph de Sopper (1875–1960), initiated the brochure series *Synthese*, in which he developed a holistic vision of human beings and society. With this initiative, he opposed the Dutch system of pillarization and the orthodox-Christian antithesis as the basis for political governance (cf. Baneke, 2011). In the same year, 1914, he established the Religious-Democratic Circle within the Liberal Democratic League, where various professors were active, including the pedagogue Jan Gunning and the jurist Paul Scholten. The circle had its own periodical for a short time, *De Schakel*, which addressed the relationship between religion and politics. According to the Circle, political questions were fundamentally ethical questions, but, in its view, religious parties were hindering societal reforms. Within the Liberal Democratic League, where religion and politics had been strictly separated until then, this Circle did not gain much traction (Klijnsma, 2008, pp. 210–211).

Kohnstamm was also existentially affected by the war. In October 1914, he assisted in the evacuation of Antwerp by bringing refugees to the Netherlands with a truck. This deeply affected him to the extent that he had to be admitted with a nervous breakdown in January 1915. Like his father, he suffered from manic depression, which was exacerbated by the war (Koch, 2023, p. 218). In 1915, Kohnstamm wrote a preface for a new Dutch translation of Immanuel Kant's treatise *Zum ewigen Frieden* (1795), published by the Comité De Europeesche Statenbond (Committee for the European League of States). This committee advocated for the preservation of morality and justice among civilized nations, considering a European league of states as the best guarantee for this. In line with Kant, Kohnstamm rejected pacifism and Rousseau-inspired anarchism, which expected the future natural excellence of humanity. Restoration of justice and morality were necessary to end the war and prevent new conflicts. Kohnstamm quoted from a letter from one of the leaders of the Kantgesellschaft with whom he had corresponded, pointing out that science could play a significant role in restoring contacts between Kulturnationen once peace was reestablished. Kohnstamm enthusiastically agreed with this viewpoint: although he supported democratization, he still believed in the leading role of science (Kant, 1915, pp. V–XI).

Kohnstamm developed his vision of democracy in a series of brochures and articles. According to him, democracy should not be based on the equality of people, as democracy presupposes difference – diversity in gender, religion, and race is best guaranteed in this form of governance. It is not equality but the equal worth of individuals that forms the foundation of democratic thought, and this kind of equality is based on the essence of humans, namely their personality, which must be able to develop freely and unbound within the frameworks of justice and morality. No one should have dominion over the personality and conscience of another. In his earliest reflections on the idea of democracy, Kohnstamm already emphasized the importance of education. He quoted the educational reformer Jan Ligthart, who believed that all education is based on the certainty that the child has a conscience – Kohnstamm connected this back to the democratic idea

that should be spread through education. During the First World War, Kohnstamm sharply distinguished personality from the community, but in his later work, he would take a more nuanced position, emphasizing the importance of the community more strongly; at this stage, his aim was to protect the individual from the coercion of conscience directed by demagogues steering the masses (cf. Vermeer, 1987).

For Kohnstamm, democracy is not primarily a system of government but a mentality, an attitude towards our fellow human beings. The fundamental equality of every human conscience, argued by Kohnstamm with a reference to Kant, means that differences in aptitude and giftedness should not be decisive in democracy. Consequently, a country should not be governed by a closed political caste of intellectuals. Selection based on intellect is a very one-sided instrument; as an educational scientist, Kohnstamm would later argue that this applies not only to politics but also to schoolchildren. According to Kohnstamm, the idea of democracy serves the human personality and its freedom of conscience. The democratic political structure is best equipped to protect this because, in a democratic arrangement, the state serves as a servant of the legal community and, consequently, of the human conscience. The outbreak of the First World War prompted Kohnstamm to take a strong stance against the national states that, in his view, were neglecting their duty. He held greater expectations for a European league of states to prevent new wars and maintain peace (Kohnstamm, 1917).

### **The Theory of Personalism**

In 1915, Kohnstamm became a member of the board of the *Maatschappij tot Nut van 't Algemeen* (Society for Public Welfare), an organisation that, based on an enlightened idealism, had attempted to contribute to the education of the lower classes since 1784. The Society had been looking for a professor of educational studies for some years, and in 1919, Kohnstamm was appointed special professor of educational studies at the university where he was already working. He also became director of the *Nutseminarium voor Paedagogiek*, a research institute associated with his chair, which initiated empirical educational research.

In his inaugural address *Staatspaedagogiek of persoonlijkheidspaedagogiek* (Pedagogy of the State or Pedagogy of the Personality) he once more denounced intellectualism and rationalism. They are ultimately based on Plato's belief that the intellect will lead us to the ideal world. Kohnstamm argues that the real world is of a historical, individual and personal nature. It implies that we need other means to become aware of reality as for example feeling in the arts, or the will in ethics. To study reality we need a teaching that is different from the state school created by liberalism or the dogmatic school of confessionalism. This new teaching needed to be adapted to each personality, which included also will and intuition (Kohnstamm, 1919).

Kohnstamm was one of the first professors of educational studies in the Netherlands, and thus, he had to shape this new discipline. In 1932, in addition to his Amsterdam chair, he was appointed extraordinary professor at the University of Utrecht. Kohnstamm completed three volumes of his system of personalistic philosophy entitled *Schepper en Schepping* (Creator and Creation) described in the subtitle as "a system of personalist philosophy on biblical basis", i.e., the epistemological part *Het waarheidsprobleem* (The Problem of Truth, 1926), the educational part *Persoonlijkheid in wording* (Becoming Personality, 1929) and the theological volume *De Heilige* (The Holy One, 1931).

Kohnstamm's personalism forms the theoretical basis for his educational theory, which can be summarised as a theory of the development of each individual person into an incomparable and unique personality. Kohnstamm noted three pedagogical consequences of his personalism. First, every personality is different, and uniqueness must be safeguarded; therefore, education must take the uniqueness of every child into account. Second, there is no given system of laws and norms, and the right thing to do differs for every person. The conscience guides the making of normative choices and is the limitation of the subjectivity that may result from a philosophy wherein no law system is given. Finally, Kohnstamm's interpretation of personalism makes his theory a pronounced Christian theory but leaves room for generally valid pedagogical consequences. Kohnstamm commented that he intended to write for a non-Christian audience as well. A significant source of

inspiration for Kohnstamm's theory was the German-American psychologist William Stern (1871–1938), while in the I-Thou relationship important to Kohnstamm, the influence of Martin Buber (1878–1965) can be presumed (Hoencamp, Exalto, De Muynck & De Ruyter, 2022).

The space Kohnstamm allowed for other beliefs is in line with the pluriform concept of truth he stood for. He described his personalism as just one approach to the truth. Kohnstamm saw the recognition of and freedom for other worldviews as logical consequences of his personalism because they suit the idea that each personality is unique, with his or her own beliefs and interpretations. These consequences of personalism also influenced Kohnstamm's views about an ideal school, in which personality is formed and space is given to all kinds of worldviews. Kohnstamm argued for a school as a place where children from different backgrounds and diverse worldviews meet. Moreover, the school should be a place where children from different social environments can work together and reduce the inequality of opportunities in education. In this way, the personality will also be developed.

In the 1930s, he recognised the danger of National Socialism and antisemitism and turned against anti-democratic tendencies in Dutch society. In 1933 he dealt with the causes of antisemitism in his series *Psychologie van het ongelooft* (Psychology of Unbelief). At the bottom of antisemitism, he argued, lies the irreconcilable opposition between Aryan and Biblical religion, which even in their secularised forms presuppose a basic relation between I and Thou. In 1934 he links the contemporary forms of dictatorship with the Romantic cult of the Person, which he opposes to Biblical Personalism. They are not only a political system, but National Socialism, communism and fascism imply a world view and a utilitarian training.

As in his previous brochures on democracy Kohnstamm stated that liberal democracy rests upon the absolute value of the individual, of which, as Kant argued, conscience is sovereign. It implies that democracy presupposes humane education, which develops the awareness of values and respect of the other. In 1936 the Comité van Waakzaamheid (Committee of Vigilance) of anti-nationalist intellectuals asked Kohnstamm to write their first pamphlet, which warned the Dutch



against the spiritual danger of National Socialism. Kohnstamm took the matter to a philosophical level. National Socialist anthropology, which focusses on the community and asks the individual to be prepared for sacrifice, is opposed to rationalist anthropology of the Enlightenment, which focuses on the selfish individual and approves gain at the cost of society. It justly showed the inadequacies of 19th century thought, but the inevitable consequences of National Socialism are the denial of the human spirit, a glorification of violence and antisemitism. The answer to the challenge only faith can give, that is, a reaffirmation of the Dutch humanist tradition, Kohnstamm argued (Kohnstamm, 1936).

Much like how he halted his work in the natural sciences in 1914 with the outbreak of World War I, he found himself unable to complete his magnum opus *Schepper en schepping*, intended to consist of seven parts, due to the increasing manifestation of National Socialism and antisemitism starting in 1933. His expectations for the future of a “becoming humanity” collapsed. After the First World War, Kohnstamm was optimistic and began to write his own magnum opus with the aim of establishing not only a pedagogy but a science of the human person. The plan for this magnum opus was huge: Kohnstamm spoke of “the construction of the whole”, comprising two series of three parts each. Kohnstamm completed the first series of three volumes in 1931. The second series – on ethics and sociology, esthetics and history – would not materialise. This had everything to do with the Great Depression and the rise of fascism in the 1930s, as Kohnstamm wrote in an autobiographical sketch in 1934: “I saw a line drawn through all my reflections and expectations for the future of a growing humanity. This whole society, in all its forms and proportions, has become shaken.” Kohnstamm referred to “mental disruption and degeneration”, full of bitterness and hatred, which must necessarily lead to a new war: “Can one in this world, in which one of the greatest civilisations denies its cultural task in such a painful way, as we experience and contemplate every day, can one write in quiet isolation about the Beauty of God? Maybe others feel capable of that; I can’t (Kohnstamm, 1934, pp. 42–43).

As a Jew and German by birth, he could no longer seclude himself in serene silence in his study with the growing antisemitic and National

Socialist developments. In 1934, he wrote that the form of a grand systematic work did not suit this “deeply shocking time”. Believing that if God was at work in history, it was for humans to wait and be silent. The antisemitic measures of the Nazis affected Kohnstamm in 1940 when he was forced to resign from his position as a professor; the Germans excluded all “non-Aryans” from public functions. Dealing with illness, Kohnstamm withdrew to his country house; since he was baptized Reformed and married to a non-Jewish woman, during the early war years, he faced no more interference from the occupation than the average Dutch person. In the second half of the war, he was at risk of being captured, but he narrowly escaped and survived the war.

### **Conclusion**

Between the two World Wars, Philipp Abraham Kohnstamm became one of the founders of Dutch academic pedagogy. In his educational theory, the war played a significant role in the background. Kohnstamm’s philosophy of personalism was intended as a defense against fascist tendencies towards Gleichschaltung and dictatorship. With his educational ideas, Kohnstamm wanted to strengthen democratic citizenship and the emancipation of the lower classes. In the 1930s, Kohnstamm entered into a debate with National Socialism and emerged as a principled proponent of democracy and democratic education. The rise of National Socialism strongly influenced Kohnstamm and it caused that he only finished the first series of his magnum opus.

To further explore the impact of war and dictatorship on educational theories, this case study needs to be placed in a comparative perspective with other scholars, different countries, and various contexts in order to draw more far-reaching conclusions. A comparison with, for example, Montessori can contribute to a better understanding of the contextuality of educational theory and can elucidate the factors that determine why one theory is susceptible to “fascistisation” while another is less so, or not at all, but is sharpened by the confrontation with dictatorship.

For now, we suffice with two considerations based on this case study. Firstly, Kohnstamm developed his educational theory in the

tensions of his time, his philosophy of personalism can be seen as a response to the challenges of his day. When assessing Kohnstamm's theory, it is important to take this historical context into account. In general, this leads to the conclusion that educational theories need historical contextualization in order to be understood.

Secondly, Kohnstamm's theory of personalism has been criticized by some eminent philosophers of his time. However it can be understood as a liberation of the mind from the entrapment of 19th century philosophy of positivism and determinism, Kohnstamm was too quick to fill the gaps with theistic metaphysics. Another weakness of Kohnstamm was that he wanted to reduce everything to the personal, individual and concrete. That sometimes gave his considerations something vague and indefinable. But at the same time, it is attractive about Kohnstamm's personalism that it is not a closed system and can still appeal to us today.

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