

Education, Knowledge and Truth

Beyond the postmodern impasse

Edited by

David Carr

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EDUCATION, KNOWLEDGE AND TRUTH

In the 1960s educational philosophers showed enormous interest in the nature of knowledge and truth and its organisation for curricular purposes. However, in the light of recent socio-political and educational changes and developments, the interest has declined markedly. This volume collects contributors from an international team of educational and other scholars to reinstate conceptual problems concerning knowledge, truth and the curriculum on the agenda of educational philosophical debate.

Although it is arguable that curriculum policy makers have continued to subscribe to a 'foundationalist' paradigm of rational educational planning, few contemporary educational philosophers would consider this to be still tenable following the impact of 'postmodern' critiques of the objectivity, truth and authority of our knowledge claims. This collection, however, aims to explore different epistemological conceptions in relation to their influence on the curricula and pedagogy of primary and secondary education—with the ultimate aim of carving a coherent route between rational foundationalism and intellectually indiscriminate postmodernism. To this end, the volume fills a major gap in the literature of contemporary educational philosophy.

David Carr is Reader in the Faculty of Education at the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of *Educating the Virtues*, also published by Routledge (1991).

The contributors are: Sharon Bailin, Eamonn Callan, David E. Cooper, Fergus Kerr, Lynne McFall, Graham McFee, Jim Mackenzie, Shirley Pendlebury, D.C. Phillips, Harvey Siegel, Jan W. Steutel, Kevin Williams and Christopher Winch.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One is conscious of different kinds of pitfalls in setting out to edit a thematic collection of philosophical essays—one of which is certainly that of striking an appropriate balance between *coherence* and *variety*. At one extreme, since philosophers can be no less attached to their pet views (I had better not say prejudices) than the next person, there is always the temptation to invite contributions from one's friends—or, at any rate—those sufficiently like-minded to be relied upon to grind roughly the same axe as oneself. Here, apart from the unphilosophically conspiratorial flavour of any work thus assembled, one is liable to secure coherence at the price of tedious overlap or overemphasis. Hence, at another extreme, there is a temptation to embrace a certain ideal of philosophy as open and unfettered enquiry, to invite a number of interesting people to say what they like on a given issue, and then to wait and see what turns up. However, philosophical collections assembled on this principle are open to the hazard of contributors interpreting the ostensible theme so loosely and idiosyncratically that they no longer even appear to be focusing on the same issue.

It is my earnest hope that this philosophical collection on education, knowledge and truth has at least avoided these extremes. I would, of course, like to think that the other contributors to this volume would consider themselves my friends; indeed, the professional and personal associations I have over the years enjoyed with many of the contributors to this volume are such that any life without them would not be (in one sense) *my* life—and certainly not as rich *a* life. But few contributors to this volume are like-minded in anything like the intellectually dubious sense indicated above. It is not just that I have over the years disagreed with some of those whose work is included in this volume, but that not a few of them obstinately persist in observing philosophical loyalties I continue to regard as significantly misplaced; consequently, I never for a moment doubted in the course of preparing this volume that I would ultimately have to agree to differ with some presently included treatments of the fundamental issues about knowledge and truth with which this volume is concerned. Thus, anyone looking for complete philosophical harmony between the different sections

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of this work is—and this is surely as it should be—destined to some disappointment.

That said, this work does have a very particular axe to grind and rough compliance with certain general qualifications was a condition of selection for this particular undertaking. Thus, I think it is fair to say that all contributors to this volume would broadly locate themselves in a tradition of analytical philosophy going back to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and would agree with these founding fathers of the discipline in regarding epistemological enquiry—rational enquiry into the formal character of knowledge and truth—as central to the philosophical enterprise. To that extent, all contributions to this volume find common cause in the rational critique of certain contemporary currents of more or less radical scepticism concerning, in extreme cases, the very *possibility* of epistemology as a going philosophical concern. Some of the intellectual trends which have given rise to such scepticism hail from philosophical traditions sometimes regarded as ‘non-analytical’—or, at least, as not ‘analytical’ in the sense of much anglophone philosophy of this appellation—but a fair measure has fairly conventional analytical roots in debates about the nature of knowledge within a modern tradition of epistemological theorizing which would readily accommodate (say) Descartes, Hume, Kant, Russell, Dewey, Popper, Quine and Davidson. All the same, at its radical ‘postmodern’ extreme, such scepticism often seems to be a rather suspect blend of insights from various intellectual traditions reflecting a diversity of (not always primarily epistemological) philosophical concerns.

Moreover, there can be no doubt that these new forms of scepticism have at least partly contributed to a radical decline of interest in theorizing about knowledge and truth—particularly in relation to questions of learning and pedagogy—which was in fact extraordinarily widespread in the post-war heyday of analytical educational philosophy. Indeed, this decline of epistemological interest seems related to a loss of philosophical confidence—in the light of ‘postmodern’ critiques of that enterprise of systemic knowledge construction nowadays often simply referred to as the ‘enlightenment project’—in any common-sense construal of human knowledge or enquiry as a matter of the discovery of *objective* truths about a mind-independent order of reality; hence it has lately become more common—and more fashionable—for educational and other philosophers to speak the language of *narrative*, voice and even myth, in preference to that of truth, reality or (heaven forbid) fact.

The present enterprise, however, is driven by a faith that postmodern accounts of knowledge are themselves little more than dubious concoctions of epistemological truth and fiction—and, as such, prime candidates for what many postmodernists are inclined to call ‘deconstruction’. For whilst it may well be that the various philosophies of postmodernism contain important insights about the nature and provenance of human knowledge which it

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would be foolish to ignore—for example, the consideration that certain pictures of knowledge and its acquisition by which people have been held captive, during and since the ages of reason and enlightenment, are no longer credible in terms of what we now know about the world and our place in it—it is nevertheless more than likely that these insights have suffered some distortion by association with forms of scepticism about the very possibility of objective knowledge long ago familiar to (if not then actually effectively refuted by) the founding father of western epistemology, Plato. If this is so, then the only possibility of rational movement *beyond* the current dogmas of postmodernism must lie in some serious attempt to distinguish what is more from what is less credible in such doctrines; but, however we slice it, this would appear to mean serious rehabilitation—consistent with the fallibilist insights of postmodernism—of notions of *objective* knowledge and truth as logically presupposed to any such further rational enquiry.

It is a general commitment to this broad programme that unites all the contributions to this volume. Each contributor was from the outset invited to address some particular aspect of recent postmodern assaults on traditional or ‘received’ conceptions of knowledge and enquiry with a view to sorting out what might be considered reasonable from what would appear less so about such critiques. Some contributors were asked to look at ways in which postmodern scepticism may be considered to have impacted on knowledge claims in particular areas of human enquiry—such as science (Mackenzie), art (McFee) literature (McFall), religion (Kerr) and morality (Steutel)—whereas others were asked to investigate postmodern and other sceptical influences on thought about issues of such more general educational relevance as learning (Winch), critical thinking (Bailin), values (Carr) and assessment (Williams); but the volume also contains fine explorations of the wider political (Phillips) and socio-cultural (Callan) implications of postmodern epistemological scepticism—including an essay on feminist contributions (Pendlebury)—and, after a stage-setting introduction by the editor, general foundations are laid for subsequent discussions by two splendid ripostes to postmodern critiques of the key epistemological notions of knowledge (Siegel) and understanding (Cooper).

It may have been already noted that this collection of essays is very much an international response to the issues to which it is addressed—contributions have come from England, Scotland, Ireland, Holland, Canada, South Africa, Australia and the USA—and, though there are some interesting differences in the professional backgrounds and experience of the contributors, all are academics of distinction with deserved reputations in their respective fields. All of the essays were specially commissioned for this volume and the extraordinarily high quality of the contributions received should leave no one in much doubt about the seriousness with which this enterprise was taken by this assembly of distinguished scholars. Indeed, the editor owes an enormous debt of gratitude to all the contributors for putting their very best

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efforts into this project and for their unfailingly patient and gracious accommodation to what must at times have seemed—especially in the context of other pressing professional commitments—irritating editorial demands. However, while thanks are due to all contributors for the final appearance of this work, I think that it is only proper to record a special debt of gratitude to Chris Winch, who was in many ways the invisible second editing hand behind the production of this volume. It is several years now since Chris and I discussed the need for a project such as this one in the pleasant grounds of Gregynog at a West Midlands Philosophy of Education residential conference. In fact, the original plan was that we would co-edit the volume together and much correspondence between us over a year or so was devoted to assembling a basic proposal. Indeed, it was only after we had already begun to look for a publisher for the venture that Chris came to feel that pressure of other professional commitments precluded any further active involvement with editorial responsibilities on his part. Thus, in the event, I single-handedly took over the helm of a project originally jointly conceived. A large part of any editorial credit for the success of this enterprise must therefore go to Chris; I also venture to hope, however, that he may not be minded to conclude that I have merely spoiled what we both started.

David Carr, Spring 1998
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INTRODUCTION

The post-war rise and fall of educational epistemology

David Carr

Epistemology in the new philosophy of education

It is beyond serious dispute that a large role in the development of that analytical revolution in educational philosophy which swept through the English speaking world in the sixth and seventh decades of the twentieth century was played by British philosophers—notably those influenced by the seminal work of Richard Peters at the London Institute of Education. With hindsight it is also fairly clear, I suppose, why the United Kingdom was singularly well placed to host any such development in what is no doubt a fairly *recherché* branch of academic enquiry. First, Britain—like other western European countries—was faced with a huge task of economic reconstruction following the devastation of a terrible modern war. But, after a relatively short period of austerities, a new climate of social and economic optimism emerged from the post-war settlement emphasizing the potential of education for social and economic progress and the need for a better educated, perhaps all-graduate, teaching workforce; in turn, this indicated some overhaul of existing courses of professional education for teachers embodying a significantly more rigorous and critical basis for professional educational reflection. Thus, armed with recently forged tools of modern analytical philosophy—well tested, so it seemed, in the fires of mainstream philosophizing—Peters and associates stepped into the breach to dispel the confusion they took to be characteristic of received educational theorizing.

This is not to deny or belittle broadly similar movements elsewhere; there was, for example, important new American work in the philosophy of education—under the leadership, most notably, of Israel Scheffler—which was, in terms of insight, analytical rigour and influence, easily of equal quality to that of Peters and his followers. But there were also significant

differences. First, this work was to a large degree continuous with a home-grown tradition of pragmatist philosophy and educational theorizing which may, I suspect, have diminished any sense of real departure from received educational wisdom in the United States. On the other hand, insofar as the British professional experience of educational philosophy (as Peters was wont to complain) had largely amounted to instruction in historical ‘doctrines of the great educators’, the philosophical techniques that Peters and others imported into educational philosophy under the then still fresh spell of such ‘use theorists’ as Wittgenstein, Austin and Ryle did have all the excitement of novelty for the new breed of educational professionals in the making at the London Institute and elsewhere. Moreover, though the USA had emerged from the war as the world’s foremost economic and military super-power, Britain was almost certainly still (at least at this time) the predominant cultural influence in former dominions such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa; to this extent, it is understandable why—despite counter-influences from elsewhere—the work of the London-based philosophers and their various Oxbridge influences engendered something of an anglophone educational philosophical orthodoxy in the 1960s and 1970s.

Irrespective of particular influences, however, most educational philosophers of this period would have agreed substantially about one thing—namely, the crucial, if not pivotal, importance of epistemological enquiry for any real progress in our appreciation of the nature of knowledge and understanding and its curricular organization for educational purposes. In this connection, significant epistemological work was undertaken by Scheffler (1965) and, though his own work focused mainly on the normative framework of educational thought, Peters certainly regarded rigorous epistemological theorizing as the key to any real grasp of the basic role of education in the cross-generational transmission of human wisdom (Peters 1966). Moreover, it is now part of educational philosophical history that the main epistemological burden was carried by Peters’ chief follower and associate Paul Hirst, whose ‘forms of knowledge’ epistemology (Hirst 1974) was to exercise a significant influence—not only on educational theorizing about knowledge and understanding as such but, in Britain and elsewhere, on official curriculum policy making. Thus, it is noteworthy that long after Hirst’s epistemological theorizing came to appear unsatisfactory to educational philosophers and theorists (including, latterly, Hirst (1993) himself) the curriculum planning of official educational policy makers—particularly those committed to ideas of common or national curricula—continued to exhibit the hallmarks of ‘forms of knowledge’ thinking. It is therefore arguable that the main influence of early analytical philosophy of education survives in current political and professional theorizing about the curricular organization of knowledge for common schooling—though, to be sure, much thinking of this less academic and official sort has also inclined

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to a rather un-Hirstian instrumental construal of the nature and purpose of knowledge (see, for example, SED 1975).

But, to the extent that the most conspicuous educational philosophical casualty of the past two decades or so has been theorizing about knowledge of precisely the sort pursued by (early) Hirst and others—particularly epistemological reflection designed to lay the rational foundations of a socio-politically neutral liberal education for the common school—this is something of an irony. Indeed, whereas early analytical philosophy of education produced a torrent of single-authored works or edited collections directly concerned with the analysis of this or that aspect of knowledge for the express purpose of rational curriculum design and development (for example, White 1973; Barrow 1976; Pring 1976; Brent 1978; Harris 1979; Degenhardt 1982; Reid 1986), that torrent has all but dried up in the late 1980s and 1990s, and direct interest in epistemology as a going concern of educational philosophy has (with some honourable exceptions) well nigh disappeared. Whilst the reasons for this decline have been many and varied, foremost among them has been the wholesale influence on educational philosophy of a powerful mainstream philosophical counter-reaction to that ‘liberal enlightenment project’ of rational knowledge construction which was such a conspicuous part of the programme of early analytical educational philosophy.

Moreover, whilst this general critique of enlightenment rationalism has emanated from sources still recognizable as broadly within the analytical tradition of Anglo-American philosophy, it has also drawn wider inspiration from rather different European currents of philosophical thought such as phenomenology, post-structuralism, hermeneutics, neo-marxism and critical theory. In this regard, to be sure, whereas analytical philosophers of education (or any other sort) of the immediate post-war years were mostly able to insulate themselves from those alien and exotic ideas against which the English Channel or the Atlantic Ocean provided reasonably effective bulwarks, modern mass communications and ease of travel in the ‘global village’ has forever removed such barriers. Thus, philosophy conferences—in educational philosophy as elsewhere—are nowadays distinctly international affairs characterized by a quite unprecedented exchange of ideas derived from quite disparate intellectual traditions. On the other hand, however, it may well be thought a further irony that this quite unprecedented level of conversation between different philosophical cultures and traditions seems for the most part to have yielded only widespread scepticism that genuine communication or agreement in judgements and values might ever be a realistic outcome or meaningful goal of such dialogue; briefly, the main conclusion of recent international and cross-cultural dialogue seems to have been that there can be *no* common theoretical or practical discourse enshrining cross culturally applicable canons of rationality, knowledge and truth.

This, in a nutshell, is the position and the predicament which has come to be labelled ‘postmodern’; moreover, it hardly requires present emphasis that it is a position with potentially devastating consequences for education and educationalists—not least those required to operate in the increasingly multi-cultural or value pluralist circumstances which characterize so much of the developed world. Thus, for the rest of this chapter—and by way of setting the stage for subsequent essays—I shall attempt two mainly interpretive tasks: first, I shall try to account for the general decline into disfavour of educational epistemological theorizing; but, secondly, I shall seek to identify some of the main philosophical and intellectual trends and pressures that have served to undermine confidence in received liberal-enlightenment conceptions of reason, knowledge and truth. I might also say that it is not my concern in so doing to herald some rearguard defence of enlightenment ideals of reason and truth grounded in the exercise of reason alone; I agree with many other contributors to this volume that there is much to be learned from postmodern critiques of such ideals and that there can be no uncritical return to the pre-lapsarian state of enlightenment innocence. However, it is a central purpose of this volume to deny that such critiques must point inevitably, as some appear to have thought, to the effective abandonment of epistemology as a legitimate form of philosophical enquiry—and of ideas of objective knowledge and truth as proper goals of such enquiry; it is, to be sure, a principal lesson of this work that—so far as educational philosophy and theory are concerned—we abandon such ideas and aspirations only at the gravest professional peril.

The chequered fortunes of forms of knowledge

In considering the general fortunes of post-war educational epistemology I shall focus—for various reasons of familiarity and convenience—upon the fate of Hirst’s influential ‘forms of knowledge’ thesis. Thus, in his frequently reprinted paper ‘Liberal educational and the nature of knowledge’ (Hirst 1974), Hirst argued for a conception of liberal education as essentially a matter of intellectual initiation into a range of conceptually discrete forms of rational knowledge and understanding. Forms of knowledge were therefore to be regarded as logically foundational to any balanced curriculum. Moreover, to the extent that any such curriculum was to be ‘based on the nature and significance of knowledge itself, and not on the predilections of pupils, the demands of society, or the whims of politicians’ (Hirst 1974:32), a liberal education was also conceived—by way of contrast with all or any processes of social conditioning or indoctrination—as conducive to the production of rational, unbiased and tolerant citizens of a liberal-democratic polity. To that extent, Hirst evidently regarded it as consistent with both the enlightenment roots of modern liberalism and the ideals of classical post-Socratic Greek thought that the judgements of such

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citizens would also need to operate—as founded upon disinterested reason and evidence—at some critical distance from the received wisdom of inherited human traditions.

But what conception of knowledge could possibly secure the certainty and objectivity which Hirst seems to have supposed to be hallmarks of the judgements and values of the liberally educated person? As is well known, he appears to have considered knowledge claims to be objectively true or false in virtue of their conformity or otherwise to certain overall (albeit variously modified for different forms of knowledge) rational criteria; in brief, any epistemic agent would require some understanding of the concepts peculiar to a given form of human enquiry, of the canons of correct inference or right reasoning appropriate to that form, and of what might constitute reasonable evidence for the truth of any judgement within that form. On this view, it would be the mark of an educated person to render rationally unto God and Caesar—and inability to distinguish between different logical orders and objects of discourse would be a clear sign of miseducation; thus, for example, a given anti-religious argument might well be considered invalid because someone was inappropriately seeking empirical evidence for religious conclusions, and a moral inference could be said to fail because it attempted to derive some evaluative conclusion from a set of purely factual premises.

But these very examples may already arouse the suspicions of the philosophically minded; the view that religious judgements have no empirical basis follows from a contestable modern (fideist) interpretation of the logic of religious discourse, and the view that values are logically independent of facts rests upon an equally contestable (non-cognitivist) construal of evaluative discourse. Indeed, even the ostensibly well grounded claim (apparent in Hirst's distinction of scientific from mathematical reasoning) that it is possible to draw a clear line between empirical or observational statements and a priori truths or definitions has been seriously challenged in the present century by pragmatist philosophers (for example, Quine 1953). Hence, Hirst's semantic, syntactical and evidential criteria were all from the outset philosophically problematic: at best they were question begging; at worst, however, they traded upon some failure to distinguish between several quite different interpretations of the relationship between reason, knowledge and truth that have seriously divided modern epistemologists. Indeed, there would seem to be at least three different conceptions of meaning and truth at work in early Hirst.

First, Hirst's rather confusing talk of the testability of different kinds of judgement against experience appears to fall between two rather different conceptions of the relationship of thought to world. Insofar as he seems inclined to employ the notion of evidence in the service of demonstrating the possibility of any knowledge whatsoever, a *realist*—if not a correspondence—theory of knowledge and truth seems to be implied; on this view, moral and religious judgements might be held true or false by virtue of reporting what

actually does or does not obtain in some realm of moral or religious fact—just as scientific statements are, on realist theories, held to be true or false by reference to a realm of empirical fact. On the other hand, however, such a view is not entirely congruent with the equally persistent idea in Hirst that moral and religious statements are not to be seen as testable in the same way (against facts) as empirical scientific statements—and this rather suggests a non-realist interpretation of testability against experience. One candidate for such a view, of course, is the *verificationism* associated with modern logical positivism—of which, again, Hirst’s thesis is redolent; but the trouble here is that positivist verificationism affirmed the meaningfulness of logical and empirical statements at the price of dismissing moral, religious and aesthetic statements as (essentially meaningless) expressions of emotion rather than reason (Ayer 1967).

But Hirst also alludes to Wittgenstein and language games (Hirst 1974, especially chapter 10) in connection with his thesis—which rather suggests a conception of knowledge and truth more consistent with the non-realism of *use theory* (for example, Wittgenstein 1953; Austin 1962). On this view, however, though moral, religious and aesthetic judgements certainly have sense—and may even be apt for appraisal as rational or irrational—their status as objective truths is more questionable. Consider, for example, a use-theoretical conception of moral discourse after the fashion of prescriptivism (Hare 1952); if it is basic to regarding a form of conduct as good to be consistent in my commitment to it, I can be criticized for lack of integrity, but there is no pressing need to consider that to which I have committed myself as true in any extra-personal sense. But if any such non-realism does not already make nonsense of Hirst’s idea of the testability against experience of forms of knowledge, it should be clear from what he otherwise says about the importance of evidence that he would wish for a more objective sense of moral knowledge than this. Generally, the problem is that the forms of knowledge thesis is something of a ragbag of ambiguous and not mutually consistent fragments of different theories of knowledge and truth, all of which are problematic for the purpose of grounding a liberal educational curriculum of a kind which educational philosophers such as Hirst at that time sought.

But could not professional educational policy makers aspire to adopt a Hirst-like conception of liberal education as a matter of broad initiation into a range of distinguishable forms of rational enquiry—of a kind redolent of most national curriculum proposals—simply ignoring the philosophical complications? Indeed, it is likely that the popularity of Hirst’s thesis among non-philosophical educational administrators and policy makers rests upon its apparent vindication of the general form and content of a traditional subject-centred education; this was, to be sure, a common radical educational complaint against Hirst’s theory. However, various considerations conspire to jeopardize any such strategy. First, the lately identified uncertainties about

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the proper interpretation of Hirst's thesis clearly have profound implications for the actual practical teaching of some, if not all, subjects; it makes all the difference in the world to the teaching of, for example, religious education whether religious statements or doctrines are to be taught as (somehow) verifiable or testable truths or as aesthetic expressions of non-rational moral commitment. But, secondly, such problems also affect any uncritical acceptance of a general Hirstian conception of the school curriculum as a set of relatively discrete disciplines—since it is clear from relatively recent educational history that this is not the only available curriculum conception. Here, it is only fair to say that Hirst did not identify his forms of knowledge with *subjects* or see them as automatically licensing a subject-based programme of study—but he did, as we have seen, regard different forms of knowledge as logically distinct, and there is a definite tendency in his work to regard this distinctness as best acknowledged via the pursuit of distinguishable rational disciplines; it is, after all, the mark of an educated man to distinguish epistemological chalk from cheese.

Following the publication of *Children and their Primary Schools* (Plowden Report) (Central Advisory Council for Education 1966) in England and *Primary Education in Scotland* (SED 1965), however, primary schools in the UK were widely, even officially, encouraged to think of the curriculum in a quite other than subject-centred way—as in short, an integrated programme of study in which traditionally separated modes of enquiry are, as far as possible, brought together in the interests of a more holistically conceived educational experience. What influences lay behind these proposals to revise the traditional primary curriculum? There can be little doubt that modern developments in cognitive psychology—for example, alleged empirical support for the idea (perhaps first seriously mooted by Rousseau 1974) that learning is developmental—contributed significantly to the view that some sort of thematic contextualization of the skills of traditional disciplines might be more conducive to meaningful early learning. However, it may also be that there is little in such psychological observations inherently at odds with a Hirstian account of knowledge or its subject-centred interpretation at the secondary level; for, of course, the difference between primary and secondary curricula might just come down to differences of organization of basically Hirstian disciplines—primary children acquire the basic skills of diverse disciplines in circumstances of meaningful contextualization, whereas the more advanced learning required for secondary education best proceeds in the splendid isolation of discrete subject disciplines.

But this view fails to acknowledge another, arguably more important, influence on post-Plowden 'progressivism'—namely, the pragmatist epistemology of the American philosopher and experimental educationalist John Dewey and such disciples of his as W.H.Kilpatrick. As the all-time philosophical arch-enemy of dualisms, dichotomies and distinctions Dewey

maintained (in anticipation of analytical pragmatists to come) that all traditional (empiricist and other) distinctions between modes of knowledge and judgement were simply illusory—rather than merely symptomatic of bad curricular packaging; the knowledge through which human experience is rendered meaningful ought properly to be conceived as a seamless web of problem-focused enquiry (Dewey 1938, 1958). Indeed, he explicitly sought to undermine all post-Cartesian dualisms of theory and practice, knowledge and experience, upon which traditional epistemology seemed to be based—especially denying, in favour of an ‘instrumentalist’ epistemology, that ‘passive spectator’ view of knowledge acquisition associated with correspondence theories of truth; for Dewey, acquiring knowledge was more a matter of learning techniques or skills for the effective management of experience via the solution of survival-related problems than of registering ‘inert’ bodies of empirically testable facts or information. In short, Dewey’s epistemology is naturalistic and evolutionary and represents a radical break with those more traditional approaches to thinking about the nature of human knowledge that seem, at least partly, to have influenced Hirst’s early curriculum theorizing.

The postmodern assault on knowledge and truth

The various curriculum models to have emerged in British primary and secondary education in recent years are not therefore dismissable as simply alternative ways of organizing or packaging for different educational stages what amounts to a single conception of knowledge; on the contrary, they reflect significant epistemological differences that require attention at the level of educational philosophy and theory. In this respect, the pragmatist challenge to traditional conceptions of knowledge and learning requires to be addressed in more serious terms than those (of superficial political mud-slinging against so-called ‘progressive’ education) which—with some notable exceptions—has so far characterized curriculum debate in the UK and elsewhere. This is especially so because the pragmatist critique of more traditional conceptions of knowledge and its place in the school curriculum has gone hand in hand with other contemporary re-evaluations of epistemology and the purposes of education and schooling in the radically changing circumstances of late modernity, which many nowadays believe (including, latterly, Hirst himself) must spell the end of any foundationalist epistemology of a forms of knowledge kind. I shall now offer a thumbnail sketch of some of these challenges with reference to four main issues or themes of general epistemological concern: constructivism, historicism, relativism and subjectivism.

To this end, the already noticed philosophical pragmatism of Dewey may be taken as a useful point of departure for the rest of the story. Generally, the challenge to the ‘passive spectator’ conception of knowledge acquisition

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of traditional epistemology initiated by Dewey and his pragmatist contemporaries was to undergo consolidation and refinement in the hands of later American philosophers operating in broadly the same tradition. Dewey's epistemological holism was to be powerfully endorsed by the devastating critique of W.V.O. Quine (1953) and others of that pivotal mainstay of empiricist epistemological taxonomy—the analytic—synthetic distinction. The distinction between observational statements and definitions—which underpinned Hirst's separation of scientific from mathematical knowledge—had been of enormous importance to past philosophers because it seemed to offer a route, one way or the other, to the logical grounding of human knowledge claims; for rationalists, the certainties of logic and mathematics offered one sure basis, for empiricists, testability against experience provided another. Quine's critique of what he termed an 'empiricist dogma', however, dealt a crushing blow to both these aspirations; he argued not only that there are no 'analytical' truths of reason that we might not have to abandon in the light of developments in our (particularly scientific) understanding of the world, but also that observation is overdetermined by theory to the extent that there can be no theoretically uncontaminated account of the deliverances of experience. This thought has exercised a profound impact on modern philosophy of science; in particular, it has led to a shift away from the traditional 'realist' view of scientific progress as the accumulation of scientific truths or 'facts', to a model of scientific enquiry as concerned with the *construction* of so many models or metaphors that do not aspire to any true representation of how the universe actually is—for, it is said, there can be no such ultimately true picture, only explanatory utility. A radical version of this essentially constructivist view of scientific progress has been popularized in more recent years by Thomas Kuhn (1962) who characterizes scientific progress in the now widely influential language of 'paradigm shifts'.

As also seen, however, Dewey's pragmatism has—at least in the context of educational philosophy, theory and practice—rubbed shoulders with ideas from other intellectual traditions; in particular, Deweyan constructivism found common cause in primary progressivism with the structuralism of such cognitivist psychologists as Piaget and Bruner. As an intellectual movement of originally mainland European origin, structuralism sought—in fields as diverse as psychology, anthropology and linguistics—to discover the basic principles, categories and rules in terms of which human agents organize individual and social experience. However, in the manner of their main enlightenment inspiration Kant (1968)—structuralists were inclined to believe that the basic categories of human thought and language disclose something in the way of a *necessary* ordering of human experience; thus, beyond the surface grammatical differences which distinguish particular cultural forms of thought and language there is—in terms of Chomskian linguistics—a 'deep grammar' (Chomsky 1965) that reflects the way in which

experience would have to be conceptualized to be the object of human knowledge at all. For structuralists, as for Kant, there could be no coherent thought that did not acknowledge certain fundamental categorial distinctions between, for example, subjectivity and objectivity or cause and effect. Thus, whilst endorsing Kant's scepticism about the possibility of any pre-theoretical knowledge of 'things in themselves' beyond our ideas of them, structuralist epistemology retains a deeply Kantian faith in the non-negotiable character of certain formal features of knowledge-worthy experience; in short, though knowledge is in a sense a matter of construction, we are not all the same free to conceive the world in any way we like.

However, it is just this 'essentialist constructivism' which has been subverted by writers in that other highly influential continental philosophical tradition variously known as 'post-structuralism' or 'deconstructionism'. Whilst it is probably only fair to say that the motives and concerns of deconstructionists are complex and not primarily epistemological as such, they have nevertheless exercised enormous influence on thinking about knowledge and truth—in anglophone cultures as elsewhere—and it seems that post-structuralists have significantly contributed to the entrenchment of that *historicist* climate of thought about human understanding that is such a hallmark of 'postmodernism'. In a nutshell, post-structuralists are inclined to deny what structuralists uphold—that there are universal, ahistorical and transcultural concepts or categories of human thought and understanding lurking beneath the diverse socio-culturally conditioned forms of thought, speech or discourse encountered by field psychologists, anthropologists or linguists. In short, all is cultural contingency and—in the light of that philosophical-historical enquiry sometimes called *genealogy*—past conceptual truths are apt to appear no more than transient local and ethnocentric concerns; thus, according to some (for example Foucault 1961, 1969), no universal significance attaches to our received concepts of insanity, deviance and sexuality and, according to others (for example Derrida 1967), our very notions of personal identity and agency are but questionable cultural or philosophical artefacts. All we are left with are so many narratives or texts (in the beginning, for Derrida, was the word rather than the deed) susceptible of diverse, more or less interesting, local interpretations. In general, however, this characteristically postmodern historicism is well expressed, in the much quoted words of a leading figure of this ilk (Lyotard 1979), as 'an incredulity about meta-narratives'.

Historicism of a slightly less uncompromising kind has also been characteristic of recent analytical philosophy; we have already descried it in post-pragmatist philosophy of science and it is certainly conspicuous in those 'communitarian' and 'virtue-theoretical' critiques of liberal social and ethical theory that have lately gathered strength (see, for example, MacIntyre 1981; Taylor 1989). Indeed, it is probable that most contemporary forms of historicism, analytical and post-structuralist, have a common source in the

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profoundly historicist tradition of Hegelian thought—particularly in its most familiar modern form of Marxism. Arguably the key influence of Marxism has been its hegemonic reading of epistemic disagreement in terms of ideological conflict; on this view, disagreements about knowledge are in fact largely expressive of political struggles between diverse social (class-conditioned) interests. Marxist historicism, however, is not yet *relativism*; indeed, there is a strong tendency in Hegel, Marx and the work of more recent Hegelian ethical and social theorists to hold that class and other ideological conflicts—the theses and antitheses of human thought—might ultimately be reconciled in some more all-encompassing conception (synthesis) of truth (MacIntyre 1981, 1987, 1992). Again, at a more intuitive level, it could be argued that though human knowledge is conditioned by social or class interests, there nevertheless exist universal canons of rational scientific or moral criticism that might enable us to determine the truth or falsity of ideologies—and some such line seems to be taken by exponents of the influential post-marxist school of critical theory (Habermas 1981). Still, wherever pure Marxism stands in relation to these possibilities, it seems that it has spawned movements of a more unashamedly relativist temper.

One such movement—which has very much taken to heart the Marxist assimilation of knowledge to ideology—is generally known as the sociology of knowledge (see, for example, Berger and Luckmann 1966). Indeed, the more or less direct application to education by sociologists of knowledge of Marxist ideas concerning the interplay of social class, knowledge and power has had an enormous influence on radical theorizing about the form and content of the school curriculum. It has for years been routinely argued in such quarters that much of what Hirst and other liberal theorists of education have taken to be objective, inherently worthwhile knowledge is little more than an instrument for the social oppression of those constitutionally unable to comprehend the modes of discourse and ratiocination of their (middle-class) oppressors (see, for example, Young 1971); on this view, the inability of one class to comprehend another entails only that the modes of comprehension of the former are different from the former—not inferior. We should also recognize that much argument of this kind is driven by a perfectly proper concern with the plight of traditionally marginalized and dispossessed social groups—the working classes, women, those racially and culturally discriminated against, and even those of ‘irregular’ sexual orientation; it has been precisely in the interests of restoring to some dignity the previously despised experiences of such groups that radical epistemology has sought to show that one human experience is as ‘valid’ as any other—that, for example, vernacular cultures are as worthwhile in their own terms as anything to be found in what is often arrogantly celebrated as ‘high culture’.

Certainly, such reasoning has been taken to extreme lengths; it has been a feature of some (but not all) feminist educational and other philosophy, for

example, to reject not only the values and preferences discernible in traditional epistemological theorizing, but also any apparent appeal in such theorizing to logic and reason—not on behalf of some alternative conception of logic and reason, but on the grounds that logic and reason are themselves no more than instruments of male hegemony and oppression. Moreover, ideas to the effect that what is of significance for human growth and flourishing may well lie in forms of experience which lie beyond the objectivist aspirations of traditional epistemology are to be found in intellectual traditions not yet touched upon. We could not possibly take leave of this brief survey of recent philosophical developments without at least some mention of phenomenology and existentialism, whose leading exponents Heidegger (1973) and Sartre (1956) and such of their followers and associates as Gadamer (1965) and Merleau-Ponty (1945) have continued to exercise enormous influence on mainstream as well as educational philosophy. An idea apparently common to these movements is that the experiential heart of an agent's engagement with the world is liable to a degree of distortion in any attempt to represent or express it in the favoured objectivist categories of traditional epistemology; in brief, there is an irretrievably *subjective* dimension to any genuine human appreciation of the world. Ideas of a not dissimilar sort are also discernible in the work of Michael Polanyi (1967)—particularly in his idea of the *tacit dimension*—and perhaps even in the work of writers with such otherwise impeccable analytical credentials as Gilbert Ryle (1949). But it should also be noted that relativism and subjectivism are not at all the same or even compatible ideas; hence, although the sociology of knowledge has often sought to combine a Marxist-derived relativism with subjectivist phenomenological elements, it may be doubted whether any such project is consistently realizable.

All these ideas, however, have contributed to the spread of non-realist or anti-realist conceptions of knowledge and truth; moreover, as already noticed, even more straightforward 'analytical' philosophical movements such as 'use theory' have been generally non-realist about knowledge and truth, and have not remained free from traces of constructivism, historicism, relativism and even subjectivism. However, there is one modern philosopher who, by virtue of his anti-realist synthesis of pragmatism, post-structuralism and well nigh everything else, is widely regarded as the high-priest or arch-fiend of the general 'postmodern' critique of enlightenment epistemology. Thus, in various works of extraordinarily widespread current influence, Richard Rorty (1980, 1989) has appeared to argue for nothing less than the abandonment of epistemological enquiry—or, at any rate, of any search for objective knowledge and truth as traditionally conceived—as a going philosophical concern.

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Towards a rehabilitation of objective truth

Many of these ideas are doubtless philosophically extreme—and many of them may be no more than sophisticated modern re-statements of forms of traditional philosophical scepticism about the possibility of objective knowledge and truth; indeed, as Plato (1961) was the first to show, the notion of objective truth is difficult to expel from our talk about the world—for it seems presupposed even to the claim that there is no objective truth. All the same, there should be no doubt that all these ideas have as much importance for theorizing about education and the curriculum as they have for philosophy as such. If there are no objective truths or facts of any matter—if all is a matter of individual or socio-historical construction of more or less persuasive models of reality and there can be no rational basis, other than convenience or utility, for preferring one perspective to another—what price any notion of education as initiation into truths, virtues and values that are significant in ways that transcend convenience and utility? And, what becomes of curriculum planning? If there is no more than personal preference or cultural prejudice to someone's judgement that Mozart is musically more rewarding than Madonna, what justification can there be for including one rather than the other in any school curriculum? Moreover, one may try to ignore such ideas, but they will not go away. Indeed, many of them have been fuelled, as we have seen, by a perfectly proper concern with the educational plight of traditionally dispossessed and marginalized social groups, and by a sometimes justified suspicion that culturally imperialist, elitist and paternalist traditional school curricula have, for unashamedly exploitative purposes, played a large role in denying alternative voices (see, for example, Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984).

To be sure, there can be little doubt that the key issue of contemporary curriculum debate, especially in western culturally pluralist democracies, is that of *inclusion* versus *exclusion*, and no less doubt that 'postmodern' critiques of traditional epistemology have been enlisted in the currently 'politically correct' cause of inclusion. But this alignment may also be considered unfortunate to the extent that any defence of traditional epistemology—or, at any rate, ideas of objective knowledge and truth—could be, and has been, interpreted as a rearguard defence of elitist or exclusivist claims. It is arguable, however, that any wholesale indictment of traditional realist or objectivist epistemology in this connection is excessive and that there is no reason in principle why epistemological objectivism needs to be exclusivist in this sense; indeed, one contributor to this volume (Siegel 1995, 1996) has explicitly argued that inclusion actually *needs* traditional or 'conservative' epistemology for its coherent defence. It will soon become clear, however, that other contributors to this collection have their own very different and individual approaches to these general educational-epistemological problems. Thus, the essays included here range from those

inclined to defend more traditional, conservative and realist (perhaps even foundationalist) epistemological conceptions against postmodern criticisms, to those that would re-evaluate notions of objective knowledge and truth from the perspective of a more radical overhaul of traditional epistemology—with a variety of positions in between. But, though agreement on all points philosophical is not to be expected within the pages of this volume, there is broad agreement between contributors that some conception of objective knowledge and truth requires urgent defence or rehabilitation in the interests of coherent educational and curricular theorizing.

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Part I

KNOWLEDGE IN GENERAL

1

KNOWLEDGE, TRUTH AND EDUCATION

Harvey Siegel

Introduction: The relevance of epistemology to (philosophy of) education

Philosophers of education have routinely paid considerable attention to knowledge, truth, justification, rationality and other epistemological notions. And (pardon the expression) with good reason—for these concepts are closely connected to matters central to educational endeavours. It is difficult to see how we might understand educational activities such as teaching, hoped-for educational outcomes such as learning, staples of schooling such as curriculum, or proposed educational aims and ideals such as the attainment of knowledge and understanding and the fostering of rationality, without reference to this range of epistemological notions. They, and the deep philosophical issues concerning them, are basic to any adequate philosophical perspective on education.

Of course epistemological theorizing is as contentious as it is fundamental. It would be folly to pretend that epistemologists have achieved widespread agreement on matters of basic doctrine. Theories of truth and of justification remain loci of intense debate, as do controversies concerning internalism versus externalism, naturalism versus non-naturalism, a priori versus a posteriori epistemological methodology, scepticism, and many others. These controversies will perforce remain largely unremarked upon in what follows.

On the other hand, certain general views concerning matters epistemological have often been articulated and defended by philosophers of education, and equally often been presupposed by both philosophers and educators. Central among them is the idea that it is possible, and desirable, for people to engage in, and take seriously the fruits of, *rational enquiry*, where such enquiry is understood to involve the pursuit of *truth*—concerning the natural world, or the human condition, or any other domain about which

enquiry is possible. This presumes the legitimacy of talk of truth and falsehood, and of rational belief as belief that is based upon and appropriately related to relevant evidence. It presumes as well that such belief is indicative, albeit fallibly, of (probable) truth. The related view concerning education, which relies upon the cogency of these widely presumed epistemological views, is that it is educationally important that students gain *knowledge*, and the ability to engage in rational enquiry; and that students develop an appreciation of such enquiry, and (insofar as they are able) conduct their believing, judging and acting accordingly. That is, students should be led, in their education, to value enquiry, and the *justification* that the evidence thereby produced offers to candidate beliefs, judgements and actions.

I will consider the notions just emphasized—knowledge, truth, justification and rational enquiry—in the next section, as I develop these widely held epistemological views further; in the following section I will consider some important recent challenges to them. My aim is to offer an account and defence that acknowledges the force of recent ‘post-analytic’ critiques of analytic epistemology (of education), but which also makes clear that that force is not such as to require the abandonment of either epistemological theorizing about education in general, or the key epistemological theses concerning education just mentioned in particular.

**The ‘standard’ view of knowledge and its problems:
Belief, truth, justification and rational enquiry¹**

Let us begin with *knowledge*. It is uncontroversial, pre-philosophically, that education aims at the imparting of knowledge: students are educated in part so that they may come to *know* things. The familiar parental question, ‘what did you learn in school today, dear?’, is readily interpreted in terms of knowledge, i.e. ‘what did you come to know in school today?’, and children’s answers equally so: ‘I learned/came to know...’.² As has long been recognized, we can distinguish between two sorts of knowledge—propositional knowledge, or knowledge *that*, and procedural knowledge, or knowledge *how*: ‘I learned *that* the capital of Slovenia is Ljubljana, which is nearly surrounded by mountains, and that its citizens are presently facing the daunting task of adjusting to western-style capitalism’; ‘I learned *how* to factor polynomials, read a topographical map, and ride a bike’. For better or worse, epistemological theorizing in the analytic tradition has centred on propositional knowledge; I follow that tradition here.

How is knowledge of this sort to be understood? To ask this question is to ask for a theory of knowledge: what are the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge? What conditions must be met in order for some particular knower *S* to know some particular proposition *p*? Since Plato, the standard account of knowledge has been that knowledge is *justified true*

belief; these conditions—belief, truth and justification—being individually necessary, and jointly sufficient, for knowledge. Before enumerating problems with this account, let us briefly consider the reasons which have led philosophers to regard them as *the* conditions of knowledge.

Belief is perhaps the least controversial condition, since it is unclear how a person could know something she did not believe. Suppose you were told by your daughter Mary's teacher that 'Mary knows that the Earth is round, but she does not believe that it is'. Would you think, on the basis of this remark, that Mary knows that the earth is round? Could she know it if she didn't believe it? Virtually all philosophers seeking to analyse knowledge have answered the last question in the negative, concluding that one can know only what one believes. While I've said nothing about what a belief *is* (a verbal disposition? some other sort of disposition? a psychological state? something else?), it is as universally agreed as anything is in epistemology that belief is a necessary condition of knowledge.³

Consider next the *truth* condition. Can a person know something which is false? For example, could I know that the Earth is round, if the Earth were *not* in fact round? Since Plato, most philosophers have regarded it as uncontroversial that these questions must be answered in the negative. If *p* is false, I cannot know that *p*. Of course I can *believe* that *p* even though *p* is false; there is nothing problematic about the idea of a false belief, or even of a justified false belief. Thus I can believe, falsely, that *p* is true, when *p* is false; my false belief that *p* may even be justified, despite being false. But if it is false, I cannot know that *p*. Hence the truth condition.⁴

Finally, consider the *justification* condition. Suppose I believe that there is an as-yet undiscovered species of iguana living in the mango tree in my backyard. Suppose as well that this is true. Suppose, finally, that I have no reason to believe it: I do believe it, but I have (and so can offer) no evidence for the claim. I've made no relevant observations; I have no detailed knowledge of iguanas. I just believe it, and it happens to be true. Do I *know* it? Plato, and the tradition his work spawned, thought not, regarding cases like this one as cases not of knowledge, but of 'lucky' true belief. What turns true belief into knowledge is 'an account', or, in more contemporary language, reasons (evidence) which *justify(ies)* or provide(s) *warrant* for belief. Hence the justification condition.⁵

What is epistemic justification, exactly?⁶ What is required of a belief or claim in order that it be justified? There is at present tremendous controversy concerning these questions, which I cannot pursue here.⁷ But in general—and especially insofar as this notion is relevant to education—"justification" is essentially tied to *rational* justification, such that my belief that *p* is justified if and only if I have reasons/evidence which render(s) my belief that *p* rational. While the two terms 'rational' and 'justified' are not equivalent,⁸ they are both *normative*—terms of *epistemic appraisal*—and it is uncontroversial that the primary feature of justification is its normative

dimension. Theories of justification seek to explain why beliefs that meet their proposed criteria are *worthy* of belief; why their criteria pick out the worthy beliefs from the infinite range of possible beliefs.⁹

We have already noted the centrality to educational epistemology of the idea that students be brought to an understanding of, respect for, and disposition to engage in rational enquiry, where such enquiry is understood as aiming at *truth*. David Carr, who construes knowledge as ‘the grasp of an independent objective order by an epistemic agent who, in his attempts to apprehend it, observes certain rational canons and procedures of disinterested and impartial enquiry’ (Carr 1994:224), puts the basic idea as follows:

On any respectable account of knowledge...the notion of objective truth as a significant goal of human enquiry is simply indispensable if we are to have any confidence that our enquiries may actually get us somewhere by way of an understanding of that which exists beyond the otherwise uncertain contents of our own minds... Any serious attempt to deny the possibility of discovering the objective truth about a given issue...is tantamount to a denial of the possibility of genuine rational enquiry regarding that issue.

(Carr 1994:225)

As Carr makes clear, the challenge here is to say something helpful about this notion of *objective truth*, since

if we are to have any real confidence that the exercise of reason is actually getting us somewhere in terms of an understanding of how things are as distinct from how we are inclined to take them to be, truth must be regarded as more than a matter of mere coherence between personal cognitive constructs and involve definite reference to a mind-independent order of objective reality against which such mental constructs may be measured. Thus, the holy grail of educational epistemology clearly lies in the development of a *realist* conception of truth.

(Carr 1994:236, emphasis added)

Carr uses several terms—‘realist’, ‘objective’, and ‘mind-independent’—which suggest that truth must be understood in terms of *correspondence* with reality, such that a sentence is true if and only if it so corresponds. But he makes clear that he has in mind only a minimal sort of correspondence, captured by Aristotle’s dictum that ‘To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false; whereas to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true’ (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Book IV, 6, 1001b); and he explicitly rejects any view of correspondence which requires knowers ‘to

adopt some inconceivable Archimedean epistemological standpoint' (Carr 1994:225). Carr is correct, I believe, that this notion of truth is required to make sense of the educational importance of enquiry noted above; it is, moreover, in keeping with more technical recent work in epistemology and metaphysics concerning truth.¹⁰ The key feature of this realist view of truth is that truth is *independent of the beliefs of epistemic agents*: our thinking that something is true does not make it so; what does make it so is its successful capturing of some independent state of affairs which obtains independently of our thinking that it does.

This conception of truth has come in for serious criticism in recent general philosophy and philosophy of education; we will consider some of these criticisms below. In addition to these criticisms, there are also, as has been noted, important extant controversies concerning the justification condition. There are, furthermore, important controversies concerning the standard, 'justified-true-belief' account of knowledge more generally. Some argue, Plato to the contrary notwithstanding, that justification is not a necessary condition of knowledge (Sartwell 1992; Carrier 1993). Others point to Gettier cases (Gettier 1963), in which persons have justified true beliefs but seem not to know, in order to argue that these conditions are not jointly sufficient for knowledge.¹¹ It must also be acknowledged that further controversies exist concerning many of the points made thus far, and about many other matters not mentioned. These controversies remain ongoing at present; no immediate resolutions are in sight. This is, I suppose, only to be expected concerning such fundamental philosophical matters.

These controversies concerning the analysis of knowledge and its conditions, however, do not automatically or straightforwardly challenge the general view of the relevance of epistemology to education and its philosophy noted earlier. Despite them, we seem still within our rights to think it educationally important that students gain knowledge, that they learn how to enquire, that they come to value such enquiry and the rational justification it provides, that such enquiry be conceived as enquiry concerning the truth, and so on. Are we? To answer this question we must consider some challenges to the epistemological tradition just depicted extant in the philosophy and philosophy of education literatures.

Recent challenges to (educational) epistemology

'S-knows-that-p' epistemologies¹²

I begin with a very general critique of the entire approach to epistemology just rehearsed. Lorraine Code criticizes 'S-knows-that-p epistemologies' (1993:15)¹³ on several grounds. In order to appreciate the force of her critique, it is important to keep in mind that the sketch just given of this approach tries to analyse or define the key terms of

epistemology—knowledge, truth, belief, justification, rationality, etc.—*generally*, i.e. for all epistemic subjects. The conditions of knowledge, on this view, are what they are, independently of the features/attributes of individual knowers. The approach abstracts away from the particularities of such individual knowers—who they are, what they believe, what they feel, what assumptions they make or loyalties they hold dear, what culture or historical epoch they live within, what gender, racial, ethnic or class location they occupy, etc.—in order to arrive at a ‘universal’ epistemology applicable to all knowers. It is this zeal for universality, and rejection (as irrelevant) of particularity, of *whose* knowledge a given bit of knowledge is, that constitutes the basis of Code’s critique.

Code’s criticism, very briefly, runs as follows: because these epistemologies attend to only a problematically narrow range of cases (1993:15), and presuppose illusory and flawed epistemic ideals of ‘pure’ objectivity and value-neutrality, which erroneously sanction the transcendence of particularity and contingency and treat knowers as essentially equivalent and interchangeable (16), they deny knowers their unique, individual ‘subjectivities’ and fail to take such subjectivity into account in their analyses of knowledge.¹⁴ Code’s overall argument, she summarizes, ‘points to the conclusion that necessary and sufficient conditions for establishing empirical knowledge claims cannot be found, at least where experientially significant knowledge is at issue’ (39). Thus the project undertaken by *S*-knows-that-*p* epistemologies is doomed.

I trust it is clear that these are fundamental, deep criticisms. While there is much to say about each of Code’s points, space allows consideration only of her main claim: that accounts of knowledge must ‘take subjectivity into account’, and therefore that general, impersonal accounts of knowledge, in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, are not possible. Code insists on the recognition of the place of subjectivity in knowledge and its proper analysis. Her complaint is that *S*-knows-that-*p* epistemologies ‘homogenize’ knowers: they render crucial differences among knowers invisible, and regard knowers as essentially equivalent. In particular, these accounts ignore the relevance of *gender*—they problematically presume ‘that gender has nothing to do with knowledge, that the mind has no sex, that reason is alike in all men, and man “embraces” woman’ (1993:20). Recognizing that gender intersects with other ‘specificities’ such as class, race and ethnicity, Code challenges this ‘homogenization’ of knowers, and argues that its breakdown forces epistemologists to contemplate subjectivity in their analyses of knowledge: ‘Homogenizing those differences under a range of standard or typical instances always invites the question, “standard or typical for whom”? Answers to that question must necessarily take subjectivity into account’ (20, note deleted). Consequently, epistemologists must ‘pay as much attention to the nature and situation—the location—of *S* as they commonly pay to the content of *p*’; they must ‘take subjective factors—factors that

pertain to the circumstances of the subject, *S*—centrally into account in evaluative and justificatory procedures' (20).

There is a sense in which Code's point is uncontroversial. Epistemologists typically insist that knowledge requires justification, that justification is relative to evidence, and that evidence is relative to person, in the sense that different people will have access to different sets of evidence. Just as the non-physicist will lack evidence about technical matters that the physicist has, some people will lack the perceptual and other experience and background knowledge that others have—and will consequently not be in a position to know what others do. In this sense, taking the knower's location into account in determining what she knows is quite standard epistemological fare (Feldman 1994).

But Code has more in mind than this. Consider two knowers, John and Mary. Both observe an interaction between Mr Smith, a landlord, and Ms Brown, a tenant in Smith's apartment building. After the interaction John and Mary discuss it, and discover that they believe quite different things about it. In particular, Mary believes that Smith treated Brown in a sexist manner, while John believes the contrary. Assume that John and Mary have different 'subjectivities'—Mary has been treated as a girl/woman all her life, and has been exposed daily to institutionalized sexism in school, at home, in the media, etc.; while John has enjoyed the privileges of patriarchy. Consider now the questions: Does John know that Smith did not behave sexistly? Does Mary know that Smith did behave in that way? If Code is right that subjectivity has a central place in knowing and its philosophical analysis, then presumably John and Mary do indeed, or at least might, know different things about the sexist cast of Smith's behaviour towards Brown. How can we answer these questions? How can we determine whether or not John and Mary know these things?

I have no desire to resolve these questions about Smith's behaviour here. Indeed, it seems clear that the case would have to be filled in in considerably more detail before resolution became possible. My point, rather, is that once we have taken due note of John's and Mary's subjectivities, answering the questions *still requires an analysis of knowledge*. For example, it seems clear that we cannot simply grant that John and Mary know these things just because their respective subjectivities lead them to believe them. After all, John may himself be sexist, which might mitigate his claim to know that Smith is not. Mary's claim to know that Smith's behaviour was sexist might be similarly mitigated. But to agree that we can't simply grant John and Mary knowledge of Smith on this basis is to hold that 'subjectivity-inspired belief is not sufficient for knowledge. On the other hand, to grant them knowledge of Smith is to hold that such belief *is* sufficient for knowledge. However we answer the questions about John's and Mary's knowledge, we will be relying upon some analysis of knowledge or other.

Code seems, in her insistence on realism and empiricism as 'mitigating'

her relativism (1993:39–41), to be committed to regarding truth as a condition of knowledge. Nothing in her discussion suggests that she would reject the belief condition. I hypothesize that her main diversion from the standard ‘*S*-knows-that-*p*’ analyses is her insistence that ‘subjectivity’ be somehow built into the justification condition. Whether this is right or not, however, the main point is that Code has not escaped the ‘*S*-knows-that-*p*’ tradition. Her challenge to the ideals of pure objectivity and value-neutrality, her insistence that subjectivity be taken into account in determining what knowledge is and who has it, and her recommendation that the sort of knowledge taken as exemplary be expanded, are all consistent with the fact that Code is attempting to develop a conception of knowledge—one which will allow us to determine, for particular *S* and *p*, whether *S* knows that *p*.

Whatever the other merits of Code’s feminist, ‘subjectivity’-oriented epistemology might be, then, her critique of ‘*S*-knows-that-*p* epistemologies’ does not succeed; nor does it directly challenge either the epistemological or the educational theses concerning knowledge, truth, justification and rational enquiry noted above. Let us see how these views fare in the face of criticisms which do directly call them into question.

‘Overcoming epistemology’: Truth, foundationalism, and agency

Charles Taylor (1987) famously urges us to ‘overcome epistemology’. However, unlike Code, Taylor has as his target not ‘*S*-knows-that-*p* epistemology’, but rather the ‘realist truth’-dependent idea that ‘knowledge is to be seen as correct representation of an independent reality’ (466).¹⁵ This, Taylor argues, rests upon an inadequate conception of the *self* as radically disengaged from the natural and social worlds (471). For selves cannot coherently be seen as so disengaged:

Even to find out about the world and formulate disinterested pictures, we have to come to grips with it, experiment, set ourselves to observe, control conditions. But in all this, which forms the indispensable basis of theory, we are engaged as agents coping with things.... [W]e couldn’t form disinterested representations any other way.

(Taylor 1987:476)¹⁶

This point, Taylor suggests, ‘undermines’ ‘the entire epistemological position’, (1987:476) in two ways. First,

foundationalism goes, since our representations of things...are grounded in the way we deal with these things. These dealings are largely inarticulate, and the project of articulating them fully is an essentially incoherent one, just because any articulative

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project would itself rely on a background or horizon of nonexplicit engagement with the world.

(Taylor 1987:476–7)¹⁷

Second, and more deeply:

Foundationalism is undermined, because you can't go on digging under our ordinary representations to uncover further, more basic representations. What you get underlying our representations of the world...is not further representations but rather a certain grasp of the world that we have as agents in it. This shows the whole epistemological construal of knowledge to be mistaken. It doesn't just consist of inner pictures of outer reality, but grounds in something quite other. And in this 'foundation' the crucial move of the epistemological construal, distinguishing states of the subject—our 'ideas'—from features of the external world, can't be effected. We can draw a neat line between my *picture* of an object and that object, but not between my *dealing* with the object and that object.

(Taylor 1987:477, emphases in original)

We needn't agree with Taylor here: I can, it seems, perfectly well distinguish (for instance) between my *dealing* with the keyboard on which I am now typing, and the keyboard. (For example, the latter is made of plastic and is grey, while the former is not; the former is often slow and clumsy, while the latter is not. That I must interact with it to discover its properties or construct a representation of it is quite compatible with the distinction.) But the main points to make lie elsewhere. First, the 'epistemological construal' which Taylor is criticizing is not required by anything said about knowledge, truth, epistemology or education thus far; the positive view advanced above does not presuppose that 'underlying our representations of the world' are 'further representations'. On the contrary, that view is perfectly compatible with the claim that our representations in some sense depend upon our interaction, as agents, with the world which our representations represent.

Second, as pointed out in the previous note, Taylor's argument suffers from a basic unclarity. When he writes that 'the whole epistemological construal of knowledge...doesn't just consist of inner pictures of outer reality, but grounds in something quite other', how exactly is '*grounds*' to be understood? As the passage is written, the '*grounds*' of knowledge are just what knowledge '*consists in*';¹⁸ but Taylor seems clearly to mean by '*grounds*' not what knowledge '*consists in*' but rather what our beliefs about and representations of the world are ultimately *caused by*—they are caused, the argument goes, by our dealings with/in the world. Let us grant Taylor (and Heidegger) this claim: our knowledge of the world depends

(causally) ultimately on our agency in the world. This in no way undermines the view that knowledge consists in beliefs which (among other conditions) accurately portray ‘an independent reality’. That is, Taylor’s being right (if he is) that our gaining knowledge of the world requires our engagement with that world, is completely compatible with the claim that knowledge is the product of successful enquiry, where ‘success’ is understood in terms of truth.

Third, Taylor’s argument against the ‘epistemological construal’ depends upon the key epistemological notions canvassed earlier. Taylor is arguing that it is *true* that the ‘epistemological construal’ fails; that Heidegger’s argument shows it to be rationally untenable; that our representations depend in some sense upon our agency, etc. To the extent that his argument depends on these notions, Taylor’s attempt to ‘overcome epistemology’ requires something very like the epistemology defended thus far.

Taylor’s main thesis is that we must follow Heidegger in recognizing that in the end we are not disengaged subjects, but *agents*, and that our knowledge depends upon this fact. I have argued that Taylor’s/Heidegger’s argument for this claim fails. But even if it succeeds, it is unclear what follows other than that we must embrace fallibilism—which the target epistemological-educational views clearly do. In other words, Taylor’s ‘overcoming’ of epistemology leaves epistemology pretty much as it is. In particular, we are free, Taylor’s criticisms to the contrary notwithstanding, to understand knowledge, and truth, in terms of ‘correct representation of an independent reality’ (466).

Fallibilism, foundationalism and the challenge of postmodernism

Finally, in view of the popularity of recent ‘postmodern’ challenges to it, it will be perhaps useful to make some further general observations concerning ‘foundationalism’ and the senses in which the educational epistemology advocated here is/isn’t ‘foundationalist’.

Several recent critiques of epistemology have focused on ‘foundationalism’ and certainty,¹⁹ and have urged that these be abandoned, and that *fallibilism*—the view that none of our beliefs are certain, that we can always be mistaken, and that we ought therefore to have an attitude of modesty and humility toward our epistemic judgements—be embraced. According to fallibilists, our views are far too susceptible to error for us ever to be warranted in arrogantly proclaiming ourselves to ‘have’ the truth, or to know with certainty.²⁰ I hope it is clear that such fallibilism is completely in keeping with the epistemological views defended thus far; it is embraced by contemporary epistemologists virtually universally. Despite this embrace, that epistemology is routinely criticized as ‘foundationalist’. What exactly is the target of such critiques?

Within mainstream epistemology, ‘foundationalism’ has a narrow,

technical meaning, denoting one possible response to the ‘regress problem’ concerning epistemic justification.²¹ It is not this sense of ‘foundationalism’ that is the object of these critiques. Rather, the object of criticism is a broader notion of foundationalism, helpfully summarized by Wilfred Carr (1995).²² Carr is concerned to describe (and presumably to endorse) the ‘postmodernist challenge’ to ‘Enlightenment educational values’ (78) and ‘the postmodernist critique of Enlightenment philosophical thought’—in particular, the ‘theoretical criticisms collectively aimed at dismantling the Enlightenment conceptions of reason and the rational subject’ (79). The main target of postmodernist critique is

Kant’s ‘foundationalist’ philosophy—a philosophy designed to show that the Enlightenment concept of the rationally autonomous subject did not simply apply to a particular culture or society but was grounded in *a priori* truths about the ‘universal essence’ of human nature itself. At the risk of oversimplification, three of the familiar postmodernist strategies used to undermine and discredit this foundationalist philosophy can be rapidly stated. The first is to call into question the Enlightenment’s universal, *a priori* and absolutist conception of reason. To its universality, postmodernists counterpose the ‘local’ determinants of what counts as rational thought and action; to its *a priori* necessity, they counterpose its fallibility and its contingency; and to its absolutism they insist that rationality is always relative to time and place. What, secondly, postmodernism opposes and denies is the Enlightenment idea of a disembodied ‘rational autonomous subject’. In opposition to the assumption that the self has at its centre an essential human nature that predates history and is prior to a particular form of social life, postmodernism counterposes the image of the self as ‘decentred’: a centreless configuration mediated and constituted through the discourses learned and acquired in becoming a participant in a historical culture. Since there is no way to step outside such discourses, since our sense of who and what we are is always shaped by the discourses circulating in our historical context, there is no essential ‘self’ to discover. In Heidegger’s phrase: ‘Language speaks man’.

Third, and closely interwoven with the postmodernist critique of Enlightenment conceptions of reason and the autonomous subject, is its critique of the Enlightenment distinction between the ‘knowing subject’ and an ‘objective world’ to be known. Against this postmodernism insists that the subject’s knowledge of the world is always preinterpreted: it is always situated in a conceptual scheme, part of a text, internal to a tradition outside

of which there are only other conceptual schemes, texts and traditions and beyond which it is impossible to stand. It follows from this that knowledge is never ‘disinterested’ or ‘objective’ and that the Enlightenment idea of the knowing subject, disengaged from the world, is a myth. It also follows that the Enlightenment assumption that philosophy can provide the epistemological ‘foundation’ on which ‘objective’ scientific theories can be erected is false. What postmodernism insists is that there is no realm of ‘objective’ truths to which science has exclusive access, no privileged position that enables philosophers to transcend the particularities of their own culture and traditions, no Archimedean point which can provide philosophical inquiry with a neutral ahistorical starting point.

(Carr 1995:79–80)

I beg the reader’s indulgence for the length of this citation; I offer it in order to make clear just how broad this broader sense of ‘foundationalism’, against which the postmodernist rebels, is. Space does not permit a detailed reaction to the many points Carr makes. But some general comments are in order.

First, Carr provides at most only very brief arguments for these several criticisms of ‘Kant’s “foundationalist” philosophy’. Most of the passage does not defend these postmodernist views, but only articulates them as alternatives to (Kant’s) foundationalism, in the form of ‘postmodernism denies...’, ‘postmodernism insists...’ and ‘postmodernism counterposes...’. Carr suggests that these ‘postmodernist strategies’ in fact ‘undermine and discredit this foundationalist philosophy’, but it is unclear why we should accept these postmodernist assertions and counterpositions. Carr’s discussion does not defend postmodernism, but simply takes it for granted.

Second, some of these criticisms of foundationalism, as stated, face huge difficulties, as they appear to presuppose what they want to reject. For example, Carr’s postmodernist wants to reject the possibility of objective knowledge, but apparently regards it as an objective fact about the world that a subject’s knowledge of that world is always ‘preinterpreted’, and that knowledge is therefore never objective. Despite the postmodernist’s repudiation of ‘universal reason’, she likewise seems to presuppose a ‘universal’ (and perhaps a priori and ‘absolutist’ as well) conception of reason (or rationality or logic), since the non-objective character of knowledge is said to ‘follow from’ the fact that a subject’s knowledge is always preinterpreted, where this implication is not relativized or contextualized—it follows, apparently, for us all.²³ Similarly, the postmodernist insistence that there is ‘no privileged position that enables philosophers to transcend the particularities of their own culture and traditions’ seems itself an attempt to speak from just such a position, since

it seems to be making an assertion concerning all philosophers, cultures and traditions. Equally problematic is the apparently incoherent suggestion that ‘rationality is *always relative* to time and place’ (emphases added). In short, there appear to be deep internal inconsistencies in the postmodernist position as Carr articulates it.

Third, ‘foundationalist philosophy’ is specified in such vague and general terms that it would be hard to locate a clear advocate of it in the contemporary literature. For example, even if Kant thought so (which is less than clear), no contemporary philosopher claims that there is ‘an essential human nature that predates history and is prior to a particular form of social life’, if that is taken to mean that there might exist actual possessors of human nature outside of history or some particular form of social life, or that there might be a ‘disembodied “rational autonomous subject”’. Similarly, which contemporary epistemologist regards empirical knowledge as infallible? Which philosopher holds that there is an ‘Archimedean point which can provide philosophical inquiry with a neutral ahistorical starting point’? Which subscribes to the ‘myth’ that objectivity requires that cognitive agents be ‘disengaged from the world’?²⁴ The universe allegedly inhabited by contemporary ‘foundationalists’, against which postmodernists rebel, is apparently an empty one.

Fourth, the postmodernist’s argument against the possibility of objective knowledge is a strikingly weak one. Which principle of postmodernist logic sanctions the move from ‘knowledge...is always situated in a conceptual scheme, part of a text, internal to a tradition’ to ‘outside of which there are only other conceptual schemes, texts and traditions’? Does it really follow, as Carr’s postmodernist alleges, that because my knowledge of trees, atoms and people is always situated within my conceptual scheme, that there aren’t trees, atoms and people which exist independently of my scheme? Is it really being alleged that the stars were not in the heavens before there were people to declare their (the stars’) existence in their (the people’s) schemes? The postmodernist critique of objective knowledge, and of a reality independent of us and our schemes is, alas, deeply problematic.

Finally, and most importantly in the present context: this postmodernist critique of ‘foundationalist philosophy’ fails seriously to challenge the educational epistemology articulated and defended thus far. Some aspects of the critique successfully challenge positions—for example, that knowers have a ‘view from nowhere’, outside of all conceptual schemes—which are not part of that epistemology.²⁵ Other aspects of the critique simply fail—for example, the criticism of the distinction between the ‘knowing subject’ and the ‘objective world’ has been shown to be multiply problematic both in this and in previous sections. In any case, nothing in the postmodernist case we have been considering suggests that there is anything problematically ‘foundationalist’ about the views defended here: that it is educationally important that students gain knowledge, and develop the ability to engage

in rational enquiry which seeks the truth; and that they develop an appreciation of such rational enquiry, and (insofar as they are able) conduct their believing, judging and acting accordingly.

Conclusion

If my arguments have succeeded, then the challenges to the views of knowledge, truth, justification and rational enquiry articulated earlier—and by implication, to the place of these views in educational theorizing—have not. The criticisms considered—Code’s challenge to ‘*S*-knows-that-*p* epistemology’; Taylor’s challenge to views of knowledge which regard it as representing an independent reality, and which do not recognize that knowers are agents; and Carr’s postmodernist’s challenge to everything ‘modern’—fail to upend either the epistemological position defended above, or the basic ideas that education ought to strive to impart to students knowledge, the ability to engage in rational enquiry, and the disposition to engage in such enquiry and to take seriously its results. These claims are not ‘foundationalist’ in any pernicious sense. They fully embrace fallibilism, and while they are ‘objectivist’, they are unproblematically so, presupposing neither a ‘view from nowhere’ nor disembodied knowers. I hope my consideration of these criticisms has not been unduly negative, for there is much of value in them, as I hope my discussion has acknowledged. Still, what is right and valuable about them is completely compatible with acknowledging both the epistemological and the educational legitimacy of the epistemically-oriented aims and ideals of education articulated above.²⁶

Notes

- 1 I intend this section to be uncontroversial; it presents information routinely covered in more detail in epistemology textbooks (e.g., Audi 1988; Baergen 1995; Dancy 1985; Lehrer 1990; Steup 1996). Scheffler (1965) remains an important basic discussion of the conditions of knowledge, both in general and as they relate to education.

I should note here that, although Hirst’s ‘forms of knowledge’ account of educational epistemology has been enormously influential, as the Editor’s Introduction to this volume makes clear, it is not and has never been the only epistemological game in (Philosophy-of-Education) town. In particular, the work of Israel Scheffler (1965, 1973 and elsewhere) develops a powerful philosophy of education which emphasizes epistemology, but not in Hirstian terms. My discussion follows Scheffler’s approach in regarding *rationality* (rather than knowledge or truth) as the fundamental epistemological notion relevant to education, and in rejecting sharp demarcations among alternative discrete, logically distinct ‘*forms*’ of knowledge, each with its own unique methods of enquiry, standards of evidence, and/or types and tests of truth.

- 2 This ‘ready interpretation’ should not be taken to suggest that the two notions are equivalent; they are not. In particular, while I may rightly be said to have learned something which is false (e.g., ‘in school today, I learned that the atomic

number of gold is 55'), I cannot come to know that which is false—I may have *learned*, but cannot be said to *know* that the atomic number of gold is 55, for it isn't. For lucid clarificatory discussion, see Scheffler (1965), ch. 1.

- 3 For further discussion of the belief condition, see the texts cited in note 1. On the character of belief, and its relevance to education, see Scheffler (1965, ch. 4).
- 4 Truth is here understood as a *semantic* notion: truth is a property of *sentences* or *propositions*, but not of objects or other non-semantic entities. Stars, for example, are neither true nor false; but sentences about stars can be either (i.e. they admit of truth-values). I have said nothing yet about what truth *is*, nor have I mentioned the main extant theories of truth (correspondence, coherence, pragmatic, relativist, deflationary, etc.). Two excellent recent books on truth are Kirkham (1992) and Schmitt (1995), the first of which is impressively thorough, the second elegantly brief. 'Minimalist' theories of truth are offered in Horwich (1990) and Alston (1996). Moser (1996) provides, in very short compass, an excellent overview of the main theories of truth and their difficulties.
- 5 See esp. Plato's *Theaetetus*, reprinted in Hamilton and Cairns (1961). Several Platonic dialogues, in particular those from the 'middle' period, deal with epistemological themes. For critical analysis, see White (1976).
- 6 This qualifier is necessary in order to distinguish the sort of justification being addressed here from other sorts of justification, e.g. prudential or moral. I leave it out below, but presuppose it throughout.
- 7 Among the extant issues are: is justification a *causal* relation between a belief and its cause, or rather a *logical* or *epistemic* relation between a belief and the reasons/evidence which render(s) it epistemically worthy (or both)? Relatedly, is justification better understood in *external* terms, such that a believer might be justified while having no idea that she is (e.g. because her belief is caused in the appropriate way even though she is completely unaware of its causal etiology), or in *internal* terms, such that a believer's being justified requires that she be in some sense *aware* of her being so? An influential externalist is Goldman (1986); representative internalists include Chisholm (1989) and Bonjour (1985). The internal/external distinction has been widely discussed during the last two decades, and is addressed in the several texts already cited; a sophisticated analysis of relevant literature, and defense of externalism, is offered in Schmitt (1992).

Theories of epistemic justification include *foundationalist* theories (e.g. Chisholm 1989), *coherence* theories (e.g. Bonjour 1985), *reliabilism* (e.g. Goldman 1986), and '*foundherentism*' (Haack 1993). The literature here is vast. It is helpfully, albeit controversially, summarized in Plantinga (1993), who offers his own '*proper functionalist*' theory of warrant (which is not obviously equivalent to justification) in his (1993a).

In philosophy of education as in epistemology, it is the *pragmatist* tradition which most systematically understands epistemic justification in terms of its role in enquiry. A recent work which emphasizes this connection is Haack (1993).

- 8 Goldman (1986:20–7, 69–70), clearly articulates some of the ways in which these two notions diverge, while emphasizing their relatedness as central notions of epistemic appraisal.
- 9 Siegel (1996) discusses the character and scope of epistemic normativity, in the context of 'naturalized' epistemology; Siegel (1992) criticizes the 'reflective equilibrium' approach to justification advanced by Goodman, Rawls and Scheffler, in part in terms of its inability to recognize the full scope of epistemic normativity.

Theories of justification also routinely undertake the task of clarifying the relation between justification and truth; indeed, it is often held that beliefs which enjoy sufficiently high justificatory status are worthy of belief *because* justification is linked in some way to truth (e.g. BonJour 1985; Haack 1993; Goldman 1986; Goldman 1988; Schmitt 1992). I am myself critical of the *instrumentalism* presumed by these writers, but cannot pursue the point here. For further discussion, see Siegel (1996a, 1997a).

- 10 See here Mackie (1973); Horwich (1990); Schmitt (1995); and Alston (1996), all of whom defend conceptions of truth consonant with Carr's 'minimal realist' requirement, and (I believe) avoid the problems afflicting other, more robust views of 'correspondence'.
- 11 Gettier's brief paper spawned an enormous literature, and generated a wide range of attempts to adjust or supplement the standard account of knowledge either by deleting one or more of the original three conditions, by adding some fourth condition, or by some combination of these; thus were born (or came to prominence) defeasibility, causal, explanationist (Goldman 1988), and many other accounts of knowledge. The early Gettier literature is helpfully summarized in Shope (1983). Shope notes that there are several earlier discussions, including those of Russell, Meinong, and possibly Plato himself, which raise what is now called the Gettier problem.
- 12 I am grateful to Ken Howe, whose (1997) suggested to me that I consider Code's critique here. I regret that space permits only a very restricted treatment of Code's discussion.
- 13 See also Code (1991, 1992). Unless otherwise noted, citations are to Code (1993).
- 14 Code also claims that these epistemologies presume an indefensible political neutrality, and that the political dimensions of epistemological theorizing need to be much more central to such theorizing (1993:16, 20, 23, 26; 1992:138) I have some sympathy for this claim, although I believe that it is in important respects overstated; I regret that I cannot consider it further here.
- 15 All page references to Taylor are to his (1987).
- 16 This point seems to conflate disengaged *persons*, on the one hand, and disengaged or disinterested *representations*, on the other. But I will not pursue this complaint further here.
- 17 Here too there seems to be an important equivocation: '*grounded*' in the cited passage seems clearly to mean *caused by*. But that our representations of things are caused by our dealings with these things seems irrelevant to the epistemological issue Taylor takes himself to be addressing, namely the adequacy or justificatory status of our representations. In other words, Taylor's point about agency, even if correct, does not undermine the epistemic status of our representations.
- 18 This is already a quite charitable reading of the passage, which conflates the grounds of *knowledge* and the grounds of the '*epistemological construal*' of knowledge.
- 19 See in particular Nel Noddings' discussion of truth and certainty (1995, ch. 6), and my criticisms of it (1997b).
- 20 Peirce and Popper famously advocated fallibilism; virtually all contemporary epistemologists embrace it to some significant degree. For discussion see Siegel (1997, chs. 1–2, 8).
- 21 For discussion see Siegel (1997:112–14).
- 22 All page references in this section are to Carr (1995).
- 23 For a more detailed response to the postmodernist critique of 'universal reason',

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- see Siegel (1997, ch. 10). Carr's critique of universality also presupposes a sharp local/universal dichotomy (see esp. p. 81); for arguments against this dichotomy, see Siegel (1997, ch. 12).
- 24 On objectivity, see Neiman and Siegel (1993).
- 25 For further discussion of the implications of the idea that there is no 'Archimedean point', no vantage point beyond all schemes, see Siegel (1987, ch. 2; 1999).
- 26 Thanks to David Carr for helpful editorial advice.

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2

INTERPRETATION, CONSTRUCTION AND THE 'POSTMODERN' ETHOS

David E. Cooper

I begin by recording a striking shift that has taken place in ideas and ideals of enquiry and hence of the educational practices in which enquiry is of central importance. This shift can be characterized as one from an old to a new notion of humanism. I then indicate some of the factors, at work both in our wider culture and within educational trends, which have predisposed many people to embrace the new humanism. Next I articulate two philosophical positions, 'radical hermeneutics' and 'constructivism', on which the intellectual credentials of the new humanism seem mainly to rest. These are serious positions that it is not my intention to 'rubbish'. What I will reject is the idea that these positions support certain fashionable educational proposals—for the teaching of maths and history, for example—and a wider 'postmodern' ethos of education which such proposals nowadays reflect.

The new humanism

There is a certain idea and ideal of enquiry which stretches back to classical antiquity, but which, for our purposes, we can first locate during that retrieval of antiquity known as the Renaissance. The idea is that human beings have it in their own power—certainly with far less need of divine grace than the medievals imagined—to discover the order of things. The ideal of enquiry is a total, accurate and certain delineation of reality. 'There will come a time', wrote one scientist in 1599, 'when none of the secrets of nature will be out of the reach of the human mind' (quoted in Hale 1994; 588). It was the capacity to approach this ideal of the 'delineation of nature' that constituted, in large part, what Pico Della Mirandola famously called 'the dignity of man' (Pico Della Mirandola 1956). And it was confidence in this capacity which was a main ingredient in the 'humanism'

of the Renaissance Humanists and which informed the concept of the educated 'Renaissance man'.

Contrast this with the humanism advocated by William James: 'Humanism' is the name for 'the doctrine that to an unascertainable extent our truths are man-made products...[that] We break the flux of sensible reality into things...at our will'. Far from 'our dignity' residing in a (non-existent) capacity to provide an 'absolute' account of reality, it is something we appreciate through recognizing that 'man *engenders* truths upon' a 'malleable world' (James 1977:451ff.). In educating people, we are not furnishing them with knowledge of a world that commands a particular set of descriptions, but introducing them into the 'ways of world-making' which human beings have engaged in. Indeed, in what has become popular parlance in some circles, we should speak, not of knowledge, but of 'knowledges'—the more-or-less organized sets of procedures and assumptions that serve to 'legitimize' the statements we make.

Since 1907, when James made his remarks, the broad themes of the new humanism which those remarks announced have become, as Joseph Margolis says, 'very nearly commonplace (which is not to deny that they are also disputed)'—such themes, to cite the same author, as that there can be no way to determine 'the world's real structure' independently of 'conditions of enquiry', 'conceptual schemes' and other 'contingent artifacts...of human societies' (Margolis 1995:2–3). Symptoms of the degree to which such thoughts have become 'commonplace' abound on the current cultural and educational scene. They include: enthusiasm among many maths and science teachers for a 'human', 'constructivist' mathematics and science; 'death of the author' or 'role of the reader' doctrines, with their denial of a 'pre-existent' text, possessing a determinate meaning, there to be encountered; 'conventionalist' and other 'non-cognitivist' conceptions of moral judgement; and the image of historical writing as a form of 'fiction'.

The popularity of these and other views belonging to the motley of the new humanism could not be explained by the intellectual cogency of the philosophical positions—pragmatism, constructivism, hermeneutics, deconstructivism, or whatever—which, in their different ways, appear to support them. That popularity, after all, extends well beyond the circle of people with an informed acquaintance with those positions, let alone of those competent to pronounce on their cogency. Presumably it is to currents of modern culture and sensibility, with which those views seem to chime, that we would have to turn. It is not hard, for example, to see how the anti-elitist, demotic animus of our age prepares people to welcome views which, like the reduction of history to 'fiction', seem to deny the very possibility of there being a body of truths available to expert enquirers; or which, like the 'role of the reader' doctrine, give to you and me as large a part in the 'creation' of texts and meanings as Shakespeare or Balzac. Nor is it difficult,

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in an age which puts a premium on individual autonomy and freedom, to decry the appeal of a view, like 'constructivism' in mathematics, that treats an intellectual activity as externally unconstrained and productive, rather than as one whose procedures, if rationally conducted, are compelled by an objective order. It is easier still to see why a position like that of 'conventionalism' in ethics—removing, as it does, the need to adjudicate where convictions or practices seem to collide—should suit the 'multiculturalist' sensibility of the times. And it is, perhaps, a wider sensitivity to, and 'celebration' of, 'difference' which, even more than the 'extreme intellectual laziness of contemporary culture' referred to by Thomas Nagel (1997:6), is responsible for the reluctance he rightly identifies 'to take seriously...the objective arguments of others'—a reluctance that is an open door to the idea that there are anyway no really objective arguments to take seriously.

It is natural to think that the welcome accorded to the themes of the new humanism in educational circles, and the many symptoms of that welcome to be found in actual and proposed pedagogic practice, are a function of the wider cultural tendencies just mentioned. Doubtless this is, to a degree, true. But it should not be overlooked that there were already trends in educational thought, salient by the 1960s certainly, that also prepared a warm welcome to those themes. For example, the ethos of 'child-centredness': for how could one deliver more of a knock-out blow to 'traditional' methods of 'filling children's heads with facts' than to show that, really—'out there'—there are no facts for their heads to be filled with? Again, the 'holistic' animus directed against a curriculum divided into 'subjects'—partly on the grounds that 'subjects' imply 'experts'—could only be reinforced by the news that such a division corresponds to no discrete realms of facts or 'forms of knowledge'.

Before identifying in more detail the philosophical positions that inform the new humanism and the educational attitudes which reflect it, it is worth looking, more closely than I have so far done, at a couple of illustrations of those attitudes. This will be useful for future reference, both when identifying the underlying philosophical positions and when addressing the question of whether those positions really do yield the educational conclusions that many people draw from them.

Two good examples, from very different areas of the curriculum, are furnished by 'the new history' and 'the new maths'. There is no need, I think, for any elaboration by me in order to recognize how the following remarks, made by enthusiasts for these two developments, reflect the themes indicated earlier. Here, for instance, is how one writer characterizes the difference between the 'established' understanding of history and the kind he advocates. According to him the former is a 'compendium of pre-existent and inalienable FACTS'; whereas the latter 'constructs knowledge...these constructions are negotiable' (D.Schemilt, quoted in

Partington 1986:68). And here are some remarks made by a number of 'postmodernist' historians in responses to an interviewer: 'No [historical] facts exist independently of...our relation to them'; 'history is a constructed narrative with much in common with literature'; 'we can never get outside our culture to the real world'; '[historical] truth isn't objectively there'; 'the point of studying history is just to see what is the current state of historiography' (Swain 1997:19). History, then, for the 'new' historian, is an essentially interpretative, constructive activity. Engaging in it, the student cannot be encountering how the past objectively was: what he or she encounters, rather, is 'the state of historiography', the procedures, prejudices and other conditions which shape the narrative constructions or fictions which historians create.

The rhetoric is not dissimilar in the writings of enthusiasts for a new, more 'human' mathematics teaching, particularly of those who champion 'radical constructivism'. Thus, its leading champion, Ernst von Glasersfeld, contrasts the old 'naive' perspective, according to which the pupil is studying 'a *real* world of unquestionable objects', with the radical constructivist one which rejects the possibility of 'furnishing an "objective" representation of the world as it might "exist" apart from us'. We hear from another author that, in challenging the allegedly 'certain knowledge' of traditional mathematics, the radical constructivist is 'shak[ing] the foundations of all truth' (quoted in Ormell 1993:128). In 'proving' a theorem, say, the mathematician is not following the contours of mathematical reality, but constructing an entity with no 'ontological reality' at all.

For the new historians and mathematicians, the implications of their views both for the practice and ethos of teaching are profound. If, after all, history is akin to fiction, then the history pupil should self-consciously engage in the telling of imaginative tales in which all historians, were they to admit it, are really engaged. And if mathematical practice is a constructive exercise, not a delineation of reality, students must be encouraged to produce their own constructions, rather than ape those of alleged experts. Moreover, whether in maths or in history, students should proceed with a different self-understanding of what they are doing. They are not to see themselves as arriving at, or even approaching towards, a grasp of truths or certainty. For it is not 'forms of knowledge' into which they are being initiated, but the contingent, creative activities of people, into forms of practice which yield, not knowledge, but 'knowledges'.

Hermeneutics and constructivism

There is nothing new about the 'new' trends in educational thought that I have mentioned. They, or close relatives, were abroad in the 1960s and 1970s. There has, however, been a significant shift in the kinds of

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theoretical support for these trends that their proponents have sought. Earlier, the appeal was primarily to sociology and social anthropology, with such names as C.Wright Mills and Peter Berger copiously cited. For example, variations across the globe in mathematical practices or moral attitudes were held to have radical implications for the status of 'knowledge', as were the social influences on enquiry studied by sociologists of knowledge. (See, especially, the essays in Young 1971.) This is not to deny that considerations of a philosophical kind played a part, but these tended to remain implicit. The present writer, for one, attempted to uncover the epistemological assumptions which these radical educators clearly needed if the claims of anthropology and sociology were to yield the desired results (Cooper 1980: ch. 4). For instance, the fact that social influences play a role in the development of bodies of knowledge has, as it stands, *no* disturbing implications for their status as genuine *knowledge*.

In the intervening years, the case for the 'new' educational trends has become more self-consciously philosophical. It is names like Rorty, Heidegger, Derrida, Lyotard and Wittgenstein that now abound in the literature. As even that brief list suggests, philosophical favour is curried from very different positions, but which are all deemed to share the new humanist hostility to the notion of an objective order, independent of contingent modes of enquiry, 'there' to be delineated. These positions are often dubbed 'postmodernist', but as Richard Rorty frequently remarks that sounds an infelicitous label for currents of thought already flowing strong at the end of the last century, in the writings of Nietzsche, say, or William James. My own perception is that there are two broad philosophical '-isms' which, more than any others, currently inspire the developments in, say, maths and history teaching outlined above—radical hermeneutics and radical constructivism. Or perhaps we should speak of a single '-ism' resulting from combining these two perspectives. I shall say something about these two, and their combination, so that we may then ask if the educational trends in question really do find support in those directions

'Hermeneutics' began its career as a name for the theory of interpretation of written, especially biblical, texts. In the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, however, not only was the scope of hermeneutics extended—to embrace cultural products in general—but it began to connote a certain epistemological stance, notably the insistence that understanding of cultural products is much more akin to the kind we obtain when translating a text into our own language than to the subsumption of phenomena under causal laws. But it is with Heidegger that hermeneutics took a radical turn. In his view, our relationship to everything is hermeneutic, for whenever we encounter and experience anything we are necessarily in 'the business of interpreting'. To experience is to experience *as...* so that interpretation 'goes all the way down' and hermeneutics is 'universal' in scope, embracing our encounter with flowers and stones as much as with texts and paintings.

There is, in other words, no level of encounter with ‘brute’ data, with things ‘in the raw’, no ‘presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us’ (Heidegger 1980:192). When we imagine we are simply describing something in a manner that is imposed on us, we ignore the ‘fore-conceptions’, the background of presuppositions, which enable us to encounter it as this rather than that. Not even scientists, making immaculate observations and subsuming what is observed under laws, are extricated from this background, since for anything to stand out as an object of observation a whole set of ‘fore-conceptions’, a whole ‘world-picture’, is presupposed. As Heidegger’s student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, puts it, ‘prejudices’ are the necessary ‘conditions whereby we experience’ anything, the ‘biases’ we require for ‘openness to the world’ (Gadamer 1979:9).

The hermeneutical approach gives the new humanists some of what they want, in particular dismissal of the idea that there is a reality we encounter which is already structured independently of human thought and enquiry. But, as it stands, the approach can hardly warrant radical rhetoric of the kind met with earlier. For one thing, it does not, as so far described, exclude the possibility that the ‘fore-conceptions’ said to condition our experience of the world are necessary features of rational thought—in which case denials of our capacity to obtain knowledge or certainty might appear idle. Again, that we are always in ‘the business of interpreting’—that, in a different idiom, all data are ‘theory-laden’—is so far compatible with the possibility of rational interpretation and theory choice, indeed with its being *compelling* to prefer a particular interpretation or theory. So, the hermeneutic idea, unless elaborated in a certain direction, provides no warrant for, say, the depiction of history as the telling of fictions or of mathematics as unbooted invention.

The direction in which elaboration is needed if such conclusions are to have even initial plausibility is the one taken by ‘constructivists’. We have encountered this term in connection with fashionable trends in maths and science education, and the constructivism there spoken of can be thought of as belonging to a wider philosophical attitude which may be adopted towards any domain of enquiry. The general thought is that the objects or entities we imagine ourselves to be discovering in the course of our enquiries are really ‘products’ or ‘constructs’ of those enquiries. Thus we hear, for example, that ‘science as public knowledge is not so much a discovery as a...“construction”...we construct theoretical entities (magnetic fields, genes...) which in turn take on a “reality”’ (Driver 1987:6).

Passages like that, typical of much recent educational literature, confirm the opinion of its critics that constructivism, if intelligible at all, is feebly supported. Certainly the author seems guilty of two *non sequiturs*: first when concluding that scientists do not ‘discover’ anything since they actively construct theories rather than—what? wait patiently for reality to speak to them?; and second when concluding that theoretical ‘entities’ are

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constructs just because 'theories' are. Quite obviously, one cannot draw substantial 'idealist' or 'anti-realist' conclusions from the banality that scientists actively *do* things in the course of their enquiries.

A coherently argued constructivism will appeal to the thought, often attributed to Wittgenstein, that the judgements we make, and the steps in chains of reasoning we take, are not *compelled*—whether by the order of things, the meanings of our words, conventions previously adopted, or the 'fore-conceptions' that open up the possibility of judgement and proof. For the constructivist, in Crispin Wright's useful term, our judgements and procedures are not under 'cognitive command', so that it is wrong to assume that, where people differ in judgements or in 'ways of going on', some of them must be cognitively askew (Wright 1992). Here, for example, is a characteristic passage from Wittgenstein:

'But am I not compelled, then, to go the way I do in a chain of inference?' Compelled? After all, I can presumably go as I choose! 'But if you want to remain in accord with the rules you *must* go this way'. Not at all, I call *this* 'accord'. 'Then you have changed the meaning of the word 'accord', or the meaning of the rule'. No;—who says what 'change' and 'remaining the same' mean here?

(Wittgenstein 1978:1–113)

The general point is that, in taking inferential steps or making judgements, we follow rules, but what counts as accordance with a rule is not something determined in advance. With each step or judgement, there is, as one philosopher of education puts it, a 'deep need for decision'—deep, because it does not appear, on the surface, that we are making the decisions which we must in fact be doing (Parker 1997:100).

It is a short move from appreciation of this 'deep need for decision', of the absence of 'cognitive command', to the ontological claims of constructivism. For if things—be they mathematical series, natural kinds or moral obligations—existed 'out there', independently of our enquiries and decisions, the judgements we make and the inferential chains we follow *would* be under 'cognitive command'. There would, necessarily, be something cognitively awry—lack of information, ratiocinative power or whatever—when people differ in judgements or in the conclusions they draw. Given this, the rhetoric of mathematical entities, say, or natural kinds, being 'constructs' is not unnatural.

By grafting these constructivist thoughts on to the claims of hermeneutics, the new humanist arrives at the following position: Since the ways in which we encounter, experience and think about things are shaped by interpretative 'pre-judices' and 'fore-conceptions', there can be no 'brute' encounter with an 'order of things' independent of interpretation.

Moreover, the particular judgements we make, or the particular inferential procedures we follow, though made possible by 'pre-judices', are not compelled by them. Indeed, they are not compelled by anything, for the 'rules' we may speak of ourselves as following determine nothing 'in advance'. Hence, we must reject the older humanist image of a world and a body of truths awaiting discovery and delineation.

I take this to be a serious and challenging position, not one lightly to be dismissed. Nor, of course, is it one whose pedigree is to be found only in the wilder, generally Parisian, reaches of 'continental' philosophy. It is not a position which I intend, in the few words that would be available, to criticize. The question I address is whether this position can justify the radical educational tendencies which, if I am right, look to it for their philosophical credentials.

Radical philosophy and educational ethos

It is not hard to see why it may be thought that the proposals made, for example, by aficionados of 'the new maths' and 'the new history' find support in the philosophical position recently described. We will be told that, since mathematics is to be understood in constructivist terms, pupils should not be 'stuffed' with alleged mathematical knowledge, but set to 'invent' their own proofs and methods of calculation. Or that, since history is an activity of relatively unconstrained interpretation, pupils should be exhorted to tell their own 'fictions', in the form, say, of letters or diaries that a First World War soldier or an Alabama slave might have written.

It may be that, on various pedagogic grounds, there is something to be said for such proposals: but my question is whether they really receive any support from hermeneutic, constructivist premises. Or rather, it is less with particular proposals than with a more general 'postmodern' educational ethos, of which they are symptomatic, that I am concerned. Something of this ethos comes across in the following remarks of one advocate, Stuart Parker. Having argued against 'realism', and in favour of a 'postmodernist' stance, on primarily 'Wittgensteinian' constructivist grounds, he lists features of an educational ethos which, he holds, his arguments would endorse.

Teachers...will become deconstructive in their readings of educational texts, in their situating of received wisdom, in their creation of values... [E]ducational institutions must...organize for free textual plurality.... Teacher education courses will need to... throw off the inhibitions of realism and engage in creative, literary writing.

(Parker 1997:142ff.)

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Again, it is not my main aim to criticize this ethos of 'irony' towards 'received wisdom', of 'plurality', 'creativity' and 'deconstruction' (though one must surely fear for the fate of children taught that Nazism is 'wrong' *only* 'because it offends *our* literary taste' (154)). The aim, rather, is to question whether promotion of such an ethos has the philosophical credentials alleged. Such questioning is always in order when educators draw radical practical conclusions from radical philosophical theses. Thus, there is irony in Parker's invocation of Nietzsche's authority. Nietzsche's thinking has certainly inspired 'postmodern' tendencies and may indeed have been the 'dynamite' its architect proclaimed. Yet Nietzsche championed a disciplined classical schooling utterly opposed to the 'child-centred' pedagogy of many German contemporaries. In his view, the 'creativity' vaunted by critics of traditional pedagogic methods would be a meaningless charade without a previous and hard scholarly training. (See Cooper 1983.)

I focus on two important and related reasons why a 'postmodern' educational ethos is not endorsed by the new humanism, by the hermeneutical-*cum*-constructivist position adumbrated above. The first stems from the fact that this position purports to be, and should be taken as, an account of our actual practices of enquiry, judgement and reasoning. If Heidegger and Gadamer are right then even seemingly detached, objective scientific enquiry is necessarily shaped by 'fore-conceptions', by interpretative stances, which open up domains into which to enquire. If the radical constructivist is correct, then even the most traditional, conventional mathematical reasoning consists, deep down, in continual decision-taking. Wittgenstein sees himself as talking about mathematics as it is, not as it might or should be, and this illustrates his 'quietist' insistence that philosophy 'leaves everything as it is' and changes nothing. It is ironic, therefore, to invoke Wittgenstein, of all people, in support of newfangled practices.

Suppose, to elaborate, the advocates of the new maths or history win out and pupils are encouraged to do their own constructions or tell creative tales about the past. Still, they are not then being, in the relevant senses of the terms, *more* constructive, or *more* interpretative and creative, than their traditionally educated predecessors and 'conventional' practitioners of the subjects. For if the philosophical position to which appeal is being made is right, construction, interpretation, creation cannot be avoided.

It might be replied that, even if the new humanist position has no direct implications for teaching, the latter should surely be accompanied by an attempt to instil into pupils an awareness of the nature of their enquiries—one which might surely impact upon the way they conduct them. This means, presumably, that they should be introduced to the insights of hermeneutics and constructivism. But, now, if they are *properly* introduced to these, they will understand that these are accounts of how mathematical

or historical enquiry *must* be—in which case it is hard to see what impact there could be on the conduct of the enquiry.

It might be said, too, that in the case of moral education, at least, these insights, and the pupils' awareness of them, cannot leave everything as it is'. Surely, for instance, recognizing that Nazism's evil consists in offending 'our literary taste' must profoundly affect how we judge other people. But this is to assume that such a diagnosis of evil is the kind warranted by hermeneutic or constructivist premises. This assumption is not only questionable but, if true, would constitute a powerful reason for rejecting those premises. The example illustrates a general dilemma for the 'postmodern' educator. Either the philosophical positions appealed to are compatible with our actual ways of judging, enquiring and 'going on', or they are not. If they are, it is hard to see what radical implications for educational practice there could be. If they are not, what reason is there for accepting those positions?

My second reason—perhaps only a special instance of the first—for challenging a move from the new humanism to a 'postmodern' educational ethos concerns the status of some venerable distinctions, which have already cropped up in my discussion: for example, certainty versus uncertainty, description versus interpretation, fact versus fiction, truth versus falsity, decision (invention, construction) versus discovery, creativity versus rational compulsion. Now it is characteristic of the 'postmodern' ethos that it advocates *reject* such distinctions: indeed, it is *because* they are deemed untenable that the ethos is advocated. We have already encountered such claims as that no mathematical judgements can be true or certain, that 'the distinction between...literature and history' has 'broken down' (Linda Hutcheon, quoted in Margolis 1995:211), and that 'going on' is always decision-taking rather than discovery-making.

Such distinctions get rejected on rather different grounds: sometimes the point is that only one term in a pair ('uncertain', say) has application, sometimes that neither term ('true' and 'false', perhaps) has, sometimes that a distinction (historical fact versus fiction perhaps) rests on a false assumption ('the reality of the past'). Whatever the grounds, the effect is to deny distinctions on which, it might reasonably be held, educational practice has traditionally depended.

The question is whether rejection of these distinctions is warranted by—indeed, to be found in—the hermeneutical-*cum*-constructivist position to which 'postmodern' educators appeal. It might seem to be, for is not the effect of claiming, say, that interpretation 'goes all the way down', or that in following rules decisions are constantly being taken, to deny that we ever merely describe or are ever rationally compelled? But against this, it is clear to me that none of the major architects of the new humanism—James, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, for example—had any intention of rejecting the above distinctions, of denying that both terms in the pairs genuinely apply. For them to have done so would have been quite incompatible with their

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aim of diagnosing our actual practices, ones in which the employment of these distinctions is central. Thus it was not Wittgenstein's aim to deny the 'hardness of the logical *must*', but to free us from a 'mythical' understanding of it. (Admittedly Wittgenstein came to deny that various propositions—'Cats don't grow on trees', say—which many would call 'certain' are felicitously so called, but *not*, of course, because he thinks they are all *uncertain*. On the contrary, as the fixed 'hinges' on which the rest of our beliefs turn, 'certain' seems, as it were, too tame a label, one appropriate only where some doubts may have been in order.)

The point which emerges is this. Remarks like 'interpretation goes all the way down' or 'rule-following is decision-taking' are remarks at a *deep* level. They are not intended to ruffle the surface level of ordinary practice and discourse where the familiar distinctions between describing and interpreting, or between being forced to and constructing a conclusion, do their legitimate work. They are, one might say, strategic remarks in campaigns against other and older philosophical positions. *If* describing is thought of as reporting on 'brute' data, there is no such thing—only interpretation. *If* the steps in a chain of mathematical inference are thought of as 'magically' contained in the nature of numbers or in some convention adopted, there is no 'logical *must*'—only decision-taking at each step. *If* the truth of a moral judgement is held to consist in its tracking of moral entities, there are no moral truths—only moral invention. It is not, then, that familiar distinctions are denied. What are denied, rather, are philosophical conceptions which, if true, really would make those distinctions inoperative. And how, one might ask, could such distinctions simply be abandoned? There is a certain madness, surely, in proclaiming that $7+5=12$ is neither true nor certain; that we do not *have* to draw the conclusion 'Q' from 'P' and 'If P then Q'; that historians' writings are *always* 'imaginative inventions'; or that Nazism merely offends against '*our* literary taste'. Yet it is conclusions like these—ones which challenge the distinctions we make at the surface level of ordinary judgement and discourse—which are required if the 'postmodern' ethos is to appeal. If I am right, there is nothing in the hermeneutical-*cum*-constructivist position to warrant such conclusions and hence to render that ethos attractive. If the educational practices endorsed by that ethos have anything to recommend them, it is in a different direction that their credentials must be sought.

A final thought: the feeling will persist, reasonably perhaps, that allegiance to the philosophical position I have been describing must make *some* difference to the spirit in which people conduct enquiry and school the young in the nature of enquiry. At the very least, to revert to a theme with which I began, it must encourage, so it will be said, a shift from an old to a new humanism, from an old to a new conception of 'the dignity of man'. We can no longer, like Pico, hubristically suppose that what distinguishes human beings is their capacity to delineate a reality independent of schemes

of their own making. But, by way of compensation, we obtain a new sense of human dignity—the dignity of creators—precisely because any world we can experience is, so to speak, *our* world, the function of our interpretations and constructions.

Well, perhaps something like this shift would take place. Whether it is a sensible and desirable one is another matter. For all the brash confidence of Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers in their capacity to know the world as it is, this was at least balanced by a concomitant sense of being *answerable* to something, an order of things. Real hubris, real ‘lack of humility’, writes Thomas Nagel, is to be found in ‘the view that what exists...must be identified with what is thinkable by us’, in the attempt to ‘cut the universe down to size’ (Nagel 1989:109). I am doubtful that Heidegger and Wittgenstein (whom Nagel has in mind) are open to such a charge (see Cooper 1997). But in the ‘postmodern’ celebration of ‘free plurality’, ‘creation of values’, ‘invention’ of theories and perspectives—none of it answerable to anything outside the ‘play’ that is celebrated—some critics will discern, not a new homage to the dignity of man, but self-satisfied conspiracy in the intellectual laziness of our age to which Nagel earlier alluded.

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Part II

KNOWLEDGE IN
PARTICULAR

3

SCIENCE EDUCATION AFTER POSTMODERNISM

Jim Mackenzie

Postmodernism is the latest move in the long dialectic between scepticism and claims to knowledge. The learned have a tendency towards scepticism, for so much of what there is to be learnt is that the beliefs of the unlearned are mistaken or doubtful. No other challenges to scepticism have had anything like the strength of the science that grew from the seventeenth century and formed the inspiration of the Enlightenment (Kant 1788:163 =1956:167). The question of the Battle of the Books, between ancient and modern learning, was answered. Swift (1704) was wrong. The modern was superior.

...it is hard to recapture the sense of conviction which Newton's theory inspired, or the sense of elation, and of liberation. A *unique event* had happened in the history of thought, one which could never be repeated: the first and final discovery of the absolute truth about the universe. An age-old dream had come true. Mankind had obtained *knowledge*, real, certain, indubitable, and demonstrable knowledge—divine *scientia* or *epistêmê*, and not merely *doxa*, human opinion.

(Popper 1952:93, his emphases)

Here at last was the answer to the sceptics, insight into the true workings of things, real knowledge that would enable humanity to change the world. By the end of the eighteenth century, it was beginning visibly to do so. Lavoisier synthesized the work of others to provide a science of the kinds of matter. His death in the French Revolution showed that in the study and organization of society there was still far to go: the 'social sciences' had not yet found their Galileo. In 1859, Darwin offered new and challenging knowledge about life itself.

The new science differed from other systems of thought in its silence on the very questions about which all the others said so much, questions of conduct and questions of ends. The circumstances under which violence is justified, property rights, the conditions for marriage, the ideals for human life and for human society, life after death: on all these questions science scandalously said simply nothing. Worse, the standards of evidence that science applied to the questions with which it did deal undermined many of the answers provided by other systems of thought to more important questions without putting anything in their place. Science had its own moral teaching: that careful observation, rigorous honesty and self-criticism, clear, unpretentious language, humility before the facts, understanding of mathematics, distrust of tradition and authority, distrust of imagination, of speculation, and of mere wishing, and conversely willingness to test whatever they might suggest, were the qualities required of those who wished to acquire knowledge. Science produced its own characteristic personality, one not appealing to those whose skills lay in words:

Attentive, but skeptical. But not egoistic. There's no way to
bullshit your way into looking good on a mechanical repair job,
except with someone who doesn't know what you're doing.

(Pirsig 1974:308)

Criticism of science was not only directed to its inadequacies in dealing with the social when compared to its success with the natural world. Many, notably the romantic poets, rejected what they regarded as the unspirituality, the unstylishness, the essential nerd-character of science.

Over the past couple of centuries, the hope of the Enlightenment has been in many ways fulfilled. Our world and way of life are vastly different from those of any previous society, and overwhelmingly, these differences are due to scientific knowledge and its application. 'Science, broadly considered, is incomparably the most successful enterprise human beings have ever engaged in' (Medawar 1982:80). It shapes not only our material conditions, but also many of our assumptions. That we live on a ball of rock orbiting an uninteresting yellow star in an immense galaxy among countless others in an expanding universe; that water is a compound of (light, explosive) hydrogen with the oxygen which is vital to life; that plants engage in photosynthesis; that invisible radiation can carry information: nobody who reads this chapter seriously doubts these and innumerable other findings of science that would have been incomprehensible or absurd to everybody just a few generations ago, and would perhaps seem strange still to many people alive today.

Faith in Enlightenment progress was shattered by the First World War. The power science had put into humanity's hands could be terribly misused. Less often clearly explained was the destruction of faith, not merely in our wisdom to use science, but in its validity. Newtonian science seemed to have

done everything that a sceptic could ask to prove its credentials as real knowledge, and perhaps more than almost any sceptic had thought to require. Yet it could not uniquely specify any answer as correct.

A different theory could do all that Newton's did. Einstein's theory of General Relativity dealt with the same problems, but differently. Einstein's denies the absolute space and absolute time fundamental to Newton's. They make different predictions but (and here was the central strangeness) the differences between the two sets of predictions, on all the innumerable cases where Newtonian physics had been checked, were far less than the error due to observation. The concrete demonstration that two inconsistent understandings could result in what for practical purposes are the same outcomes led to a different conception of knowledge. Science never established *This is the answer*, but only *This is the best answer so far*.

Philosophers had noted that some thinkers had expected science to become entrenched in the modern world view in the same way that key religious dogmas had been entrenched in earlier world views, yet when Newtonian physics was superseded by Einstein's the social fabric was not torn as it had been when Luther challenged the authority of the Church (Gellner 1974:166–7). Their verdict was premature. The overthrow of Newtonian physics at first produced no consequences beyond the world of professional physics, especially since for ordinary calculations Newtonian approximations were still used. But how it had been possible that even a theory so elaborately and accurately tested, of such enormous practical significance, which had even corrected observation, could nevertheless come to be rejected as a description of reality posed a problem for epistemologists and historians of science. The working out and articulation of the implications took them half a century or so. When dramatically presented by T.S.Kuhn (1962) and others the consequences influenced thought in many other fields. (The spread of Kuhn's influence can be most easily measured by tracking the use of the word *paradigm* in the sense—or according to Masterman (1970), the twenty-one senses—he introduced. In his second edition (1970:182), Kuhn suggested abandoning the word.) This is not a social crisis on a par with the Reformation, but the resulting paralysis of cognitive discrimination and reprivileging of discredited positions contribute to the revival of fundamentalisms and superstitions and attendant bloodshed.

How can an enterprise depend on culture in so many ways yet produce such solid results? Most answers to this question are either incomplete or incoherent. Physicists take the fact for granted. Movements that view quantum mechanics as a turning point of thought—and that includes fly-by-night mystics, prophets of a New Age, relativists of all sorts—get aroused by the cultural component and forget predictions and technology.

(Feyerabend 1994:29)

The extraordinary development of science through the nineteenth century demanded explanation. In the popular mind, as evidenced by such unreflective texts as journalism and school textbooks, the explanation for the success of science is something like this:

Science is able to achieve its results because of the application of the Scientific Method. Scientific Method is objective, value-free, and rigorous. It begins with innocent, unprejudiced observation, which leads to the establishment of scientific findings or hypotheses, on the basis of which are built, by steps of adamant proof, scientific laws.

It hardly needs to be said that this understanding was totally mistaken in every particular. There is no one Scientific Method, and such methods as there are are not objective or value-free. Its objectivity is rather intersubjectivity. Science rarely begins with observations. No observation is unprejudiced or innocent. Scientific laws cannot be proved. Yet to a great extent, the sceptical counter-attack was directed at exactly this false and superficial picture—‘the point is that neither logic nor mathematics escapes the “contamination” of the social’ (Aronowitz 1988:346)—even though a better understanding was available.

Much of the critique of the simplistic account of scientific method was made clearly enough by Whewell (1840, I i 2: vol. 1, 18–25, and I i 6: vol 1, 41–5). It was made very clearly by Popper in the 1930s, and became standard fare in undergraduate courses in the philosophy of science more than thirty years ago. It has been belatedly partly rediscovered by a number of social, cultural, and literary theorists, who have restated parts of it apparently under the impression that rather than giving an undergraduate-level description of how science is done, they are demolishing its pretensions and contributing an original and unanswerable critique. Harding concludes her commonplace analysis of science:

I doubt that in our wildest dreams we ever imagined that we would have to reinvent both science and theorizing itself to make sense of women’s social experience.

(Harding 1986:251)

As Margarita Levin commented on this passage, ‘This megalomania would be disturbing in a Newton or Darwin; in the present context it is merely embarrassing’ (1988:106).

That a view known to be mistaken should be widespread can only be the result of educational failure; and recent attacks on science are indeed the result of failures in education, both in the sciences and in the humanities.

Education in science took the wrong track increasingly from the late

nineteenth century. The tradition begun by the popular demonstrations with which scientists in the nineteenth century had entertained and instructed audiences of ordinary people was allowed to fade. Science education became a matter of calculations and rote learning (Thomas 1990:57). The complexities of statements and definitions were not explained as exclusions of other categorizations and theories, nor explained at all: they were simply part of science, to be accepted on authority as brute fact. All too often, the contents of textbooks were simply wrong (Feynman 1985:298). Science as taught was cut off from its development in the discussion of ideas. The current account of something was presented, not as that one among a number of rivals which currently best answered objections and dealt with the evidence, but as an isolated, authoritatively established truth. It was also cut off from things seen and handled, except those on the laboratory bench. The requirement for students to keep laboratory books and the use of these for assessment meant that much science education became a training in intellectual dishonesty. Students discover the ‘correct’ answer in the textbook, and ensure that their own books report measurements which average to very close to it. This education provides the specialists needed to keep the machines running and, from the few who survive the deadening routine with their critical faculties intact, the flow of inventions coming. But as the pervasive character of the false picture of a scientific method shows, it does not provide for the rest of the population.

If science education was not conducted well, literary education was in an even worse state. The communication technologies engendered by science changed access to, and the structure of, the world of ideas of literary and humanistic culture. As the twentieth century wore on the narratives of the Bible and tradition and the great nineteenth-century novels with which all educated people in the European-speaking world were familiar were no longer the only common narratives. Beside Herod and Bad Prince John stood Citizen Kane. Mickey Mouse was more familiar than Puck.

Adapting the humanities to encompass the new subject matter was postponed too long and was eventually conducted with considerable rancour. Other influences, postcolonialism, antiracism, feminism, environmentalism, the failure of 1960s idealism, the failure of the Marxist economies, and the linguistic turn in philosophy, jostled for priority in various appreciative disciplines and parts of the social sciences. The kind of writing that emerged as the approved style in much of this cultural world was oppositional, perspectivist, and critical of what it called the privileging of western (white, male, European, capitalist) values and culture and knowledge. Some in the field, adapting the term from architecture and consciously enjoying its paradoxical connotations, described the style as *postmodernist* (Lyotard 1979).

Postmodernists were ambivalent about science. On the one hand, they attacked it as yet another privileged form of knowledge, deeply implicated

in imperialism, capitalism, militarism, patriarchy, racism and other evils of the modern world; and science is not blameless on these counts. (Nor, indeed, are other human activities, from religion to the social sciences.) On the other hand, they were eager to grasp the prestige of mathematics and science, and boast familiarity with them. Particularly popular were Chaos Theory, Fractal Geometry, and—oddly, since both date from before the Second World War—Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle and Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem. Whether attacking or invoking, they too often betrayed a complete lack of understanding of what the results of science actually were. Derrida declared that ‘The Einsteinian constant [*viz.*, the speed of light in a vacuum, *c*] is not a constant, not a center. It is the very concept of variability...’, (1970:267). Increasing numbers of commentators, including those on the political left such as Sprinker (1992), were sufficiently familiar with the relevant sciences to question the more outrageous blunders of the postmodern authorities (Broderick 1994; Gross and Levitt, 1994).

Nearly fifty years ago, in a piece of fiction written primarily for adolescents, a character said sarcastically: ‘Do you think a great invention or a great scientific principle is born full-grown in the mind of a genius divorced from his cultural *milieu*?’ (Asimov 1949:143), understanding that readers would immediately recognize the idea as silly. But what students in junior high school then could see at a glance is considered today as a new and difficult insight requiring elaborate defence in learned journals. Once we recognize that scientific theorizing has a political dimension, it is very tempting to apply the standards of social behaviour to scientific theorizing. One could demand, for example, that it should not be offensive, that it should give special protection to those who in the past have been disadvantaged (such as women and members of ‘minority’ cultures).

If you want to be effective at the game of liberal science, you must persuade others that you are right; and, as a rule, abusive shouting is a poor way to make converts. For that reason, an epithet-shouting strategy is self punishing except in the very short run. Why has science evolved such a mannerly demeanor? Not because scientists are better brought up than other people, but because thoughtful, systematic argument works better than ‘Nigger!’ or ‘Faggot!’

(Rauch 1993:141)

Avoiding name-calling is the rule not only for the natural sciences but for much of the social sciences and for history. It is conspicuously not the case in the world of literary criticism and ‘Theory’. That a view has been avowed by conservatives is taken to be an argument against it. Terry Eagleton thought it worth his while to point out which literary theorists are Jews and

what not they, but their families, did during the Second World War (1984:31). Criticism in science is robust, but no journal in, say, polymer chemistry, would publish a paper which raised such matters.

The false picture of science that had been used to explain its success and then the replacement of Newtonian physics by relativity opened the door to sceptical counter-attacks. But the counter-attack that emerged was not strong. It was directed at a false picture of its adversary, a non-existent kind of knowledge: pure, objective, value-free and conclusive (Bloor 1976, 1981: Brown 1984). An undeveloped and ill-informed anti-realist epistemology (Tobin, 1993; von Glasersfeld, 1995; for criticism, see Nola 1997) was promoted to justify non-didactic teaching, as if the firmest of realists, Plato himself, had not promoted non-didactic teaching in the *Meno* 82–85 BC.

Another constructivist, Aronowitz, claimed:

Machine technology cannot be separated from the social relations that created it. The logic of domination remains embedded in the machine, which is an instrument for the perpetuation of social oppression and exploitation by virtue of not only its uses but its construction.

(Aronowitz 1988:78)

This claim is very precisely false. Machine technologies such as radios simply do work independently of the social relations between those who use, or those who construct, them. Not only is it false, but it illustrates a particular kind of (very linear) thinking, satirized by Dr Johnson as the principle ‘Who drives fat oxen should himself be fat’ (Boswell 1799:1307, entry for June 1784).

As we come to recognize the conventional and artificial status of our forms of knowing, we put ourselves in a position to realize that it is ourselves and not reality that is responsible for what we know.

(Shapin and Schaffer 1985:283)

The notion of just one thing (*ourselves* or *reality*) causing (or *being responsible for*) something is precisely the fallacy constructivists condemn as ‘linear causation’, here committed at the heart of constructivist scepticism.

Two questions, objectivity and observation, have been regarded as being so insuperable as objections to the claims of science, that they merit fuller discussion. Since there is no way to attain the kind of objectivity of the mistaken popular explanation, science is not objective in that sense. Such objectivity as science attains is achieved on what John Stuart Mill called the only terms on which ‘a being with human faculties [can] have any rational

assurance of being right', namely 'Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving' it (1859, ch. ii:271), the public checking of each by any, cf. Popper (1934, § 8:44–8), and Rauch (1993:64–5, 73–5). Any assertion, any finding, is open to attack by anybody from any direction, provided only that the attack does not display too great an ignorance of the preceding discussion. Some journals intended for school science teachers refuse, as a matter of policy, to consider contributions which refute relativity. The rule is an arbitrary restriction on discussion, and therefore contrary to a scientific position. To creation science, astrology, ufology, IQ psychology, dialectical materialism, psychoanalysis, Lamarckian inheritance, the reply of science until some new evidence can be adduced is *Been there, done that*.

The thesis that every observation is theory-laden is nowadays often taken to be a commonplace in philosophy of science and the social sciences. Whenever an observer makes an observation, what is observed is infected with theories that the observer held beforehand (Hanson 1958:22). Medawar remarked, 'naïve observation, innocent observation, is a mere philosophic fiction. There is no such thing as unprejudiced observation. Every act of observation we make is biased' (1963:35). When one goes for the first time into a chemistry laboratory, it looks to the unprepared (open, innocent) mind like a total confusion of bottles, beakers, tubes and unidentifiable equipment. After one has learnt some chemistry, one can see what is there and what is going on, because one has the requisite understanding (preconceptions). Acquiring the requisite understanding certainly encourages one to think along some (orthodox) lines, and discourages one from thinking along heretical ones; but it is vain to hope that the remedy for this is to attempt to revert to the incomprehension with which one first saw the room.

The doctrine of theory-ladenness is controversial. Many of those most commonly invoked as its advocates have never accepted it. Feyerabend, in particular, opposed the doctrine throughout his career, as he has several times insisted (1977:156, n. 9; 1987:289). In this, he was following his teacher Popper (1934, § 25:94–5). Their objection to the doctrine of theory-ladenness is not that it goes too far—that there are observations which are somehow independent of theory—but that it does not go far enough. There is nothing untheoretical to carry the theoretical 'load'. Observation is not improved by paring away the theoretical excess to get at (or get closer to) some untheoretical substratum. Rather, observation is improved by acknowledging that it is irretrievably theoretical and dealing with it *as* theoretical, by considering criticisms of it and attempts to refute it by appeal to other observations: in short, by considering other possibilities and alternative frameworks.

Nor is the acceptability of an observation statement to be attributed to the mere fact that the appropriate experts agree. It

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is the extent to which the statement is able to withstand objective tests that is fundamental.

(Chalmers 1990:49)

Both those who accept the doctrine of theory-ladenness, and the more extreme school of Popper and Feyerabend which rejects it on the ground that everything is theoretical, agree in taking the threat to observation to be not an excess of prejudice, but a deficit of alternative frameworks. Science is at any moment the resultant of a clash of alternative theories, alternative ways of thinking about the world. It is a prolonged debate about ourselves and our world by people of different cultures. Experiments are conducted to *disprove* hypotheses—as Platt (1964:352b) requires, to rule out some classes of alternative explanations. The careful qualifications in definitions and generalizations are, as Lakatos (1976:83–7) showed, stipulated to prevent possible alternative interpretations.

Frequently we read elaborate arguments to show that some aspect of a situation is not natural but constructed, from which it is immediately concluded that since it is constructed it is alterable. But natural does not mean fixed, and constructed does not mean alterable. It is only because much that is natural is alterable, not fixed, that medicine, engineering and cosmetics achieve their effects. Diseases are natural and some are alterable, indeed eliminable. Hair colour is genetic and therefore natural, and of course quite alterable. Conversely, what is constructed need not be alterable. The sequence of primes is presumably a mental or social construction (on pain of Platonic metaphysics it must be), but not all the efforts of all us could render 1728 prime. The structure of verb tenses in English is a human construction but not alterable by individual effort. Indeed, speakers of English have notoriously been unable to provide ourselves with a third-person singular pronoun of common gender. The mistake of identifying the natural/constructed distinction with the fixed/alterable distinction is knocked out of social science students by the discussions of Social Facts in Sociology I and of Nature/Nurture in Psychology I. It persists only among those who work *neither* with their hands (they call in a plumber or an electrician to alter unsatisfactory bits of nature for them) *nor* with society (advertisers know how hard it is to change socially constructed things: the combined efforts of very clever and highly paid opinion-manipulators over several generations have failed to convince anybody that washing the dishes is fun), but who work with a small group of students in a classroom for a limited time. If they still believe what you have said at the end of term, you've 'succeeded' in changing society.

Oppression and injustice are certainly constructed and in many cases alterable; what prevents their alteration is commonly not what the postmodernists wish to attack, the belief that they are natural and fixed, but the power of those who commit them. And a 'radical struggle' against the

repressive structures of society that culminates only in searing indictments in academic journals is a radical struggle that even university administrators, let alone power structures in the wider society, find easy to tolerate. Far from risking anything, it advances one's career and, since it is not part of old-fashioned political debate with people who have different interests about some immediate concrete collective action, one is not forced to change one's views by opposition or empirical evidence.

The triumphant complacency of postmodernist scepticism was disrupted by two shocks. The first began with the revelation of racist bogies in the postmodern closet. Heidegger, Derrida's teacher, was revealed to have joined the Nazis enthusiastically rather than reluctantly, and before institutional measures required him to. Paul de Man, celebrated postmodernist literary critic, was found to have as a young man written servile, and in one case anti-Semitic, articles for the press in Nazi-occupied Belgium (Lehman 1991). The postmodernists were prepared to defend collaboration with the Nazis (MacDonald 1991) and to abandon their most distinctive theses to do so. Those who had most loudly ridiculed the outdated superstition that an author's say-so determines 'the meaning' of a text shamelessly insisted that the meaning of their own texts was what they said it was. Derrida complained that an interview with him had been published without *his* authorization (1993:44a); he described de Man's 'living present' as 'the crossroads of these two incompatible and disjunctive temporalities, temporalities that nevertheless went together, articulated in history, in what was *his history*, the only one' (1988:650, Derrida's emphasis). As allies of progressive social criticism, and as discoverers of radically new methods of understanding, their hollowness was brutally exposed.

The second shock came when the journal *Social Text*, in a special double issue (April 1996) devoted to rebutting the charge that critiques of science by cultural theorists tended to lack understanding of science, included an essay entitled 'Transgressing the boundaries: toward a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity' by Alan Sokal, a theoretical physicist at New York University. As Sokal later revealed, and as was perfectly clear to anyone with a scientific or mathematical background from almost every sentence in it, the essay was a hoax, a grotesque parody of the worst postmodernist writing about science. Those who had criticized others from a position of superior understanding of texts had been shown to be unable to detect what any high-school graduate in mathematics would recognize as nonsense. They were shown also, if proof were needed, to have no sense of humour about their own activities. What is worse, 'the conclusion is inescapable that the editors of *Social Text* didn't know what many of the sentences in Sokal's essay actually meant; and that they just didn't care' (Boghossian 1996:14c).

Karen Green revealed how the appeal to Saussurian linguistics by the

postmodernists, especially Derrida, presuppose a doctrine of the unreality of relations that was ultimately a residue of Hegelian metaphysics. A standard move by Hegel was to use a thing's being what it is only in virtue of its relations to other things to show a contradiction in the nature of the thing. Derrida, in precisely the same way, uses a phoneme's being what it is only in virtue of its relations to other phonemes as showing there to be something puzzling about it (1976:158–9; 1978:201; 1982:5). He describes its phonetic character as depending on an inaudible difference. But the difference between phonemes is not inaudible. Even a baby can react to it, as Green remarks, and 'it is through hearing the differences between sounds that an infant comes to recognise the phonemes of their language' (1993:253). The whole complexity of difference (and the introduction of Derrida's neologism *différance*) is due to nothing more than a lack of a decent logic of relations (Green 1993:253; see also Russell 1914:48–62). What is apparently unimaginable in the early nineteenth-century (Hegelian) world of Derrida, that relations might be real things, is so routine in every natural science through mathematics that what is unimaginable is not understanding it. According to the ontology of modern mathematics, as developed by the pseudonymous Nicolas Bourbaki (1948), *to be is to be an object of a structure*. An object is determined by its situation in the structure—by its relations to other members of the structure. 'Given it [Frege's logic], one is not tempted to think of relations as absences in contrast to the presence of objects' (Green 1993:254).

We need scientists to keep the machines running, but this does not mean that *everybody* needs to learn science, *provided* we don't mind a scientific elite making the decisions that really matter. *If* science is to be subjected to democratic control, then ordinary people need to understand science. To an increasing extent decisions involve science, and those who don't know the science are ignored.

The danger, for the moment at least, is not to science itself. What is threatened is the capability of the larger culture, which embraces the mass media as well as the more serious processes of education, to interact fruitfully with the sciences, to draw insight from scientific advances and, above all, to evaluate science intelligently. To the extent that the academic left's critique becomes the dominant mode of thinking about science on the part of nonscientists, that thinking will be distorted and dangerously irrelevant.

(Gross and Levitt 1994:4)

As a sceptical assault on science, postmodernism was misdirected. Nevertheless, it brought out clearly the inadequacy of much of our science

education. The exorcism of the false, authoritarian picture of science is more necessary than ever before. Every citizen needs an understanding not only of what science says at the moment, but of the kinds of reasoning and evidence that led to those conclusions, and of what sorts of conclusions are intrinsically beyond science. Therefore we need to teach science realistically, as a human construction that embodies the best understanding of the world we have achieved so far, that has emerged from a process of debate and exchange of ideas and attempted disproofs, in which observations and experiments are open to different interpretations and explicable in different ways, but even so are not infinitely malleable and can constitute negative evidence.

And in our day no man should be considered educated if he does not take an interest in science. The usual defence that an interest in electricity or stratigraphy need not be more enlightening than an interest in human affairs only betrays a complete lack of understanding of human affairs. For science is not merely a collection of facts about electricity, etc.; it is one of the most important spiritual movements of our day. Anybody who does not attempt to acquire an understanding of this movement cuts himself off from the most remarkable development in the history of human affairs. Our so-called Arts Faculties, based upon the theory that by means of a literary and historical education they introduce the student into the spiritual life of man, have therefore become obsolete in their present form. There can be no history of man which excludes a history of his intellectual struggles and achievements; and there can be no history of ideas which excludes the history of scientific ideas. But literary education has an even more serious aspect. Not only does it fail to educate the student, who is often to become a teacher, to an understanding of the greatest spiritual movement of his own day, but it also often fails to educate him to intellectual honesty. Only if the student experiences how easy it is to err, and how hard to make even a small advance in the field of knowledge, only then can he obtain a feeling for the standards of intellectual honesty, a respect for truth, and a disregard of authority and bumpiousness.

(Popper 1966, vol. 2:283–4, n. 6)

We don't know nearly as much as we think we know, but we *do* know much more than we used to know. 'At the same time as we discovered that we knew so much less than we had previously supposed, we also found that we knew much more' (Gellner 1974:203).

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4

TRUTH IN RELIGION

Wittgensteinian considerations

Fergus Kerr

1

Anyone ever involved in religious education, as parent, teacher, catechist or minister, realizes that those whom they seek to educate want to know how much of it is *true*. Some feel in their bones that God exists, but others see nothing to show that such a being exists. The Christian religion is based on the claim that Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead, that he appeared to certain men and women, ate and drank with them, etc., before withdrawing from earthly sight. Like anything else that happened long ago, this could be a fact only if we trust the testimony of those who claim to have been there at the time. We surely need extraordinarily strong evidence before we could accept it as something that ‘really’ happened.

There is a difference, in traditional Christian theology, between the claim that God exists and the claim that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead.

As regards the latter, according to the New Testament, no one could believe the claim to be true without being granted the faith to do so. ‘No one can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit’ (1 Corinthians 12:3). The claim that God ‘raised’ Jesus is inseparable, that is to say, from the claim that God ‘exalted him at his right hand’ (Acts 5:30–1), that he is now ‘at the right hand of God’ (Romans 8:34; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3; 1 Peter 3:22; etc.), which means, in turn, that he is ‘judge of the living and of the dead’. The very idea of the resurrection of Christ depends on a network of connected presuppositions, principally on the belief that, as creatures, we are accountable to the God who created us. That God is our judge is not uniquely a biblical conception, something analogous is easily found in many non-biblical religions. But the notion that human beings are subject to divine judgement is clearly dominant in the Jewish scriptures. What happens, in the Christian religion, is that the God to whom creatures are accountable is definitively manifest in the existence of Jesus Christ.

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This has been well examined by Ludwig Wittgenstein, in a remarkable note on Christ's resurrection (Wittgenstein 1980:33). While declaring that he cannot himself call Jesus 'Lord'—'*Because I do not believe that he will come to judge me; because that says nothing to me. And it could say something to me, only if I lived completely differently*' (all his emphasis), Wittgenstein goes on to 'play with the thought': he moves from the notion of being under judgement to Christ's resurrection, to being saved, to faith, the heart, the soul, love, redemption, and so on, in a remarkable exploration of the concepts that need to be in place if one is ever to be in a context in which one might be prompted to say 'Jesus is Lord'. Explicitly noting that he does not himself have the faith to acknowledge Christ as risen, Wittgenstein traces, with great skill and insight, the conceptual connections that enable the claim to make sense.

But the first point that he makes is that no one can accept it as true without being divinely inspired to do so.

Whether it is true that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead is something that one can believe only by divine grace. The testimony of those who originally witnessed it, even if it had been much less ambiguous and fragmentary, would not convince anyone unless their minds and hearts were specially illuminated by the Holy Spirit. Wittgenstein is clear about this; it is the traditional doctrine of the Church.

This makes belief in the truth of Christ's resurrection privileged, sustainable only by those who have been 'chosen'. It is a problem with which Wittgenstein himself wrestled. The doctrine of predestination (*Gnadenwahl*: literally, 'grace-choice'), as found in the writings of St Paul, seems, he noted, 'odious nonsense'—at *his* level of understanding, he hastens to say. The doctrine is not suitable for him, he says, since the only use that he could make of the picture would be a wrong one—'If it is a good and godly picture, then it is for someone at a quite different level, who must use it in his life in a way completely different from anything that would be possible for me' (Wittgenstein 1980:32). In our democratic and egalitarian culture, his instinctive dislike of the notion of some people's being divinely chosen to see certain truths would be widely shared. That every level of religiousness must have a kind of expression corresponding to it, which has no sense at a lower level, as he puts it, is, on the other hand, not an observation that many people in our culture would be happy to concede. People would not want to worship a deity who is not equally accessible to us all. But at least the argument would now be moving to the right place.

One of the deepest disputes in current theology is between those who would say that, at most, the life and death of Jesus Christ and its aftermath (however interpreted) might, as a whole, be a manifestation of a divine reality which is perceptible in many other equally valid ways, and those who hold, on the contrary, that the God who raised Jesus from the dead, etc., is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, revealed historically in very specific events. It

becomes an argument, that is to say, about what theologians call ‘the scandal of particularity’—God as accessible in the history of the Jewish people and in the covenant made in Christ’s blood (Matthew 26:28, etc.), in what might seem an offensively local and specific way.

In the context of religious studies, and in connection with the other great religious traditions, a matter often of considerable interest to students, including those who are sceptical of the truth of Christian claims, it becomes possible to discuss, for example, the notion of *conversion*. People transfer allegiance from one religion to another. It seems from what they say that this is not usually an arbitrary act of will but rather a yielding to an inner prompting, an acknowledgement of the attractiveness of certain practices, institutions, etc., perhaps a discovery of one’s true ‘identity’, and so on, much of which might intelligibly be discussed in terms of ‘inspiration’, ‘grace’ and ‘gift’. Such discussion would not, of course, resolve the issue. There will always be those who resent the ‘elitism’ that they perceive, not unreasonably, in the doctrine of being chosen by divine grace to believe this or that, or to adhere to this or that religious tradition (not necessarily Christian). But at least the discussion will be located properly. Claims and counterclaims about Christ’s resurrection, in isolation from and ignorance of a doctrine of being chosen by grace to accept it, would become obviously irrelevant.

To be true, a claim also has to make sense. The intelligibility of Christ’s resurrection as understood in the New Testament and in the ancient creeds of the Church is dependent on acceptance of the possibility of divine judgement. ‘On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.’ The claim that Jesus has been raised from the dead is intelligible, and thus conceivably true, because it fits in with a whole network of beliefs, hopes, fears, etc., especially the belief in creaturely accountability. Students might find it all extremely boring; but the biblical conception of God as the creator to whom creatures are inherently accountable can surely also be expounded in an interesting way. It does not follow, we may repeat, that it becomes compellingly true simply by being expounded; but at least the discussion would be related to the central claim of Christianity, that Christ is ‘judge of the living and the dead’. Even those who cannot believe that they should regard themselves as accountable to God in Christ (the scandal of particularity again) might find the notion of our accountability simply as creatures worth discussing. The intelligibility of the Christian claims depends on background information about the biblical conception of living under divine judgement; but that does not mean that the idea of accountability as such cannot be discussed with people who do not accept the specifically biblical/Christian doctrine. On the contrary, the notion that we might be responsible to something other than ourselves (Gaia, ‘life’, ideals of some kind) could be discussed amicably. Even if it seems implausible that we are, as creatures, accountable to the God in whose image and likeness

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we have been created, in biblical terms, it may seem equally implausible that there are no ideals or standards to which we ought to submit apart from ones that we invent at will.

In short, though the doctrine of the Resurrection is fundamental in orthodox Christianity, it may be held to be true only by those who have received the faith to believe it through no merit or effort of their own but by divine grace and favour. Secondly, even they could believe in its truth only because they hold a good deal else to be the case—that human beings stand under judgement, for a start. While the constitutive role attributed to divine grace in anyone's accepting the claim that Christ was raised from the dead must make many people feel excluded, the very idea of accountability and responsibility to something transcending ourselves, could bring everyone into the argument. Ultimately, the unavoidable appeal to grace will seem 'elitist', but that is a problem met in describing many other religions besides Christianity. Nevertheless, the intelligibility and truth of the resurrection of Christ have connections in general issues of considerable philosophical interest.

2

What about the intelligibility and truth of claims about the existence of God? Here again, much argument is wasted breath, unless we locate the issue properly.

The first question to be settled is whether the evidence for the reality of God must be sought independently of any specific religious tradition—in a purely philosophical consideration of the world, or of human experience in general, or of general human experience of the sacred. Once again, the charge of elitism will arise. If we say that knowledge of God is to be found only in God's self-revelation in Christ, we deny human beings the sense of the divine which underlies the argument for the existence of God from universal consent (for example) or which may be located, very variously, in everyday experience (music, sexual encounter, Nature, etc.). One prominent school of Christian theologians, however, maintains that there is no point in arguing about the reality or otherwise of God in the abstract—we have to do with the only God there is, and that is the God revealed in the history of the Jewish people and in the Christian dispensation.

This argument goes back to the work of Karl Barth in the 1930s. Since the eighteenth century, Christian apologists, Reformed as well as Roman Catholic, have been inclined to discuss the existence of God independently of the revelation of God in Israel and in Jesus Christ. Essentially, it seemed more productive to establish something true about God in general, bracketing for later the more supernatural aspects of Christianity (God as three persons in one nature, Christ as God and man, miracles, the Church, etc.). It seemed more likely to produce agreement if we see what emerges from reasoning about our shared experience of the world before we bring in what are

admittedly matters of faith, delivered only by divine revelation. On this view, the news about God brought to us by Jesus Christ is *additional* to what can be found out about God by the disciplined exercise of reason. Barth, however, shocked theologians into thinking that any such deity would be a human construction, even an invention: in traditional biblical language nothing but an idol. For Barth, the only God there is, is the God self-revealed in the incarnation, resurrection and ascension of Christ and in the gift of the Holy Spirit. Faith in God as a Trinity of persons is not something added by way of supplement to an already established agreement about the concept of God; on the contrary, the very idea of God, Barth would think, is determined in advance by the revelation of God as Trinity. Theism, understood as knowledge of God as a Supreme Being, attainable by dint of rational argument from the world, conscience, or a putative sense of the sacred, seems to theologians influenced by Barth simply a radically misguided project. Only by God is God known, Barth would say.

Specifically, Barth maintained that no discussion with non-believers, no ‘mission to the heathen’, could be pursued meaningfully except on the presupposition of the firm belief that everything needed for salvation, including the salvation of those who have false beliefs in false gods, ‘has already taken place, that Jesus Christ died and rose again for these heathen too.... Thus the task of mission can consist only in announcing this to them. It is on this basis that they are to be addressed from the very outset’ (Barth 1962:874). The Supreme Being discovered by theistic argumentation could not be the God who is with us and for us in the history of the covenant to which the Scriptures bear witness

Along these lines, there is no significant difference between the claim for the truth of the resurrection of Christ and the claim for the truth of the reality of God. In both cases, if we accept them as true, we owe our belief entirely to divine grace. Unless we have a communication from God about himself, a Word from God, so to speak, we have no genuine knowledge of God at all—nothing but the product of our own reasonings. For post-Barthian theologians, education in Christian religious knowledge has to begin with discussion of the historical act of God in Jesus Christ and, again, that anything like this truly happened has never been visible for what it is except to those who have been divinely illuminated.

Within Christian theology, Reformed as well as Roman Catholic, this insistence that there is nothing to be said of God that would be true apart from what has actually been revealed to those with the grace of faith is not an uncontested thesis. On the contrary, the affirmation of God’s existence is widely regarded as a conclusion, the truth of which is not known until we establish it by means of reasoning. On this view, contrary to the Barthian line, there is already something true that we can say about God independently of God’s laying claim to us in the Christian dispensation of salvation. There could be no approach from the Christian side to those who do not have their

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faith unless some common ground existed. There could be no mission to the heathen, in Earth's phrase, unless some connection could be established with their experience of the world.

But arguments for God's existence that do not start from explicitly theological premises are not as straightforward as is often assumed. A proof of God's existence, Wittgenstein once noted (Wittgenstein 1980:85), should really be something by means of which one could be convinced that God exists. That seems incontestably what most of us would suppose—what the word 'proof' means. When Christians offer such arguments, however, so he suspects, what they have wanted is to 'analyse and justify their "faith" with their reason'—'they would never have come to believe as a result of such proofs'. Christians may think that cosmological, ontological and moral arguments ought to work so cogently that open-minded atheists should be convinced; but (surely what Wittgenstein implies) these arguments seldom if ever in practice compel atheists to abandon their position—rather, they allow Christians to explore the reasonableness of their faith (something which Wittgenstein probably regarded as unnecessary and even absurd). Such theistic arguments are really an exploration and reflection within the context of faith, for those who already have the gift of faith and wonder how reasonable their belief might be.

The sort of convincing appropriate in the context of religion, Wittgenstein suggests, is not that which goes with cogent argumentation. Rather, as to convincing some one of God's existence, you might succeed in doing so by means of a certain kind of *education*—'by shaping his life in such a such a way', as Wittgenstein says, implying something much more than training some one in certain arguments. This might be, he goes on to say, because life can educate one to belief in God'. This means, in turn, that there are *experiences* (his emphasis) which bring this faith about—'but I don't mean visions, or whatever other sense experiences that show the "existence of this being"'. On the contrary, 'sufferings of various sorts', 'experiences, thoughts'—'life'—'can force on us this concept [the existence of God]'. In that sense, Wittgenstein concludes, it may be similar to the concept 'object'—in the sense, presumably, that it is perfectly conceivable that we could live in a world of tables and chairs, animals and plants, without ever developing the notion of an 'object', so too we might find events in life that generate the concept of 'God', though societies without the concept might be conceivable and it would not be forced on us either by logic or revelation (Wittgenstein 1980:85).

Rather, it would be a matter of being prompted, brought up, to look at the world in a certain way. When those who believe in God raise the question of where it all comes from, Wittgenstein suggests, they are expressing an attitude to all kinds of explanation. But we have to ask how this attitude comes out in their lives, he insists. 'The attitude is that of taking a certain matter seriously and then, beyond a certain point, no longer regarding it as serious, but maintaining that something else is even more important'. For example:

‘Someone may say it’s a very grave matter that such and such a man should have died before he could complete a certain piece of work; and yet, in another sense, this is not what matters’—“in a deeper sense”, one would say—but there too, Wittgenstein insists, ‘I should like to say that in this case too the *words* you utter or what you think as you utter them are not what matters, so much as the difference they make at various points in your life’ (Wittgenstein 1980:86).

These remarks, written down within a few months of Wittgenstein’s death, merit a good deal of reflection. The point of citing them here, however, is simply to indicate another possibility besides either the Barthian one outlined above or the standard modern conception of religion-neutral cosmological argumentation.

Clearly, as Wittgenstein suggests, argument about whether God’s existence is correctly inferable from this or that feature in the world or in our experience seldom if ever convinces anyone who is not already a believer. In that sense, it is fruitless to bandy arguments about the truth or falsity of the thesis that God exists. Once again, it is a matter of where to locate the discussion if it is to be relevant to the seriousness of the issue. It is not necessary, if Wittgenstein is right, to go to the Barthian extreme of insisting that there is no possibility of genuine knowledge of God other than on the basis of God’s own self-revelation to those with faith—that all supposed knowledge of ‘God’ independently acquired by reason could never be anything but false. If we go with Wittgenstein, perhaps further than he would have countenanced, a way opens up between producing compelling arguments for God’s existence from premises that neither are nor involve religious beliefs and resorting directly to God’s revelation of his own existence—between rationalism and fideism, if you like. Wittgenstein does not like the idea that the reality of God is something that could be revealed immediately in anything like the way in which physical things are perceived—God is not known as a gracious presence, directly and unmediatedly. Nor, on the other hand, is God known (even initially) as an inference by a chain of reasoning from non-religious premises, or from naturally evident considerations such as causality, change, etc.: the traditionally acceptable starting point for classical theistic argumentation.

Once again, the question of the truth of the claim that God exists needs to be located in the right place if the argument is not to be quite irrelevant. A good deal else, in a person’s education, needs to be in place before theism becomes arguable. This is not a very surprising claim. ‘In a world that no longer has enough confidence in itself to affirm the beautiful’, as the leading conservative Roman Catholic theologian has noted (Balthasar 1985:19), ‘the proofs of the truth have lost their cogency. In other words, syllogisms may still dutifully clatter away like rotary presses or computers which infallibly spew out an exact number of answers by the minute. But the logic of these answers is itself a mechanism which no longer captivates anyone’. That does not mean that the proofs of God’s existence are invalid; at least von Balthasar

does not think so. What he clearly does think, however, is that, without a certain background, without being brought up to inhabit the world with a certain wonder, for example, one would not find the arguments by themselves of much interest, let alone find them cogent. Here again, argument about the truth of a theological claim needs to be properly situated, with much else in place, before discussion could be fruitful.

We should examine several more cases. What we have seen so far, however, about the two claims, first about Christ's resurrection and secondly about God's existence, surely shows that much of the argument both for and against the truth of the claims lies entirely beside the issue at stake. Far too often, it is assumed that we can debate the pros and cons of the claim that Christ was raised from the dead as if this was an isolated incident, a bizarre demonstration of God's power to work miracles. But neither those who believe it happened, nor those who are sceptical, can actually be discussing the issue unless they have some information about how the notion of Christ's resurrection is interwoven with such notions as accountability, living under judgement, etc. Knowing something of the context is no guarantee that the claim becomes any more plausible—on the contrary, on the most orthodox theological view, no one could or would believe it but for divine intervention—but at least the focus would be on something germane.

Similarly, far too often, those in favour of the proposition that God exists, as well as those who find it superfluous, suppose that the argument is over a certain entity, whose existence may be inferable from the existence of the world, from certain features of the world, or from something about human experience. As Wittgenstein and von Balthasar suggest, however, in different ways, the premises from which the chain of inferential argument develops are by no means as neutral as is often nowadays assumed. So long as we lived, in our culture, with the unexamined assumption that the good, the true and the beautiful are allied, even convertible, as the tradition from Plato took for granted, it is not difficult to understand that such features of the world as causality, change, etc., and indeed the very existence of the world as such, while all being non-religious in themselves, as we should now think, were easily regarded as effects of the One whom people in general called 'God'. Throughout the patristic era, down to and including the theology of Thomas Aquinas, there was no clear-cut distinction between what is and what is not religious. For Aquinas, entities were inconceivable out of relation to God; things were regarded as constituted simply by their participation in God. The Christianized neo-Platonic metaphysics of participation regarded every being as always and already a creature, hence as relational to and dependent on God.

What happened at the Enlightenment, or rather already in the late Middle Ages with the abandonment by Duns Scotus of the Thomist view that there is no discourse about being independent of a discourse about God as creator, is another matter. Disjoining philosophy from Christian doctrine opened the

way to natural theology in the sense of providing proof of God's existence on the basis of features of the world which even an atheist's gaze supposedly cannot but see.

3

Philosophers in general have by no means accepted the methods suggested in Wittgenstein's later work. On the contrary, they mostly want to provide a theory that will cover as many of the phenomena as possible. In this, they are only expressing, in a much more refined way, the desire that surfaces in bar-room argument. As regards what is or is not true, for example, we are very inclined to say that a claim is true either if it matches what we see to be the case or because it fits in with everything else that we already accept. In traditional jargon, we choose between correspondence and coherence theories of truth. A statement is true if it corresponds with what is 'out there' in the real world; or alternatively if it is consistent with much else in our system of knowledge. We could argue over which theory is better, we could try to divide up all the true or false assertions we can think of and say which theory better accounts for their truth or falsehood.

Wittgenstein, however, encourages us to bypass this supposed option. He has no theory of truth. Indeed, some philosophers find his lack of interest in truth quite scandalous. In the whole of his *Investigations*, for example, there are only two or three explicit references to truth. He argues, principally against his own earlier view, that the concepts true and false cannot be used to determine what is and what is not a proposition (Wittgenstein 1953: §§ 137–8), and that the use of the word 'proposition' and that of the word 'true' are interwoven (§ 225). Second, on a different issue, he notes that truth is sometimes not distinct from truthfulness, and that truthfulness is sometimes much the same as meaning (§ 544 and pp. 223–6). Such cavalier treatment of the issue, given that truth is central to the *Tractatus*, his earlier book, can only be a provocation. As far as we are concerned here, the decisive remark is as follows (§ 353): 'Asking whether and how a proposition can be verified is only a particular way of asking "How d'you mean?" The answer is a contribution to the grammar of the proposition.'

What Wittgenstein encourages us to do, is to examine the detailed surroundings of a disputed concept. No doubt his own attempt to elucidate the grammar of the concept of Christ's resurrection needs further discussion; if the links with other concepts that he notes are not the most relevant he would certainly have been prepared to shift the focus. He himself remains unconvinced of the truth of the claim—no philosophy or theory of truth would bring conviction about such a matter. He has noted the most important aspect of the claim—no one is going to believe it is true except in virtue of divine grace. All the same, his attempt to bring out the adjacent concepts begins to enable us to make proper sense of it. It cannot simply be an argument

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about the correspondence between what the New Testament witnesses reportedly saw and the facts in the world. Wittgenstein moves the focus from concern with verification to what the claim means. Of course, connecting truth and meaning in this way would only apply in certain cases. Wittgenstein was not advancing a general theory about meaning. What he was suggesting was only that the truth of some assertions—how they are verifiable—is inseparable from what they mean. This is particularly true of religious claims. What the New Testament witnesses of Christ's resurrection claim to have seen needs a good deal of background even to be intelligible. Sterile dispute about the verifiability of an extremely unlikely event (the appearance of a dead man after his death) has to give way to a much wider consideration of the plausibility of a whole way of living in the world—in particular, of living under judgement, or *sub specie aeternitatis*. We might be reluctant even to allow the possibility that Jesus Christ is judge of the living and the dead, perhaps. Some would deny that we are accountable to anyone or anything, any moral standard or ideal, apart from those that we invent or project. Others would be unhappy about such a radical thought. But, whatever the diversity of view, discussion of Christ's resurrection would be taking place in something like the only context that makes such a notion intelligible—against a background, at least, which does not distort the alleged phenomenon out of all recognition.

So much of the time, in Wittgenstein's later work, the task is to turn the discussion round and concern ourselves, not with pressing some phenomenon or issue under the straitjacket of some theory, but with describing what the given phenomenon actually involves. Often this means highlighting this or that connection, rearranging things that we already know, to allow the concept or issue to emerge for what it is.

Christianity is among much else a system of doctrine, thus with claims to be true, but it needs to be treated as something like a view of the world that challenges, subverts and transforms other worldviews. Perhaps Wittgenstein came near to saying this. He noted that a religious faith could be described as 'something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference' (Wittgenstein 1980:64). That is to say, although it is *faith*, 'it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing [judging] life'. Instruction in a religious faith, he goes on to say, 'would have to take the form of a portrayal, a description, of that system of reference, while at the same time being an appeal to conscience'. What this instruction would have to bring about, in the learner, would be that 'of his own accord' he would 'passionately take hold of the system of reference'.

This seems a pretty good description of a religious education. It is not a matter of indoctrination, as many fear; the beginner finally moves 'of his own accord'. A theologian would no doubt add that this movement on the part of the agent, while certainly his or her own, would also be the work of the Holy Spirit. Wittgenstein must here be thinking of the moment in any

instruction when the instructee finally makes the moves on his own, independently of his guide (cf. Wittgenstein 1953:§ 143). But there is more to initiating some one into religious faith than to teaching him to count. The presentation and exposition of the religious world view, Wittgenstein thinks, must come across to the pupil as a moral challenge. That is to say, it is not an entirely neutral communication of information. Religious education does not take place in a vacuum. On the contrary, it comes as a challenge to the values and practices that the learner already has, whatever they may be.

More generally, we may say, the biblical (Jewish and Christian) narrative has never offered itself as a detached set of writings. Rather, it is always already a rewriting, the record of the transformation and subversion of previous religious mythologies, inherited expectations, fears, hopes, etc. The best way to enter into reading the biblical story is to follow it as the record of centuries of conflict between the claims of the God of Israel and the claims of the rival religions, paganism, etc. From the beginning, the biblical narrative challenged existing world views. Isaiah spoke of the good news that the Lord God has overthrown the gods of Babylon and had thus broken Babylon's grip on the people of Israel, at least in principle. When the apostles addressed the Greco-Roman world with the news that Jesus of Nazareth was the true Lord of the world, whose accession to supreme power was the liberating news for which the whole creation had long been waiting, this was either a decisive challenge to the existing authorities or a massive illusion. The words that Christians utter, as Wittgenstein might have said, are not what matters, so much as the difference they make at various points in history (cf. Wittgenstein 1980:85).

The question of the truth of this or that particular Christian doctrine cannot be isolated from the whole story, and the whole story remains open-ended, indeed *confrontational*. The conflict that this community experienced from the outset, with fellow Jews who did not acknowledge Jesus as messiah, as well as with pagans who saw the proclamation of Jesus as Lord as a threat to their institutions, values and practices, was a clash of entire symbol-systems—much more than a dispute over the truth of this or that doctrine. Christianity has always been an intervention in an already flourishing variety of world views—a challenge and a contradiction, initially and characteristically, rather than a fulfilment and absorption (whatever may piously be said or brutally practised). From the call of Abraham onwards, the biblical narrative presents itself as the truth of which paganism is the parody—the heathen gods are nothing but idols. In claiming that they were telling the divinely given ending of the Jewish story—how the promises had all come true, how God had become the light to enlighten the gentiles and the glory of his people Israel, etc.—the early Christians were, of course, making claims that simply cannot be reconciled with Judaism. For that matter, if the biblical narrative is true, the Muslim one is not, and vice versa; and the same goes for Hinduism, Buddhism, and so on.

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The notion of truth with which religious people are concerned goes far beyond questions of the truth value of this or that individual doctrine. As we have seen, in Christianity at any rate, the truth of the central doctrines can never be imposed by any amount of cogent reasoning but has always to come as a divine gift. The most that an educator can do, that is to say, is to bring out the intelligibility of the basic concepts and claims—to situate them in the network of concepts in which alone they make sense. That is not to cut them off from ordinary life—from the life in which they might make a difference. On the contrary, even such an apparently bizarre claim as that Christ has been raised from the dead is intelligible only as a new twist on the possibility that we may be held accountable for our lives. But getting someone to appreciate this, the most that philosophy could achieve, would not bring him or her to accept it as true.

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TRUTH, ARTS EDUCATION AND THE ‘POSTMODERN CONDITION’

Graham McFee

Why does arts education have special problems?

Suppose a writer characterized art’s ‘postmodern condition’ in terms of ‘irony, parody, displacement, complexity, eclecticism...’ (Jenks 1986:15). Or, more bluntly, claimed that for art, ‘Truth has been replaced by the twins “Relativity” and “Legitimation”’ (Burgin 1986:49). What should we make of this? On the face of it, both comments imply that remarks (‘criticism’¹) about artworks cannot be true or false. Would this undermine the very possibility of arts education, by controverting any application of the idea of *truth* to art? Then, however education is explained, arts education cannot involve development of understanding, since truth and understanding are related. In part, the threats to arts education are familiar; and have been met: *subjectivism*—understood as the doctrine that ‘anything goes’, that there are no wrong ‘answers’ (McFee 1992a:21–38)—and *relativism*, understood as the possibility that two people in genuine disagreement might both be right (McFee 1992a:301–9).

What precisely is being urged by such thinkers: what *counts* as postmodernism here? If the answer turns on particular stylistic features of *art*, that will raise a set of issues for arts education different from those raised if the answer relates to more general features of our capacity to understand artworks. So there are two key issues: the (supposed) threat to arts education is a product either, first, of postmodern art providing a specific challenge to the *stability* of claims to artistic knowledge, by importing an eclecticism destructive of unity within artworks² or by undermining those artistic traditions constitutive of the ‘stability’ of the idea of the artistic.³ Or, second, of difficulties arising from the state of contemporary society (‘the postmodern condition’) or the interventions of theorists of postmodernism.

Part One addresses postmodern art: the account of arts education in Part

Two has learned from postmodernist concerns. For postmodernism's challenge is not *all* foolishness—although its relativist/subjectivist pretensions are! First, postmodernists rightly urge that a widely employed conception of knowledge is not sustainable—but this is nothing new: a tradition in British philosophy⁴ gave, in effect, the same answer to these concerns as an 'enlightened' (or rectified) postmodernism. Second, the postmodernist attack on *logocentrism* too has a point: namely, that a widespread conception of 'rationality' is mistaken—and this is crucial in defending the rationality of artistic judgement (§ 2.3).

1 The challenge of postmodern art

Might the 'postmodern condition'/postmodernism *within* the arts—*postmodern art*, if you like—undermine art's educational position? Even if the arts *had* an educative role at some point in their various histories, perhaps that time has passed. Perhaps the arts should no longer be regarded as uncontentiously educational (or, perhaps, exposure to the arts be no longer viewed in this way). Hence arts education might have gone wrong in three further ways: first, social changes (etc.) might be such that art has lost its educative power—a bleak option not considered; second, contemporary art might lack the educative power of art of previous periods; and, third, mere *exposure* to the arts might no longer be enough for educational purposes. As we shall see (on the third point), 'mere' exposure to the arts was never enough; but our view of the arts obscured this fact when people *theorized* about art education—in *practice*, it was always implicitly conceded.

1.1 Eclecticism and understanding

To sustain the second of these claims, one might either argue about examples ('What is educative about seeing such-and-such a work by Damien Hirst?') or try to identify some particular characteristic of contemporary art that renders it problematic. And, if the specific culprit were 'postmodern art', one might focus on its *eclecticism*. For perhaps the postmodern attitude here is 'a thoroughgoing mixing up of categories' (Crowther 1993:94).

Yet why should eclecticism make understanding difficult? For example, one can make sense of a 'unity' achieved through humour and pastiche. But understanding a pastiche essentially involves recognizing it as a pastiche, understood against the background of what is familiar—even if the familiar is being treated ironically. The only difference is the range of sources employed: just knowing about, say, dance of the past may not suffice. For Lea Andersen's dances, for example, a knowledge of films ('one of Astaire's and Rogers's most famous dances' (Mackrell 1992:130)) or of advertisements might be essential. But such knowledge is likely to be quite widespread: eclecticism does not necessarily preclude understanding.

Of course, what is required in order to understand postmodern artworks will be specific to that work (and that artform): it will proceed case-by-case (McFee 1978:35–58; § 2.3). The distinctiveness of postmodern art is then *within* a familiar framework, provided by our understanding other artworks (to the degree that we do), learned as we learned to understand other artworks.

Given that theoretical point, our practical concerns as theorists of arts education are both with what we can understand and with what concepts are mobilized in doing so (plus how we came by or learned them).

But this cannot be quite right. For modernist art is not well understood. Much of the public view of art of, say, the twentieth century (in fact, of art in general) is either philistine⁵ or out-dated, or both—still trying to come to terms with the innovations of the painting of Picasso from 1908 or the dance of Martha Graham of 1930. How can this audience hope to make sense of contemporary works that take Picasso and/or Graham as starting points for innovation? Or even works regarding Picasso or Graham as too far *in the past* to even be treated in this way?

Of course, there is no ready reply to such a difficulty. Our *hope* must be that a widening of interest in art, in combination with arts education (and possibly motivated by it), will overcome the problem. But, from a *theoretical* or *conceptual* point of view, we know what is needed even if we cannot see how it is to be achieved.

1.2 *Loss of tradition?*

Now we are approaching a second issue concerning the ‘stability’ of the idea of the artistic, in a ‘world’ of loss of tradition (Cavell 1969:203). But there is no general answer. As Stanley Cavell notes: ‘The trouble is that the genuine article [of art]...really does challenge the art of which it is the inheritor and voice’ (1969:219). Rather, we should recognize that, for modernism, ‘the relation between the present practice of an enterprise and the history of that enterprise...has become problematic’ (164).

On this characterization, the project of modernism can be contested only, first, by retreating to the past, turning to a time when the medium of art (in that artform) was uncontentious—generating archaic forms, not necessarily intelligible; or, second, by disputing the relevance of the project: that is, denying the very possibility of art. (This cannot be a live option for an arts educator.) Anything else is just a ‘polemical’ (Cavell 1969:221) way of ‘answering’ the project, by providing an implicit answer where doing such-and-such does indeed constitute a way to make art. Suppose, for example, we accept that ‘The post-modern choreographers of the 1960s and 1970s saw their work as part of a continuing debate about the nature and function of theatrical dance’ (Banes 1987:xxv). Then these choreographers were centrally engaged with the project of modernity, which has a developed

critical discourse. And understanding them is no more difficult (and no easier!) than coming to grasp and apply that critical discourse elsewhere. So both worries have been addressed/answered.

Of course, this reply is rooted in contrasting our response to artworks (where the idea of *critical discourse* makes sense) with our response to other objects in which we take an aesthetic interest (where it does not): that, as it were, there is a key difference *because* we are considering artworks.

1.3 *The (dis)unity of the aesthetic: the artistic/aesthetic distinction*

Should we think (as educators) of our interest in, or experience of, art as importantly different from our other aesthetic interests? Or is appreciating art simply a (non-cognitive) response like that involved with, say, beauty in nature? Treating these as importantly alike requires different arguments to justify arts education: non-art aesthetic interest could be found in appreciating the grace and line of radiators that heat the school, the melodious singing of birds in the school's playground, the design of the wallpaper, and so on. Then, concern with art would have no obvious place; neither its making, nor straightforwardly its appreciating. For why privilege one source of aesthetic pleasure over others?

Such a conclusion is very destructive of the claims of aesthetic education. To avoid it, the concern with art (both its making and its understanding) must be distinguished from the rest of aesthetic interest; and in a way that is educationally relevant, stressing the cognitive dimension of the arts (McFee 1996).

First, aesthetic appreciation of, say, natural beauty lacks ideas centrally embodied in art: for instance, the possibility of such-and-such being a 'bad' or an 'inappropriate' way to proceed has purchase for art, but no such purchase for the natural world. Then, in contrast to aesthetic appreciation of the (non-art) designed (for example, the Ferrari), art requires (at the least) that the object is *meant* (intended), although without (mistakenly) viewing intention as prior planning in the head of some particular artist. Meaning (or intending) of this sort has a history—what can be *meant* depends on the history of the form up to the point of one's so meaning (including revolting against such history) and on the 'narrative' (Carroll 1994:21–4) that might be appropriately given to explain what the work *meant*. This ensures what Jerrold Levinson (1996:151) calls an 'intentional connection to preceding art, however provisionally identified'.

As these cases suggest, art is valued differently from other aesthetic objects, such as natural beauty, the decorative, or designed objects (the Ferrari)—indeed, the *educational* distinctiveness of art depends on such a contrast. But, although *drawn* in 'real life', we have no good way to *mark* that distinction in words—the term 'aesthetic' is often used to capture interest

both in art and in the Ferrari; the word ‘art’ is used in other than the ‘fine art’ sense: for instance, a book is entitled *The Womanly Art of Breastfeeding* (Best 1992:174). So respecting this distinction is difficult—the same forms of words is typically used on both sides of the contrast.

The solution is to adopt a ‘technical’ distinction (Best 1992:165–6), reserving the words ‘art’, ‘artistic’ and the like for our concern with ‘fine art’, using the term ‘aesthetic’ and its relatives only for the other concerns—natural beauty, fountains, firework displays, and Ferraris. This distinction is artificial: we do and we must draw it—but we do not typically mark it using these words.

Of course, I have not here shown precisely how the distinction is to be drawn, nor that it can be sustained. But its clear importance is quite enough here. This distinction provides a basis for treating differently the claims of artistic interest and those of (merely) aesthetic interest: and, given the cognitive thrust of the distinction, artistic interest may be connected to the kinds of understanding central to education.

Intermezzo: ‘The other side of the coin’

The possibility of artistic knowledge is central: knowledge *manifest* in art, that is, rather than knowledge *of* art (or, worse, of art history). For only through artistic knowledge in this sense could art claim to be intrinsically educational in its own right (that is, not as history, etc.).

The educational status of the arts was, at one time, regularly assailed by contrasting arts with sciences. Judgements of the arts differ from judgements made in the natural sciences, such as physics or chemistry; but not in terms of their public character, their amenability to discussion, or their commitment to truth. They are no more *necessarily* subjective than many other judgements.

When education was explained via ‘forms of knowledge’ (Hirst 1974:30–53; 84–100), acknowledging the arts’ educational value required bringing them within that framework (Hirst 1974:87–92; Peters 1966:161–2)—arguing that artistic knowledge was actually propositional, despite appearances to the contrary (Hirst 1974:152–64); or that the artistic amounted to knowledge of ‘a different kind’ (Peters 1966:158–9). And even giving up a ‘forms of knowledge’ analysis, its adherents discussed arts education in suitably *cognitivist* terms.

Such a view recognizes that art is a human construction. But since, as Lyotard notes,⁶ we speak and judge as ‘the contingent historical selves we find ourselves to be’ (Rorty 1991:214), why should such (historically-rooted and contingent) judgements carry any weight for others, much less be compelling on them? Rather (Lyotard thinks) we should deny any single discourse the right to judge others on its terms: all discourses are equal! Faced with a search for some tribunal of Pure Reason, Lyotard asks, ‘What

language do the judges speak?’ (see Lyotard 1988:140; Rorty 1991:214). Any answer *seems* to import arbitrariness into the heart of human judgement—and hence of artistic judgement!

As traditionally viewed, science describes the world around us reductively, treating colours as optical effects, sensations and emotions as brain-states, etc. So are there *really* red postboxes, blue cars, toothaches, depressions and loves? These seem contingent features of our contemporary account of the world, with natural science offering a preferable alternative—a view of how the world *is*, abstracted from any particular historical or cultural position: the View from Nowhere (Nagel 1986).

Denying such reductionism, these like Lyotard’s commit some defenders of postmodernist thinking to attacks on the concept of truth. With no ‘metanarratives’, no overarching explanatory frameworks, the model of knowledge based on the (supposed) qualities of scientific knowledge is undermined by the postmodernist tendency to claim science as just another ‘narrative’—just one description among many, with no further claim to authority. For example, Hilary Putnam (1992) and Michael Luntley (1995) couch the challenge of postmodernism in terms central to science. For a general (and agreed) characteristic of science is the *inherent* changeability of the ‘truths’ of science and technology, in a world where theories can change.

Further, it might be thought that, ‘Only descriptions of the world can be true or false’ (Rorty 1989:5).⁷ Then, ‘it is difficult to think of the world as deciding between...’ alternative descriptions of events, once these are seen as *whole* ways of describing: ‘the jargon of Newton versus that of Aristotle’ (ibid.), for example. But then, ‘socialisation, and thus historical circumstance, goes all the way down...there is nothing “beneath” socialisation or prior to history which is definitive of the human’ (xiii). Thus, someone might think, ‘Truth cannot be out there...because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there’ (5). This seems to imply that truth is ‘free-floating’, tantamount to claiming that there is no truth.

So postmodern theories give a new piquancy by subjecting other areas to critiques familiar in respect of the arts. The very possibility of truth (and, importantly, of knowledge and understanding) seems threatened *generally*; one issue is now whether science can meet standards formerly ascribed to it (standards used in ‘arts bashing’), as part of a general attack on *ideas* of knowledge or understanding—or even of truth.

Since language has no foundation in the ‘facts’ of the world, it seems to follow that all truth claims are ultimately arbitrary, which undermines the notion of truth.⁸ There was not ‘one right answer’, but the conclusion that ‘anything goes’ simply does not follow (McFee 1992a:28). Such theorizing assumes (mistakenly) that what is not independently ‘legitimated’ is thereby guaranteed to be arbitrary. Yet, rejecting the search for ‘universal commensuration in a final vocabulary’ (Rorty 1979:368), nothing follows about issues of objectivity. Applied to arts education, rejection of the

requirement for ‘one right answer’ should militate against the assumption of ‘one right reading’ for artworks.

However, a worrying response to a recognition of differences between arts and sciences has been to embrace that difference. This most damaging error comes from the friends rather than the detractors of arts education. Beginning from a mistaken picture of scientific knowledge, it typically insists that the arts contribute in education ‘the other side of the coin’ to what is contributed by the sciences. So the educational place of the arts is justified by *contrasting* the ‘babble and rhapsody’ and the ‘profound acts of inner liberation and transcendence’ (Abbs 1994:112) of the arts with what the sciences have to offer—but since the sciences offer objective knowledge, it is easy for the arts to be relegated to offering something *not* objective and *not* (really) knowledge. Yet, as we have seen, any inference from the objectivity of science to the subjectivity of the arts is unsound.

2 ‘Arts education in an age of postmodernism’

Other views of objectivity might be offered. But this one shows why artistic judgements cannot be dismissed as subjective, and connects with the human capacity to make artistic judgements: it is, in an apt expression Putnam (1990:210) attributes to David Wiggins, ‘objective humanly speaking’. This is all the objectivity arts education requires.

In rooting objectivity in human capacities, this account might seem insufficient for (the possibility of) artistic knowledge: does it not conflate what is *true* (and hence knowable) with what humans *think*? Recognition that there is no external perspective is only worrying if our account of reason or truth would thereby be undermined: but why should that be? Those knowledgeable about an artform recognize ways of articulating *relevant* reasons here—that is, of clarifying relevance—allowing the identification of a certain claim as a *reason* in the context of the artform under discussion: as being an *artistic reason*, as we might say.

This account makes plain some of the attractions of postmodernism, although putting them more soberly: the idea of the ‘objective humanly speaking’ and the ‘fishes’-eye’ view of truth (McFee 1992a:307). Moreover, our judgements have an historical character (McFee 1992b). As Gordon Baker and Peter Hacker put it:

We cannot return the apples from the Tree of the Knowledge of History.... Though we know the Impressionists were outrageous revolutionaries in the theory and practice of painting, we can no longer *see* them as outrageous.

(Baker and Hacker 1984:4)

But this is how one sees the Impressionists as part of an on-going tradition,

where later events shape how *we* can make sense of the past. So this account both tolerates and explains diversity within a framework of rational constraint.

2.1 *Rationality and appreciation*

Notice the logical peculiarity of suggesting that ‘the postmodern condition’ requires new conceptualizations of (for example: Lyotard 1984:60) knowledge or science. For this suggests, not identification of a mistaken view previously held, but a new situation, a ‘condition’ where the whole idea of knowledge or of science can, and perhaps must, be understood differently. On this view, the old account *was* accurate, but no longer is.

But, if there were good arguments for (or against) some view of the nature of (say) science, surely they are arguments *now*. And if there are *now* counter-arguments, there were such arguments then—even if they wouldn’t easily be urged! For instance, if later changes in social understanding or scientific theory make us doubt the explanatory adequacy of some ‘metanarrative’, we are surely just seeing that it was *always* false (in its full generality) but that the area of its falsity wasn’t clear previously.

No doubt ‘our’ understanding of the world is problematic; perhaps our account of rationality *is* flawed. Yet these ‘require not only rational reconstruction but criticism. But criticism requires argument, not the abandonment of argument’ (Putnam 1992:130). The reply to attacks on ‘logocentrism’ (Norris 1987:28) is that, if we need to modify *our* account of rationality, we cannot do without some such account—since we will need criticism to motivate and to direct any modification.

Indeed, as Putnam urges:

the collapse of a certain picture of the world, and of conceptions of representation and truth that went with that picture of the world, is very far from being a collapse of the notions of representation and truth.

(Putnam 1992:124)

Finding a certain metaphysical picture *now* bankrupt is (typically) a way of noting that—for all its apparent successes—it was *always* bankrupt: that its ‘successes’ are indeed only apparent (and probably best explained in some other way).

A considered response from within arts education to the ‘challenge’ of postmodernism, then, would involve, first, arguments against subjectivism/relativism previously deployed in arts education—issues that have always arisen; second, emphasis on artistic appreciation as something *done*—as it were, *done* first, and *explained* afterwards (sketched briefly in section 2.2); third, bringing out how, in learning artistic appreciation, we learn to become *competent judges*. The third of these is our chief topic here.

A full reply should indicate that the ‘cognitive dimension’ of art imports reference to what humans characteristically find valuable, to ‘life-issues’ or ‘life-situations’ (Best 1992:162–3; McFee 1992a:173–90; McFee 1994:41–7); further, that the ability to make informed artistic judgements (central to arts education) involves not merely knowledge (one’s ‘cognitive stock’: Wollheim 1993:134) but also one’s ability to mobilize that cognitive stock (those concepts) in one’s experience of artworks: thus artistic appreciation has both cognitive and affective dimensions (McFee 1997a:34).

2.2 *Arts education and competent judges*

It might seem that judging, say, the Picasso a masterpiece can be analysed as, first, thinking/knowing *certain things* about it—such knowledge being ‘motivationally inert’ (Price 1988:87); then, second, valuing those things. In this way, critics might agree about the facts of the matter but differ in the evaluation of the artwork in question.

Such a view is mistaken, in ways relevant to artistic (aesthetic) education, first, by being misguided in general as an account of action; and, second, in underrating the degree to which artistic judgement is a kind of action.

This second point recognizes the fundamental role—for arts education—of training in artistic judgement, understood via two slogans:

Arts education is learning to see.
Arts education is learning to value.

(McFee 1997b)

For learning to *see* the work of art in question appropriately is learning what to see as *valuable* in it (or how to see it as valuable); and hence learning to value it—although I may rebel against what I have learned! We are here describing a person learning to be a competent judge in respect of matters artistic (sometimes in relation to some particular artform, sometimes more generally).

So someone failing to understand an artwork may be misperceiving that work, failing to mobilize appropriate concepts (or ‘categories’: Walton 1978) in his/her perception of the work. And that amounts to both a failure to understand the work appropriately and a failure to appreciate it appropriately. When I treat the music by Messiaen as though it were genuine birdsong, I misperceive it by applying the wrong category; but I also misvalue it—since the *normativity* that follows from recognizing it as art, rather than as *merely* aesthetic (section 1.3), would be inappropriate to birdsong. If, instead, I treat it as tonal music, I import a normativity all right—but my judgements will be inappropriate to the Messiaen (even if heart-felt!). And hence my valuing of it will also be inappropriate.

However, learning to *see* the artworks as valuable (and to see certain

features of the works as reasons for my judgements) is engaging with the narrative of art history in respect of that artform. For if my judgement of that artwork is to be explained or justified to others, reference must be made to the history and development of the artform in question—perhaps referring to a revolution against traditional ways of working in that form. For only in this way am I connecting my claims for *this* work to what is acknowledged as valuable from *other* works—and hence to artistic value!

This section emphasizes the role, in *understanding* art (and hence in *learning* to understand art), of competent judges: that the idea of art as meaning-bearing (or of art's having a 'cognitive dimension') depends on the possibility of creatures able to recognize such meaning. The possibility of competent judges, therefore, is a conceptual requirement for any artistic judgement at all, a precondition for what is 'objective humanly speaking'. Such competent judges will, at least typically, be those whom informed humans *regard* as competent: the role involves being an informed and sensitive spectator of art (typically, in a certain artform), possessing appropriate cognitive stock, and able to mobilize that stock in one's experience of artwork.

The account of artistic knowledge and of the place of competent judges in arts understanding (and hence arts education) given here exploits the insights *behind* postmodernism to clarify the nature of arts education, without accepting the excesses of some theorists of postmodernism: in particular, there is no real concession to subjectivism or relativism, no weakening of the commitment to the ideal of *truth*.

2.3 *The rationality of artistic understanding*

What model for coming to understand artworks has been developing here? This view (Ground 1989:93) recognizes that we do and must bring to such appreciation a large amount of knowledge, a substantial cognitive stock. Further, since that knowledge draws on the narratives of art history in the relevant artforms, it includes knowledge of other artworks (and perhaps other works by the artist under consideration): we are familiar with the appropriate *category of art*. The appreciation then takes the form of perceiving the work (looking at the painting, hearing the music, etc.) in the light of such understanding: it is perceptual rather than inferential, a species of noticing (McFee 1992a:138–47)—given suitable conditions and knowledge, people have the capacity for such understanding of art because they have the capacity to perceive artworks. As Richard Wollheim (1993:142) puts it, 'perception of the arts *is*...the process of understanding the work of art'. But, of course, this is merely a precondition for such understanding, since neither the sensitivity nor the informed-ness required is guaranteed. So the view is perceptualist in the quite strong sense *both* that what is required for artistic appreciation is a human power or capacity—although this is only a

prerequisite for artistic appreciation—and that there is nothing more to understanding here than perception, once the idea of perceiving is understood with appropriate richness.

Of course, art appreciation must operate through ‘perceptual engagement’ (seeing, hearing) with the work(s): your judgement of the work must relate to what you see in it, not to what you have been told is there. Still, such engagement may usefully be supplemented by discussion, drawing parallels, etc.: so, although appreciation is centrally perceptual, the spectator’s perceptual judgements (and his/her taste) can be ‘influenced’—just as well for arts educators! This is one way in which we should regard appreciation as rational.

Given my concepts and my ability to mobilize those concepts in my experience of art (as both my concepts and my powers are at *that* instant), I not only *see* a particular artwork in that certain way, but *judge* it that way (or *appreciate* it that way).

Certainly my appreciation of an artwork can change: I can regard a work differently, or an ‘insight’ of yesterday can seem insubstantial or misconceived today, and so on. But here I am mobilizing different concepts in my appreciation of that work—and this would be explicable to some degree. For example, it might be ‘explained’ either by my acquiring new concepts or by my becoming able to mobilize different concepts in my experience of the work. And, of course, the first of these might involve my bringing to bear concepts not previously brought to bear—perhaps because of, say, the re-hanging of a familiar picture or because of other things I’d seen or heard: other narratives I’d found relevant.

Moreover, our coming to understand artworks (to the degree that one can) must be ‘one step at a time’; hence some steps may prove impossible for a particular person. If I cannot see that a particular artwork has a certain property, despite your best efforts, there is nothing more you can do that will guarantee my coming either to see the work as you suggest or to value the work in that way. (In this way, the situation resembles that of the person who cannot see the ‘old woman’ aspect of the multiple-figure: you can point out its characteristics in a variety of ways, but ultimately I must see it for myself.)

Since it is ‘one step at a time’, there may be some steps I cannot take: that is, some concepts I either cannot acquire or cannot mobilize in my experience of this work of art (perhaps of art generally). For me, that artwork will be a closed book (again, like the multiple figure). And this in turn might be explained: for instance, by reference to other knowledge or other valuing of mine. For example, I am an admirer of the minimal (say, Rothko) and have no time for the sentimental (say, Holman Hunt). Now, we might expect me to find the transition from my understanding of the dances of Martha Graham to those of Merce Cunningham to be an easy one to make. And we might explain its facility in terms of my avowed admiration for the minimal,

viewing Merce as *more* minimal than Martha. (And a converse explanation for my difficulties in coming to grips with sentimental choreographers.)

Equally, faced with a spectator/student who has reached his 'last step', the arts educator will employ two basic strategies—of pointing to features of *this* work that (at present) the spectator/student does not see in the appropriate way, and of offering theoretical 'chat' to *explain* seeing the work in that way, with the discourse drawing on what the spectator/student *does* view appropriately. Either of these strategies may be augmented by looking at other works too: for at the centre of both strategies is the suggestion that *this* be seen in a way one already sees *that*. It is a case-by-case procedure in precisely this sense (McFee 1978:9–33).

Recall that the postmodernist critic claimed that the model of a purely deductive rationality was unsustainable. Without arguing this matter in detail, the aim has been to concede that point; but to insist, by contrast, that there is a perfectly good model of rationality that *does* apply here—where *here* is, especially, the domain of arts education and artistic judgement. And that model is the case-by-case one.

Our strategy here (in respect of rationality) parallels that in respect of truth/knowledge claims: the theorist of postmodernism was right to urge that a certain typical, traditional or dominant model is unworkable. What does *not* follow, of course, was that rationality lacks 'bite' here. And our explanatory tool has been the rationality of criticism, combined with our insights into the knowledge-base implicit in the practice both of criticism and of the teaching of artistic judgement.

Conclusion

Suppose that the positive positions above (Part Two) are adopted: suppose, further, that the response to postmodern art (Part One) is of the right order—where does that leave arts teachers? In particular, have the insights into knowledge in general, practical knowledge and rationality clarified the position of the teacher? If such a clarification has taken place, our confrontation with postmodern theorizing is justified.

First, I have shown how objections to the very idea of arts education might be met, stressing the possibility of artistic knowledge. And that should imply that a more generous account of *knowledge* is required. If today we see knowledge in general as more than (or other than) propositional knowledge—at least, for educational purposes—that is tantamount to treating other areas as we were once inclined to treat the aesthetic.

How plausible is it to deny that such practical knowledge as teachers employ *is* knowledge, once simplistic views of knowledge are put aside? Yet, if it *is* knowledge, then (to repeat) knowledge is not as is sometimes thought.

Of course, its value could be denied; but surely not by anyone (outside Her Majesty's Government) with a commitment to teachers: successive

Governments in the UK have seemed convinced that what cannot be stated, first, cannot be knowledge (*prepositional* knowledge is prioritized), and, second, cannot form the basis for assessment—that is, there is no place for ‘looking and seeing’ by informed observers. Hence *artistic knowledge* would be impossible. A further objection would be to the term ‘informed’: there are no ‘experts’ here, no ‘safe hands’.⁹ For if there were experts (and especially if they were teachers), HMG might have to consult them on educational policy.

No doubt the scientific credentials of education seem doubtful (Standish 1995:272). But this reflects on the equation of knowledge with that provided by science. We need a revised account, *not* taking scientific knowledge as our central case, if we are to do justice to the full range of knowledge.

Second, we have seen how arts teachers are typically custodians of artistic knowledge; they are the ‘competent judges’ in matters artistic whose existence is guaranteed by the very possibility of artistic meaning, or of the arts having a cognitive dimension. And we have recognized the centrality of that dimension to any justification of the arts in education, a fact having crucial impact in respect of accountability (and assessment) in arts education. For it means, of course, that teachers are indeed ‘experts’ here, with the kind of ‘knowledge-in-action’ which cannot be readily written down (by them or anyone else) but which they employ in practice: they are precisely the kind of experts whose possibility or existence HMG (in its previous incarnation at least) was at pains to deny. And since this position developed from our giving postmodernists their due, it might well be a picture of arts education in an age of postmodernism.

This view has three (related) major consequences: first, it creates an essential role for arts teachers in assessment—although this is news only to some theorists, since arts teachers themselves have both always known it and always practised it (at least when out of the spotlight of, say, the more idiotic demands of the National Curriculum in England and Wales). Second, it provides an account of the *objectivity* of the judgements of such teachers (at least in principle) sufficient to sustain the requirements of accountability in arts education. In doing so, and third, it highlights the sense in which arts teachers are the most important resource of arts education. This seems to me a very suitable outcome of this investigation, even if an unsurprising one.

Notes

- 1 By ‘criticism’, I intend the whole variety of remarks made about artworks, since the English language has no single word, applicable across all the arts, which applies to ‘the process of coming to understand a particular work of art’ (Wollheim 1980:185).
- 2 For postmodernism is treated as a (kind of) *style*, see Luntley (1995:13); Jenks (1986:38).

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- 3 The idea of a ‘grand narrative’ or a ‘metanarrative’ (Lyotard 1984:xxiii) *vis-à-vis* in the arts is deeply implausible. For example, Gombrich (1960) asked the question: ‘why has representational art a history?’ Or, as Wollheim (1973:261) puts it: ‘Why did Duccio and Rubens, Van Eyck and Monet, Uccello and Watteau, all of whom...were interested in depicting the visible world, depict it in such different, such bewilderingly different, ways?’—as though all representational painting answered *one* project!
- 4 For example, Austin (1970:203) noted that: ‘there is no necessity whatsoever that the various models...should all fit together neatly as parts into one single, total model or scheme’. So a general theory cannot be assumed: hence ‘incredulity’ about one offered us by some theorist would be warranted. [NB this is Austin (1970) and not necessarily Austin (1962).]
- 5 For example, a politician from Mrs Thatcher’s government, discussing photographs of ‘topless’ women on Page Three of a British national newspaper, the *Sun*: ‘made a widely reported observation to the effect that middle-class people could see spicier pictures of naked women on art gallery walls, and he really could not see that there was any difference between such things and the *Sun* Page Three girl’ (Fuller 1988:211–12). Those who cannot see any significant difference between artworks and pinups are denying the idea of artistic value.
- 6 Why choose Lyotard as a theorist when, say, Baudrillard’s ideas would be more fruitful? Lyotard’s position is, first, a *strong* one here, worthy of contesting; second, *widely-used* (and thus representative?); third, supported by (candidate) *arguments* and examples.
Lyotard seems entranced by the very variety of language-games. But Wittgenstein’s idea of a language-game (which Lyotard [1984:9] claims as methodologically central) cannot support Lyotard’s use of it: language-games are not game-like in the sense of being *non-serious* (of being part of ‘agonistics’: Lyotard 1984:10). Contrast Baker and Hacker 1980:86–98.
- 7 Travis (1996), and others, would deny that sentences are truth-bearers.
- 8 Contrast Derrida (1976:158):

The writer writes in a language and in a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely. He uses them only by letting himself...be governed by the system.... Without this recognition...critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything.

How does the Derrida of this quotation relate to his ‘playful’ refusal to discuss with Searle? (cf. Norris 1987:177–86).

- 9 Contrast D.Lawson (1981:111): ‘Throughout the 1940s and 1950s it could comfortably be assumed that not only was education “a good thing” but that it was in safe hands.’

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6

FICTIONAL TRUTH

Lynne McFall

We tell ourselves stories in order to live.... We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images...

(Didion 1979:11)

But we are not only storytelling animals, as Alasdair MacIntyre writes in *After Virtue*, we are storytellers whose stories aspire to truth (1981:201). My aim in this essay is to consider what kind of truth fiction is capable of.

1 The truths of fiction

In a review of John McGahern's *Collected Stories*, Josephine Humphreys says, 'One way to approach a story is to think of it as the writer's response to the most important question he can ask' (1993:1). Fiction—some fiction at least—is concerned with *important truths*, and importance is a normative notion. Thus in exploring the sense in which fiction can be true, we may learn something as well about evaluative truths.

One might suppose, as many philosophers and writers have, that importance or significance—epistemic worth—turns on universality or at least generality. But consider Nabokov's advice to the reader:

Fondle details. There is nothing wrong about the moonshine of generalization after the sunny trifles of the book have been lovingly collected. If one begins with a ready-made generalization, one begins at the wrong end and travels away from the book before one has started to understand it.

(Nabokov 1980:1)

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What this passage suggests is that a writer of fiction approaches concepts, abstractions, generalizations through their particular embodiments—showing, not telling; dramatic narrative, not abstract propositions.

Let's look at some examples to illustrate these claims.

In *Caligula* Camus wrote: 'Men die and they are not happy' (Camus 1958:8). Beckett has Estragon say in *Waiting for Godot*: 'I've puked my puke of a life away here...Here! In the Cackon country!' (1954:40). The first claim is universally true, but in the abstract version the heart of it is missing. 'I've puked my puke of a life away here' makes a similar 'claim' but it isn't dead on arrival.

Compare these two sentiments:

For love we would do anything.

For love I would split open your skull and put a candle in behind the eyes.

(Creeley 1982:140)

The first lies flat upon the page, all the emotion sucked out of it. It may as well be a Hallmark card. The second is vivid, singular.

Now consider a third example, a sonnet by Edna St Vincent Millay:

Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink
Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain;
Nor yet a floating spar to men that sink
And rise and sink and rise and sink again;
Love can not fill the thickened lung with breath,
Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;
Yet many a man is making friends with death
Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.
It well may be that in a difficult hour,
Pinned down by pain and moaning for release,
Or nagged by want past resolution's power,
I might be driven to sell your love for peace,
Or trade the memory of this night for food.
It well may be. I do not think I would.

(St Vincent Millay 1988:99)

What does the third example add to the first and second? The first is a general truth, abstract in form. The second is a personal truth, emotionally expressive but apparently limited to the beloved. The third is what we might call *lived truth*: there's a story behind it and a particular man, but it aims to tell us something generally true about love.

I think we have an intuitive sense of what constitutes 'lived truth'; in what follows I will try to clarify it, give it more than a name.

Fiction is often true in the sense that what is recounted actually happened in ‘real life’. Many novels are essentially autobiography. But I don’t think this is an interesting sense in which fiction may be true, and the reason can be brought out by considering a review of Kathryn Harrison’s first novel, *Thicker Than Water*, a review by Scott Spencer, himself a novelist who thus should know better. Spencer claims that

Ms. Harrison’s skill, tempting us to believe every word she has written, has slightly undermined her accomplishment. She has produced a beautifully written, unsparingly honest novel, but are we witnessing the beginnings of a brilliant career or a bleeding soul’s attempt to bind itself in a tourniquet of words?

(Spencer 1991:13–14)

An outraged reader wrote in a letter to the editor: ‘Allow me to clarify things for your reviewer. Sexual abuse does not produce a novel. Sexual abuse produces trauma. Novelists produce novels’ (Janda 1991:46).

I think the substance of this cryptic defence is that whether the novel is autobiographical or not (in light of Harrison’s recent memoir, *The Kiss*, it clearly is), its events have been selected and described, arranged on the page, precisely ordered for our understanding, their significance highlighted or conveyed, and no mere chronicle of abuse could approach this achievement.

But I think there’s a suppressed thesis beneath the reviewer’s complaint: Fiction that deserves the name is invented or created. On this view, fiction is *contrasted* to truth, and it seems to mean an early death for the claim that there is truth-telling in fiction, by the following reasoning:

- 1 Fiction is invented or created.
- 2 Truths are discovered.
- 3 Therefore fiction cannot give us truths.

If we grant the reviewer’s complaint and assume that fiction that deserves the name must be invented or created, and if we assume that some fiction—the fiction with which I am concerned—yields important truths, leaving the notion of importance unexplained, then it must turn out that important truths can be at least partly invented or created.¹ One of my aims is to suggest how this is possible.

2 Truth as a possible order

In ‘Notes On Failure’, Joyce Carol Oates writes, ‘One is born not to suffer but to negotiate with suffering, to choose or invent forms to accommodate it’ (1985:116). One such form is narration.

This seems to me one of the legitimate uses of fiction: giving a narrative

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structure to the inhospitable events in our lives. If we cannot change the past, at least we can try to make sense of it. But what relation does this motive of ‘making sense’, taking narrative control of fate, bear to truth?

In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Iris Murdoch suggests that the relation between narrative structure and truth is inverse. ‘Almost anything that consoles us is a fake’, and narrative structure consoles us (1971:59).

Martha Nussbaum makes a related claim. Admittedly philosophy simplifies on the way to truth, she says, but stories impose their own simplifications. They demand that something happen, that there be a plot with a beginning and a middle and an end. ‘They demand singleness where in life there is multiplicity, statement where there is indeterminacy, description where there are indescribable, undepictable things...art, especially narrative art, forces life to assume a shape rather than letting it be in its formlessness...’ (1990:329–30, but see also 29).

Is it true that any form laid over experience is a fake consolation, that art *must* simplify? Would experience itself be possible without form? In *After Virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that human actions in general are ‘enacted narratives’, that intelligible action requires being put in narrative form (1981:194), and that intelligible action is a more fundamental notion than action itself. Actions are events in a *possible* narrative. On this view, it is literal truth that requires a story before it can even be specified.

But clearly some narrative forms are more realistic or more fraudulent than others. Television sitcoms, for example, where major life problems are solved in half an hour, and even much of so-called serious fiction, can be accused of oversimplification. Joseph Epstein levels this charge at John Irving:

The *Hotel New Hampshire* is pro-family and anti-rape. If these views do not simply take your breath away, let me go on to say that in all of John Irving’s novels, discerning good from evil is never a problem.... As the narrator...puts it: ‘The way the world worked was not cause for some sort of blanket cynicism or sophomoric despair; according to my father and Iowa Bob, the way the world worked—which was badly—was just a strong incentive to live purposefully, and to be determined about living well.’ Now here is advice your local young law professor and a happy few million others can live with comfortably.

(Epstein 1985:135)

But not all narrative structures are cheap forms of consolation or distorting simplifications; not all require a beginning, a middle, and an end in any conventional sense; not all bend the formlessness of life to fictional form where this implies falsification. In *The White Album*, for example, Joan Didion shows that the form itself can argue for the formlessness of life. She speaks of a time when she began to ‘doubt the premises of all the stories she

had ever told herself (1979:11). The story is then told in flash cuts, disjointed scenes from the 1960s, with weird juxtapositions, events that actually happened but that are surrealistic and absurd. The essay concludes:

I have known, since then, very little about the movements of the people who seemed to me emblematic of those years. I know of course that Eldridge Cleaver went to Algeria and came home an entrepreneur. I know that Jim Morrison died in Paris. I know that Linda Kasabian fled in search of the pastoral to New Hampshire.... I also know that in 1975 Paul Ferguson, while serving a life sentence for the murder of Ramon Novarrao, won first prize in a PEN fiction contest and announced plans to 'continue my writing'. Writing had helped him, he said, to 'reflect on experience and see what it means'. Quite often I reflect on the big house in Hollywood, on 'Midnight Confessions' and on Ramon Novarro and on the fact that Roman Polanski and I are godparents to the same child, but writing has not yet helped me to see what it means.

(Didion 1979:49)

In my first novel, *The One True Story of the World*, I tried a similar device of formal structure—the three parts of the novel are apparently unconnected and told in different voices. The point is made explicitly for those with a taste for the obvious: This is the only plot. All is lost. Begin again' (1990:144).

I now think that the denial of meaning and relation is itself a form of oversimplification and cheap consolation. The newly-reformed absolutist often turns sceptic. If we can't have absolute truth, let's have renunciation at least.

In my second novel, *Dancer with Bruised Knees*, the structure is more complex and, I think, does greater justice to the truth. There are three narrative time-frames: a lifetime (which is implied by the use of photographs from the narrator's childhood), the past year, a day.

The narrator, Sarah Blight, is a one-eyed photographer, and she is telling the story on the last day of the year in which certain disturbing events took place that have caused her to 'doubt everything she had believed and had built [her] life on' (1). The bare events themselves are given first in summary form in the prologue, which is meant to suggest how little we know about what happened when we have an abstract summary of events. The more complex narrative of the year then occurs in chapters alternating with brief chapters which reintroduce Sarah's brother Morgan through childhood memories and pictures. The thematic content of these brief chapters is almost always the same: the brother's terroristic acts against the narrator. In Part Two of the novel, the brief chapters are connected to one another in an

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ongoing narrative, while in Part One they are not. This is meant to convey that an order of explanation is being formed, a ‘movie’, not simply snapshots of a bastard brother.

The formal structure of alternating chapters—straight narrative alternating with memories and pictures from the past—is meant to suggest alternative answers to some question the novel raises, answers having differing scopes: a lifetime, a year, and the reassessment occurring on this last day of the year when she is trying to make sense of it by arranging the photographs in a certain order. The apparent question is whether the brother killed his ex-wife; the real question is whether we have free will, whether, in particular, Sarah’s last act in the novel is chosen.

A philosopher at heart, Sarah Blight is unable to resist an abstract statement of what she has learned in this year of her undoing:

Is what I have done forgivable? Or Morgan? I’m still not certain he did it. But what is knowledge except the best story we can tell, with the few facts we have, what we are unwilling to give up? And even if he didn’t do it, he could have. It would have been an act he was proud of, would have laughed over....

I glance again at the video on the end table and imagine the last time I saw him, what it would look like on film, the cloud of dust at the end of the road, the bulldozer moving toward us, beloved.

My brother of course would not look at it this way. He’d begin with Arlene. If only we could fix the first betrayal. If only we knew how to shoot it, how to cut the frame.

(1994:209)

What both the content and the formal structure of the novel suggest is that there are many plausible narratives of ‘what happened’, depending on how we shoot it, how we cut the frame. Loyalty and betrayal are creatures of the imagination as well as of brute fact. Both parties to a loss may rightfully consider themselves betrayed, depending on the ‘relevant’ time-frame (a lifetime, a year), what precedes, what follows. This is Sarah’s best story, but she recognizes that others may be equally compelling.

Instead of abdicating the search for truth in the face of a multiplicity of equally compelling but mutually inconsistent narratives, we might instead define truth in terms of it, as Hilary Putnam does.

If I read Celine’s *Journey to the End of the Night* I do not learn that love does not exist, that all human beings are hateful and hating.... What I learn is to see the world as it looks to someone who is sure that hypothesis is correct. I see what plausibility that hypothesis has, what it would be like if it *were* true.... Being

aware of a new interpretation of the facts, however repellent, of a construction that can—I now see—be put upon the facts, however perversely—is a kind of knowledge. It is knowledge of a possibility. It is *conceptual* knowledge.

(Putnam 1979:89–90)

One might object that all we learn from fiction is what it's like to look at the world from an alien point of view. Fiction gives us this kind of knowledge, but it is knowledge of subjective experience and is related to reality only in that limited sense. This seems to me a dismissal of an important use of fiction. It helps us to vividly imagine what it's like to be someone else, someone whose values and beliefs are foreign to us. Such knowledge is morally important as an extension of experience, but it is also crucial to the moral task that is arguably prerequisite to all others: acknowledging the equal reality of other human beings, *seeing* other people in the nontrivial sense.

But admittedly this is not the only or even most important truth to which fiction aspires. In telling and reading stories we want not only to understand subjective experience but to do justice to reality, to 'get it right'. Can fiction accomplish this task? If so, how?

3 Exemplary stories

In 'Modern Moral Philosophy' Elizabeth Anscombe argues that the notions of moral obligation and duty, of the moral sense of 'ought' 'ought to be' jettisoned if that is psychologically possible; because they are survivals or derivatives of survivals, from an earlier conception of ethics which no longer generally survives, and are only harmful without it' (1958:26).

Now here is the complete text of Kafka's 'Couriers':

They were offered the choice between becoming kings or the couriers of kings. The way children would, they all wanted to be couriers. Therefore there are only couriers who hurry about the world, shouting to each other—since there are no kings—messages that have become meaningless. They would like to put an end to this miserable life of theirs but they dare not because of their oaths of service.

(Kafka 1946:486)

Kafka has made 'essentially the same point' as Anscombe, not through argument but by means of an exemplary story. Kafka's parable instantiates Anscombe's thesis: it provides a narrative context which determines an easily interpretable, metaphorical instance of the claim. What Kafka says of the couriers is true of those philosophers who continue to use words like 'ought' as if they had a divine legislator to back them up. The moral is obvious: The couriers are us.

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That metaphors require interpretation is no argument against them: so do literal claims. Every linguistic symbol requires interpretation. It is often said that metaphors are vague. But they admit of as much precision as literal statements do. As Catherine Elgin claims, ““smoking gun” specifies a standard at least as precise as “beyond reasonable doubt”” (1996). That stories are more complex than smoking guns is no decisive objection to them as vehicles for truth. Where the truth is complex, simplicity is not a virtue.

How do exemplary stories function?

Susan Suleiman provides a promising model for exemplary narratives in discussing one genre in particular: the *roman à thèse*. She claims that it is founded on an illocutionary verb, demonstrating:

A verbal demonstration (whose ‘weak’ form is teaching and whose ‘strong’ form is proving) can be defined by the perlocutionary effect it aims to produce: if I want to demonstrate (or teach, or prove) something to someone, I want to convince or persuade him or her of the validity of my proposition. And I can even go further: if my proposition is of a certain kind (religious or moral, for example), I can try to persuade my listeners to modify their actions accordingly. In that case, my demonstration is the prelude to another illocutionary act—exhorting or enjoining, which can be defined in perlocutionary terms as the attempt to make someone act in a certain way for his own good.
(Suleiman 1983:26)

How can a story become the bearer of an unambiguous meaning? By means of the *exemplum*, which in classical rhetoric designated persuasion by induction, or argument by analogy (in contrast to the *enthymeme*, which designated persuasion by deduction).

There is both a sender of the story and a receiver. The sender is the agent responsible for the story, its interpretation, and the injunction that results from it; the receiver is in the position of a ‘patient’, the one on whom the text ‘operates’ (Suleiman 1983:35).

To each level there corresponds a specific type of discourse: the narrative discourse tells a story; the interpretive discourse comments on the story in order to expose its meaning, which takes the form of a generalization; the pragmatic discourse derives from that meaning a rule of action, which takes the form of an imperative addressed to the receiver (reader or listener) of the text.

(Suleiman 1983:35)

The story imposes its own interpretation by the presence,

within the fictional world, of utterances that function as interpretations of the events that take place in that world. To put it more concretely: it is the characters themselves who interpret their story, thus rendering the narrator's interpretation superfluous. (Suleiman 1983:39)

One device by which this is achieved is redundancy or repetition. 'It would seem that the more a story 'speaks for itself, without interpretation by its teller, the more it must rely on redundancies to make its point' (1983:42).

Suleiman asks: How can a story—an 'invented' story, which cannot be verified—demonstrate anything pertaining to the real life of its audience? She claims that the function of the story

is to allow us to live vicariously—to provide us with experiences lived by others, but whose 'lessons' will affect us as if we had lived them ourselves. In the fable of the bassa and the merchant, only the shepherd learns his lesson by living his experience to its end; the merchant lives part of the experience, but does not allow it to run its course, having 'seen' what happened to the shepherd. As for the reader, he needn't even make the first step into error—the experience of the merchant is there to warn him against it. (Suleimann 1983:53)

This is how the lessons of fiction are taught. The fable or parable is the short and simple version of the *roman à thèse*.

According to Suleiman, for a novel to be a *roman à thèse*, at least three conditions must be met. There must be (1) the presence of an unambiguous, dualistic system of values; (2) the presence (which may be implied) of a rule of action addressed to the reader, which provides a model, grounded in authority and certainty, for the reader to follow (or avoid); and (3) the presence of a doctrinal intertext (1983:56).

Only the presence of an unambiguous, dualistic system of values allows the *exemption*—and the *roman à thèse*—to produce rules of action. It is only in a universe where the difference is always clear between truth and falsehood, or between right and wrong, that one can categorically affirm the necessity of doing one thing, or going one way, and not another.

(Suleimann 1983:56)

Suleiman suggests that fables without a rule of action are 'non exemplary'. 'The function of these fables is thus not at all to communicate values that might serve to construct an ethics (or even a pragmatics), but simply to depict, without illusions, the world as it goes' (1983:47).

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I think there are two plausible responses to this last claim.

First, we might say that such fables (or novels) *have* a rule of action: *Look at it this way*. As Joseph Conrad writes: ‘My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see*. That—and no more, and it is everything’ (quoted in Stevick 1967:401).

Alternatively, we might point to an argument given by Iris Murdoch and elaborated by Cora Diamond:

There is, [Iris Murdoch] argued, a peculiar difficulty in ethics (in contrast with other parts of philosophy) in specifying the phenomena to be studied. Our moral judgments themselves shape our conception of the field of study. We thus come up with a ‘narrow or partial’ selection of phenomena; that selection then suggests particular philosophical approaches, which in turn support the initial selection: ‘A circle is formed out of which it may be hard to break.’ The argument of the last paragraph [which claimed that *the* central question of ethics is *What should one do?*] illustrates these dangers: it reflects a particular evaluation of action, and accordingly represents what is morally significant in life in terms of actions and choices.... If we say that the sphere of the moral is not limited to action but includes thought and imagination, the moral significance of works of literature is not reducible to their connection, direct or indirect, with action, but includes also what kind of thought and imagination they express and what they invite...

(Diamond 1983:160–1)

The aim of seeing the world clearly is itself a moral task of the highest order.

Further, in morally complex situations, where certainty is impossible, the demand for a rule of action (other than ‘Look at it this way’) is infantile. One may agree with John Updike that ‘the absence of a swiftly expressible message is, often, *the* message’ (1983:2). Or listen to Chekhov:

‘Help me!’ [Katya] cries, sobbing. And catching me by the hand, she begins to kiss it. ‘Why, you’re my father, my only friend! You’re clever, you’re well educated, you’ve lived so long. You’ve been a teacher. Tell me—what am I to do?’

‘Honestly, Katya, I don’t know....’

(Chekhov 1964:103)

Helen Merrell Lynd provides further support for this claim in *Shame and the Search for Identity*:

Sir Laurence Olivier’s version of Hamlet illustrates the wiping

out of conflicts by oversimplification. The subtitle of the film, 'The tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind', implies that if Hamlet has only been a more decisive character all would have been well. Such a conception ignores the fact that the questions Hamlet struggled with were real questions: Was the ghost a devil or was it his father? Was Claudius, was Gertrude, guilty of murder? Of adultery? If guilty, was justice best served by a life for a life? What does violent action solve? What is life after death? If he killed Claudius at prayer would he be rewarding, not punishing, him? Must one renounce love as weakness or diversion if one is committed to a cause? Conflicts between past traditions and looking to the future, between different religious views of the world, different theories of spirits, different historical forms of reality, all entered in. Decisive action could not take the place of human and historical understanding.
(Lynd 1961:220)

The criteria of an exemplary story, then, will be constrained only by the quality of the truths it aims to tell. We will value complexity where simplicity is distortion; plurality or uncertainty where right and wrong are no longer clearcut; personal vision where doctrine is suspect, made for another time, 'when bishops' books resolved the world' (Stevens 1982:215).

4 Experiments in living

I now want to consider an important objection to the possibility of truth-telling in fiction.

Hilary Putnam claims that the purported truths of fiction do not constitute empirical knowledge.

No matter how profound the psychological insights of a novelist may seem to be, they cannot be called *knowledge* if they have not been tested. To say that the perceptive reader can just see that the psychological insights of a novelist are not just plausible, but that they have some kind of universal truth, is to return to the idea of knowledge by intuition about matters of empirical fact.

(Putnam 1979:89)

This seems to me false. Such claims as fiction supports are as well-tested as most claims based on everyday experience. They are experiments with flawed instruments, perhaps (ourselves), inadequate control groups and dubious background assumptions, but they are experiments nonetheless, and most of what we know of human thought and behaviour has come to us in this

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form. As E. Annie Proulx writes, fiction ‘challenges the reader to hold the page against what he or she knows of life’ (1997:xiii). As readers of both life and fiction, we ‘replicate’ the experiment in imagination, and then we take it to the world for further testing and refinement.

One virtue of this way of thinking is that it makes sense of the claim that significant truth in fiction is both partly discovered and partly created. There are constraints on the stories we tell (it must be a construction we believe *can* be put upon ‘the facts’), but there is room for invention. Just as there may be more than one line that can be drawn through the points on a graph of the data, there may be more than one way to tell the story truly. Still, some stories are false. Even if we cannot confidently say that *Henry V* exemplifies a positive and not a negative attitude towards war (Elgin 1993:19), we can confidently say that *Hamlet* is not about a boy and his dog.

Fiction gives us a new grid to lay over reality. It reconfigures a conceptual or emotional domain, and we may find the resultant picture is truer to the facts we all accept. It takes the part of the world that is underdetermined and determines it in a certain way, for our consideration. After reading Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence*, for example, one can no longer believe there is a simple conflict between decency and happiness; given a commitment to certain values, happiness may not be possible without decency, as John Kekes argues (1989:71–86). After encountering a work like *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* we can believe it possible to both love and hate the same person at the same time, as Catherine Elgin claims (1993:25).

Fiction transforms not only reality but the reader as well, the ‘instrument’ by which all our experiments in living must be performed. We come to see the world through more perceptive eyes, and may incorporate these enhanced abilities into our moral-emotional-intellectual equipment. Or we come to see well-known facts in a novel light.

Morrison’s *Beloved* draws out an implication we might otherwise overlook. Where such facts obtain, the self-protective strategy ‘Don’t love anything’ is rational. When one is powerless, love is an invitation to soul-shattering grief.... Morrison makes us realize that the tragedy of slavery consists not only in what was done to the slaves, but also in what slaves had to make of themselves in order to survive. Familiar facts supply the evidence, the novel shows what follows from them.

(Elgin n.d.: 13)

How fiction operates as an experiment in living requires further study. What I have tried to do here is to suggest that the knowledge claimed for fiction is not intuitive but empirical (which is also partly conceptual) in character, and that this claim is no more dubious than the claim that we ‘learn from experience’, which itself requires the work of imagination: hypotheses

framed, evidence gathered and interpreted, amidst complexity, ambiguity, the corruptions of circumstance.

5 The truths of moral philosophy

I suggested earlier that reflection on the nature of truth in fiction might throw light on evaluative truths. I now want to address this possibility explicitly.

In 'Moral Understandings: Alternative "Epistemology" for a Feminist Ethics', Margaret Walker contrasts two paradigms of moral philosophy: the universalist/impersonalist model, and the narrative/contextualist/particularist alternative, which she says has been 'gleaned from the works of a variety of female and feminist writers' (1989:22). The goal of the first model is systematization of moral understanding, conceived as (quoting Sidgwick) 'precise general knowledge of what ought to be', encoded in 'directive rules of conduct' which are 'clear and decisive' and 'in universal form' (1989:19). The rationale for a 'scientifically complete and systematically reflective form' in morals is that it helps us avoid 'uncertainties and discrepancies' in moral judgement and 'obvious sources of error' including 'complexity of circumstances, personal interests, and habitual sympathies'. The picture is of individuals standing before 'the bar of impersonal truth' (1989:20).

The alternative emphasizes the need to pay close attention to particular individuals, and such attention requires 'distinctive sorts of understanding', which Carol Gilligan has described as 'contextual and narrative' rather than 'formal and abstract' (quoted in Walker 1989:17).

Two elements are at work here: context and concreteness of individuals with specific 'history, identity, and affective-emotional constitution'...and the special context that is a relationship, with its history, identity, and affective definition. The two are linked by the notion of a narrative, of the location of human beings' feelings, psychological states, needs, and understandings as nodes of a story (or of the intersection of stories) that has already begun, and will continue beyond a given juncture of moral urgency....

If the others I need to understand really are actual others in a particular case at hand, and not repeatable instances or replaceable occupants of a general status, they will require of me an understanding of their/our story and its concrete detail. Without this I really cannot know how it is with others towards whom I will act, or what the meaning and consequence of any acts will be.

(Walker 1989:18)

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Walker claims, 'From an epistemological angle, one might gloss [the traditional] view as: adequacy of moral understanding increases as this understanding approaches systematic generality.' In the alternative view, 'adequacy of moral understanding decreases as its form approaches generality through abstraction' (1989:20). Which model is best? Or might both have a significant role to play in telling us how to live?

In the remainder of this essay I will try to show why it is so difficult to answer the question of which model is best. I will do this by raising another question: Can fiction be moral philosophy?

If we are to say anything about the relation between moral philosophy and literature we must, as Martha Nussbaum claims, 'have some rough story about what moral philosophy and the job of moral philosophy are' (1983:40). We must also have some rough idea of what counts as literature, given the 'postmodern' view that laundry lists, menus, and graffiti might qualify.

If we say philosophy (and thus moral philosophy) is and must be in the form of discursive argument, explicit conclusions proved with overt premises and deductively valid inferences, then it looks as if only the most didactic novel could be moral philosophy. But if we say that there are other kinds of argument, such as plausibility arguments, as persuasive in narrative form as in numbered premises and conclusions, then the answer will be different.

The problem is this: The question of which model is best cannot be answered without circularity because the judgements of importance necessary to *select* the phenomena of moral life required to define it are part of it as well, as Iris Murdoch and Cora Diamond suggest in the passage quoted in section 3.

Both 'literature' and 'moral philosophy' are normative terms; in the jargon of the philosophers, 'value-laden'. So it is little wonder that it is difficult to agree on whether literature can be moral philosophy, since all the doubts about the objectivity of value *within* moral philosophy and *within* literature are reiterated in the dispute about the relation *between* them. But there is a further complication. Depending on the story we tell about *morality*, either principles or stories or virtues (or something else) will tend to dominate or seem more fundamental.

But even if no straightforward moral description is possible in many cases, still there are *clear cases*, responses and beliefs we could not imagine giving up, which provide the foundation for reason-giving in moral philosophy. Even if we cannot confidently say that justice is always more important than loyalty or vice versa, we can confidently say that no moral theory that requires torturing small children for fun would be acceptable. This point is often overlooked. As Judith Lichtenberg argues in 'Moral Certainty', 'Our central moral responses are weightier than any considerations that would dispossess them', including any conviction of moral theory (1994:185).

William Gass told this story long ago:

Imagine I approach a stranger on the street and say to him, 'If you please, sir, I desire to perform an experiment with your aid.' The stranger is obliging, and I lead him away. In a dark place conveniently by, I strike his head with the broad of an ax and cart him home. I place him, buttered and trussed, in an ample electric oven. The thermostat reads 450 degrees F. Thereupon I go off to play poker with friends and forget all about the obliging stranger in the stove. When I return, I realize I have overbaked my specimen, and the experiment, alas, is ruined.

Something has been done wrong. Or something wrong has been done. Any ethic that does not...condemn my action is vicious... no more convincing refutation of any ethic could be given than by showing that it approved of my baking the obliging stranger.

(Gass 1972:225)

Even if there are no uniquely justified solutions to our moral dilemmas, we can still get it wrong. One way is by baking the obliging stranger.

Can virtue theory do better than the traditional view as a competitor to fiction as a vehicle for morally significant truth? I have some doubts, which I will briefly articulate.

From the fact, if it can be shown to be a fact, that a particular action or series of actions instantiates a virtue, it will not follow that one ought to do it or that this virtue rather than another should have primacy of place in one's character. Virtues compete not only with vices but with each other, and with the second-order virtue of personal integrity.² This is one of the morals of William Faulkner's story, 'Barn Burning', where family loyalty competes with justice, and personal integrity wins: Whether justice should rank higher than loyalty or vice versa cannot be determined without a context, or without reference to the values of the agent, including the agent's own ranking. Unless virtue theory can give us an 'objective' ranking of virtues, it will have no more authority than the rightly rejected 'ought', the ghost of the divine lawgiver.

We are couriers without a king. The desire for an objective ranking is the old dream of moral certainty. Where we already have certainty (in the form of clear cases), we don't need virtue theory; where we don't, virtue theory won't provide it.

6 Conclusion

I have argued that truth in fiction is lived truth as conveyed in exemplary stories, which are intense competitions for reality. Just as there may be more than one way through the maze, thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird, there may be more than one way to tell the story truly. But even in fiction,

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we can be mistaken, ‘tell it slant’, get it wrong. Moral truth, once we’re out of the realm of unmotivated torture, is also underdetermined, which is one reason we need stories: to reconfigure the possible.

By philosophical standards, I have not proved much. But if I’m right that reality is underdetermined in the way I have claimed, that ‘reality is an activity of the most august imagination’ (Stevens 1947:167), then this would not be the sort of claim one could prove. I could only tell a story that would make it more or less plausible.

I believe that the old dream of moral certainty, beyond our clearest cases or exemplary stories, the dream of universal principles and a decision procedure for ethics, has turned out to be a consoling fantasy, one shared by many philosophers but no less a fantasy for that. We are, from birth to death, inhabitants of the cave (to vary the metaphor, but not the moral). Although it may be true that both fiction and moral philosophy are forms of writing in the dark, some of the outlines of real objects are clear, and we are not alone in there. There is more than one way to tell the story of human life, but some stories are—by form or substance or oversimplification, by emotional distortion, bad faith or outright misrepresentation—falsehoods, lies, and we have reason (if not uniquely justified reason) to aim at the truth (or rather, truths) as both good fiction and moral philosophy do. In the competition for reality we are served by both: exemplary stories and principles, narrative and argument. In attempting to answer two fundamental questions of human life—how to look at it, how to live it—we need all the help we can get.

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Notes

- 1 Epistemology seems to be no better off than fiction when it comes to clarifying the notion of importance. Catherine Elgin writes:

Because of its narrow focus on the conditions for knowledge, contemporary epistemology cannot say what makes insights interesting or important, thus it cannot say what sort of knowledge is worth having and seeking.

Cognitive excellences and deficiencies are many. We value good questions, apt remarks, illuminating experiments, as well as potentially fruitful hypotheses, insightful studies, significant discoveries. We

disparage irrelevant or obvious statements, tortuous, tenuous, or tendentious arguments, unimaginative hypotheses, ad hoc explanations.

But obvious statements are more likely than intriguing ones to be true and justifiable.... So if what we want is to increase the number of justified truths we believe, our cognitive values are badly misplaced.

If, however, we seek quality rather than quantity, the aforementioned excellences are genuinely valuable. For they provide or promote the development of interesting and important insights.

(Elgin 1993:14)

- 2 For a defence of this claim, see my essay, 'Integrity', *Ethics* 98(1987):5–20.

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MORAL EDUCATION AND THE OBJECTIVITY OF VALUES

David Carr

Moral education and the modernist orthodoxy

Given a time-honoured educational concern with the promotion of what is humanly worthwhile, the current obsession with so-called ‘values education’ in the UK and elsewhere (cf. Jarrett 1991; Halstead and Taylor 1996; Best 1996; Haydon 1997) would seem to call for special comment. We might first note that while much of the recent spate of recent official documentation (NCC 1993; Ofsted 1994; SCAA 1995, 1996) seems, on the face of it, to be concerned with a range of values—spiritual, religious, aesthetic, economic, social and so on—the primary focus has undoubtedly been upon the *ethical* and *moral* aspects of personal formation. In turn, among the many reasons we might mention for this emphasis are a high level of popular and public concern about lawlessness and social breakdown (fanned by often sensational media coverage of recent appalling, if relatively aberrant, crimes of violence and mayhem), a degree of professional concern about (arguably) recent political preoccupation with the instrumental and economic more than the moral and intrinsic benefits of education, and a more philosophical-theoretical concern about the very possibility of a coherent basis for moral and civic education in the culturally pluralist contexts which, by and large, characterize most western liberal democratic polities.

Despite affording welcome opportunities for the airing of such issues, however, it may be doubted whether the plethora of recent popular, professional and official literature addressed to them, at least in the UK, has done much more than reflect widespread confusion about the nature of education in moral values—and it is this confusion I wish to explore in this chapter. Basically, I believe that the very possibility of moral education depends upon making sense of the idea of moral enquiry; that moral enquiry depends on making sense of moral knowledge; that moral knowledge is

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dependent upon the possibility of moral truth; and that this, in turn, requires a substantial account of the objectivity of moral values. I also think, however, that it is just such an account of moral objectivity which has been seriously compromised by the philosophies of modernity and postmodernity. From this point of view, perhaps the best point of departure for any re-examination of the possibility of objective moral enquiry is a brief exploration of the philosophical basis of what doubtless qualifies as the most influential modernist theory of moral education of recent times.

There can be few educationalists who have not heard the name of Lawrence Kohlberg or have been entirely untouched by his work (Kohlberg 1984); moreover, there can be little doubt that despite Kohlberg's intellectually broadminded efforts, in the course of a long and distinguished career, to unify diverse currents of philosophical and psychological moral thought in a single theory, his main aim was the construction of a liberal-democratic conception of moral cognition from basic elements of post-enlightenment moral thought. So, though one may have some sympathy with his numerous apologists, who protest that Kohlberg did seriously attempt to accommodate those affective, motivational and social features of morality he has often been accused of neglecting, it seems clear enough that his account is largely a mosaic of post-enlightenment ideas about moral *reason*. More precisely, Kohlberg's theory is at heart a blend of structuralism, pragmatism, prescriptivism, contractualism and critical theory upon which such notable modern philosophers and theorists as Piaget, Dewey, Rawls and Habermas are perhaps the most conspicuous influences.

But there are difficulties about Kohlberg's extreme intellectual eclecticism. First, it is not clear that Kohlberg can be entirely exonerated from any charge of having neglected the affective dimensions of morality (on the grounds that he later imported such considerations) since regarding feelings as basically irrelevant to moral deliberation is perhaps the most salient feature of that enlightenment rationalism from which his account takes its point of departure. What is perhaps rather less obvious, however, is the dubious consistency of the different strands of modernist rationalism out of which Kohlberg aspires to weave his theory. The intellectual ancestry of Kohlberg's theory is clear enough; it derives basically—via influences already noted—from the deontological ethics of Kant (1948). Arguably the best way, in turn, to understand Kant's ethics is via attention to the ideas of Kant's own chief moral-theoretical influence, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1973). Rousseau is, of course, best known to undergraduate students of education for his (to a degree) anti-social views of moral growth; he held that since traditional education for the most part involves the transmission of received social prejudices from one generation to the next, moral education ought to be largely a matter of the asocial cultivation of a disinterested conception of universal justice based on 'a universal justice emanating from reason alone' (1973:210).

Influenced both by Rousseau's view that conventional initiation into received social practices is a form of moral contagion and by Hume's view that values are subjective-psychological rather than objective-natural features of experience (Hume 1969), Kant undertook the construction of a highly technical account of practical moral reason that would show, contra Hume, that there can be moral objectivity despite the fact that moral judgements do not relate to sense experience after the fashion of empirical statements. Thus, in the light of the consideration that moral (categorical) imperatives have a kind of force or authority in human life which hypothetical imperatives do not, Kant aspires in the manner of Rousseau to route the idea of moral objectivity through that of rational universality; the basic idea is that moral (unlike other) prescriptions are logically such as to implicate anyone who accepts them as having any force at all into a commitment to their *universal* rather than particular application—one cannot consistently choose at whim where and when to be honest as one might choose where and when to eat sweets. So, though our sense of moral duty does not derive from sense experience (either 'inner' or 'outer') and is in essence a human rational construction, it nevertheless reflects the *necessary* logical form of any conceivable human moral experience and is not to that extent an *arbitrary* construct; Kant attempts to show (against Hume) that we can have reasons for moral decisions and that these, far from being mere expressions of self-interest or individual caprice, reflect extrapersonal ethical demands centred upon Rousseauian considerations of moral impartiality.

However, despite the unparalleled influence of Kant on modern moral thought, it is probably safe to say that no one today would cleave to unreconstructed Kantian universalism—and it is arguable that the history of developments from Kant mainly serves to show precisely how those ideas of objectivity and universality, which he conjoins, readily come apart. Indeed, simplifying somewhat, I believe that the two principal Kantian progeny of liberal ethics show that we can have either deontological universality or objectivity—but not both. The first of these, as represented by 'prescriptivist non-cognitivism', secures universality at the price of objectivity, since moral principles are little more than self-consistent rational commitments; their universality, but not their objectivity—since individual agents are free to universalize different prescriptions—is guaranteed. On the other hand, however, modern 'contractualism' secures a certain weak objectivity of consensus at the price of universality; to the extent that morality is at heart a matter of social agreement or contract, it may be objectively wrong in a given context to behave in a given way (as it would be irresponsible, for example, to drive on the right hand side of the road in the UK) but it may not be so in different social-consensual circumstances.

Thus, prescriptivist non-cognitivism and contractualism both reject the metaphysical basis of Kant's ethical absolutism and attempt to provide alternative, more empirically credible, foundations for moral deliberation;

the first grounds ethical life in the observation that morality is a sphere of authentic commitment or engagement, and the second in the idea that it is also a realm where notions of interpersonal respect and reciprocity come into play. However, the potential inconsistency of these different accounts of the foundations of moral reason should also be clear—since, to be sure, it is easy to see how my social contractual obligations may conflict with my principled commitments and vice versa. But, having seen that Kohlberg owes much to Kant, we may now ask where Kohlberg's cognitive psychology of moral development stands in relation to this contemporary bifurcation of Kantian deontology. At the outset, Kohlberg's theory appeared to be little more than a non-cognitivist constructivism of broadly prescriptivist credentials in which what is specifically held to be universal is the form rather than the content of moral judgement. However, in the face of persistent criticisms to the effect that his moral psychologism seriously sidelined the significant social and interpersonal aspects of morality, Kohlberg sought to supplement the basic theory with a moral sociology of the 'just community' (Kohlberg 1984)—essentially a contractualist distillation of diverse modern liberal and pragmatist sources. In short, Kohlberg's attempt to devise an account of moral reason focused upon the explicitly pragmatist goal of moral problem-solving combines two potentially inconsistent views of the foundations of moral judgement—with the result that it is well nigh impossible to see how any moral problems arising from conflict between personal commitment and social obligation might ever be satisfactorily resolved.

Worse yet, Kohlberg's account of moral cognition aspires to reconcile two liberal enlightenment accounts of the foundations of morality that are not just jointly inconsistent but separately implausible. On the one hand, then, although prescriptivism and related non-cognitivist ethics have had distinguished modern advocates (Hare 1952; Mackie 1977), the counter-arguments to such positions are also well known: for one thing, it seems difficult to discern a satisfactory account of moral inference on prescriptivist premises (Geach 1972); for another, since the deliberate universalization of harmful or even wicked conduct is certainly a prescriptivist possibility, the idea of principled or consistent commitment cannot suffice for morality. On the other hand, however, to whatever extent we may feel more attracted to the weak objectivism of contractualism than to the subjectivism of non-cognitivist ethics, contractualism is not very persuasive as a moral theory—and is not primarily defended as such by its leading modern liberal proponents (cf. Rawls 1993). On the contrary, the main locus of concern of modern contractualism is political theory and, by and large, the discourse of universal rights and responsibilities to which contract theorists are given aspires to impartial arbitration—for purposes of political order and stability more than moral illumination—between the diversity of conflicting moral perspectives which pattern the social reality of contemporary liberal

democracies; indeed, modern contractual liberalism deliberately aims to maintain a position of cautious agnosticism about moral truth.

Moreover, since all kinds of morally dubious and oppressive behaviour are and have been upheld by social agreement, it should be clear in general why notions of contract cannot be regarded as basic to morality and moral enquiry. The main mechanism by which modern contractualists seek to establish a basis of public order is, of course, that of democratic consensus and—though this aspires in accordance with fundamental liberal tenets to prohibit only conduct that coercively violates individual freedom—it is bound to go with the flow about what does or does not so offend. But the fact that society at large agrees that it is within an individual's rights to divorce or submit to abortion if she so wishes, clearly does not make such conduct morally *right*, and there will be many people in all societies who—whilst conceding the political freedom of others to engage in such conduct—will regard it as quite morally *wrong*. It is for this and other reasons that perhaps few modern liberals would go so far as to claim that ideas of contract and consensus are sufficient to ground moral theory and enquiry as such.

Communitarian and postmodern reactions

Still, to the extent that some latter-day liberal theorists do seem to have regarded the idea of contract or agreement as morally basic (Gauthier 1986)—and, to be sure, insofar as ideas to the effect that there is no more to morality than interpersonal agreement (beyond which conduct is entirely a matter of individual choice) have taken root in more popular thought—contractualism and prescriptivism are alike vulnerable to powerful ethical and social critiques which have, over the past thirty years or so, come to constitute something of a new moral-theoretical orthodoxy. Indeed, the view now widely shared by a motley alliance of communitarians, post-analytical social philosophers, virtue theorists, ethical realists and feminists is that the constructivist foundationalism of such variants of post-enlightenment deontology as contractualism and prescriptivism has seriously distorted our understanding of morality—precisely by virtue of its neo-Kantian prescinding of the formal from the substantive features of ethical life; in the terms of a now well worn expression, by attempting to base morality upon notions of universal impartiality and justice in total abstraction from the particularities of actual human moral engagement, enlightenment deontology has aspired to an impossible View from Nowhere (Nagel 1986) embodied in well nigh contentless principles.

Moreover, at the highly influential communitarian end of this school of thought, the key idea is that morality is better regarded as a matter of 'cultural inheritance' than of disinterested self-legislation; from this point of view, it is above all incoherent to suppose that moral priorities are formed by individual construction and a gross rationalist or foundationalist error to

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believe that there is any distinctive mode of deliberation in terms of which we might so proceed. Indeed, one radical consequence of this view amounts to a denial that there is any such thing as moral reason in the sense canvassed by Kohlberg and other liberal theorists. From this perspective, any human culture represents a particular ordering of evaluative priorities—religious, aesthetic, moral, political, economic and so on—which is unlikely to be exactly replicated elsewhere. Given that cultures are human, of course, it is only to be expected that they will face not entirely dissimilar moral, economic and political problems; but they will also be prone to different socially conditioned understandings of these—and it is a familiar feature of moral debate that appearances of general value agreement between cultures are apt to dissipate at the level of particular interpretation and application. On the communitarian conception, these diverse orderings of evaluative priorities offer different ‘horizons of significance’ (Taylor 1989) reflecting particular and distinct—if not actually incommensurable—moral perspectives; moreover, on such an assimilation of morality to culture, moral formation would appear to require nothing less than total immersion in that distinctive set of customs and practices which constitute an individual’s cultural heritage.

In effect, this widespread contemporary attempt to relocate a human moral experience construed as having been drastically decontextualized by enlightenment ethics has issued in a radical historicism about moral life—according to which it is fashionable to talk of ‘rival traditions’ (MacIntyre 1981, 1987a, 1992) of moral enquiry embodying their own internal and distinctive criteria of evaluation. And, though it is only fair to say that Alasdair MacIntyre, the philosopher most readily associated with modern talk of rival traditions, has said much in defence of the need to retain some notion of moral truth as at least a normative ideal of moral enquiry, it remains difficult to see how the assimilation of morality to cultural forms at the core of the rival traditions account can give much ground to any conception of moral values as culture transcendentally objective. In this connection, indeed, MacIntyre has argued explicitly that the culturally indexed character of any meaningful moral initiation precludes the identification of any impartial conception of moral education reflecting what he refers to as ‘a shared public morality of commonplace usage’ (MacIntyre 1991). So, whatever the nature of his precise views on moral truth, there can be no doubt that MacIntyre’s work, like that of other historicist critics of enlightenment ethics, has been a source of comfort and encouragement to postmodern apostles of moral and cultural relativism—in educational theory and beyond.

Now, however, our moral educational flight from the devil of decontextualized Kohlbergian moral abstraction seems to have led us to the deep blue sea of initiation into local, perhaps incommensurable, moral loyalties. But how plausible is any such general assimilation of moral

understanding to cultural practices? First, as we have noted, a culture is a particular ordering of evaluative priorities, only some of which are ethical; so though it may well be that all human cultures give high priority to values distinguishable from aesthetic, economic, religious, political or other considerations as ‘moral’—morality is at once both more and less than culture. Hence, to whatever extent we may regard some practical initiation into the virtues and forms of moral training typical of a form of life as a necessary moral educational starting point, it is clearly no contradiction in terms—as it would be on any wholesale relativization of morality to culture—to characterize some cultures as wicked, immoral or unjust. Further, just as it is possible to discover examples of culturally homogeneous contexts which are deeply divided on moral issues, so there does seem, on the face of it, to be substantial moral agreement between otherwise diverse cultures—even if they reason to like moral conclusions somewhat differently.

Still, on the assumption that moral values are plumbed into human culture in complex ways that resist articulation in terms of a single mode of cross-cultural moral deliberation, how might we hope to assess the moral worth of different ‘horizons of significance’? Indeed, we now seem liable to impalement on one or the other horns of a dilemma; if we are not to embrace a radical ethical particularism which relativizes morality to local cultures, are we not forced back to the idea of universal canons of moral reason to which anything worth calling a moral practice cannot but conform? Interestingly, the basic problem here is already addressed by Aristotle’s critique of Plato’s form of the good (Aristotle 1925). Plato was in fact the first philosopher to retreat from the sensible realm of moral experience to an intelligible domain of moral universals in the teeth of a problem about how our concepts can apply to the world when the features of experience they purport to identify and describe lack the precise boundaries to which our ideas aspire (Plato 1961). But Plato’s theory of ideas enshrines and reinforces a dualism that Aristotle rejects; for Aristotle, our concepts, far from populating a metaphysically separate realm of spiritual being, are biologically grounded capacities and powers that enable human agents to engage with the natural world of which they, too, are a part. Aristotle’s objection to Plato’s form of the good is therefore that it is far too rarified, too much of an artefact, to be of much practical help with the real-life problems with which our moral deliberations and responses are concerned.

The problem about values to which contemporary debates between liberals and communitarians are heir is also dualist—but not Platonically so; in fact, it is the modern scientific dualism of Descartes which ultimately bedevils contemporary discussions of moral life. It is Descartes’s consolidation of that early modern scientific rift between subject and object, observer and world (Descartes 1954), that drives the wedge between what John McDowell has called ‘the space of law’ and ‘the space of reasons’ (McDowell 1996). The general epistemological problems raised by

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Descartes's dualism for understanding how concepts of experience—construed as mental images of a world beyond the senses—might report reliably upon an order of 'bald naturalism' (McDowell 1996) are philosophically familiar; but under the powerful influence of Hume a doubt concerning the possibility of our objective knowledge of the sensible world, based on a general dualism of subject and object, becomes wholesale scepticism about the possibility of moral knowledge—based on a more specific dualism of facts and values (Hume 1969). In short, once a metaphysical gap is opened by early modern philosophers between the world and our knowledge of it, the way to regarding values as merely arbitrary human projections onto nature conceived as in itself valueless is clear. And whilst Kant, the arch-opponent of Humean scepticism, goes to great lengths to show the untenability of the crude empiricist story of a pre-conceptual experience (since 'intuitions without concepts are blind') his moral constructivist response to Hume's scepticism concerning value objectivity largely further entrenches the fact-value distinction (Kant 1948).

One very important influence on the 'postmodern' reaction to enlightenment moral absolutism of Kantians and others, moreover, has been pragmatist philosophy of science. Pragmatists from the outset inclined to a social evolutionary view of the emergence of scientific perspectives; they have ever been wont to maintain that rival scientific theories are products of particular historical circumstances which condition human observation in ways which make it virtually impossible to disentangle theory from observation, fact from value (Quine 1953; Kuhn 1962). This insight—the critique of the enlightenment theory/observation and fact/value distinctions via something like historicist assimilation of facts to theories or values—lies more than any other behind 'postmodern' philosophy, particularly latter-day social and moral theory. It is nowadays common to hear educational philosophers and theorists, rightly opposed to the enlightenment fiction of universal moral reason, arguing from the premise that there are no value- or theory-free facts or observations to the conclusion that moral values are merely culturally contingent social constructions—opposing the individualism that seems inseparable from liberal enlightenment conceptions of morality with a communitarianism that appears to make moral value little more than a matter of collusion in a given form of life.

The deep philosophical mistake here, however, is the old error of dualism. In truth, far from undermining modernist distinctions between observation and theory, fact and value, the postmodern assimilation of one to the other precisely concedes that Cartesian division of thought from world that lies at the root of enlightenment interpretations of these distinctions. What precisely follows from a pragmatist or postmodern blurring of distinctions between observation and theory, fact and value, is a new *projectivism* which simply makes it impossible to see what coherent sense might be made of any talk of facts, values, theories and observations whatsoever. But if it is in the interests

of (amongst other things) human survival that our theories about the world are in some perfectly ordinary sense *true*, how might we know them to be true unless there are observations or facts which our theories do or do not succeed in explaining? Indeed, how can there be theories, as distinct from fictions, if there are no theory-free observations—for, apart from such, any explanation of the nature of theory would be circular. Again, it is in the interests of flourishing that human values are appraisable in some equally straightforward sense as *good* or *bad*: that they should conduce, where possible, to the survival of human beings as socially co-operative animals in an often hostile environment. But what sense could we make of value talk at all if there were no facts of the matter upon which we might base that practical planning upon which the *realization* of our values depends?

Moral value beyond individual and community

In the event, it is more than likely that our ordinary pre-theoretical intuitions about the nature of theories, values, facts and observations are in good philosophical order: that pre-theoretical observations are what our theories seek to explain, and that facts (including observations and interests) are what our moral and other values are indeed based upon; we regard truth-telling as an important human value because, for the most part, false witness is humanly harmful in directly demonstrable ways. To what, then, could the often absurd contemporary conflation of theory and observation (and/or practice), facts and values, be attributed? It is but a reaction to the disordering of these notions by enlightenment philosophy—to Hume's false identification of the fact-value distinction with the difference between an order of 'bald naturalism' on the one hand and of mental projection on the other, to Kant's prescinding, in the light of this distinction, of moral judgement from (even inner) empirical content, and ultimately, of course, to Descartes's manichean separation of thought from world. What the postmodern critique seeks to recover is the insight of Kant's first *Critique* that there is no such thing as 'concept-free experience'; but this is *not* the same—and only a dualist separation of thought from world might persuade us that it is—as the ideas that there are no 'theory-free observations' or 'value-free facts'. It is the mistaken conflation of these distinctions that leads to the pernicious moral constructivism, idealism and relativism that so deeply infect postmodern thought.

Given that concepts are part of that natural apparatus that equips us for understanding, knowledge and mastery of our world, one can agree with pragmatists and others that they are, in a sense, relative to interests; but the fact that Inuit have more snow words and can make more judgements about snow than those from other cultures does not reduce facts to values or observations to theories, it merely shows that more (survival-related) facts or truths are available to Inuit. But doesn't the very fact that different cultural

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constituencies differ in their conceptualizations show that our current ways of mapping experience may be inadequate or mistaken? Of course; but we always knew this anyway and it has no implications at all for the relativity or otherwise of truth. On the contrary, it presupposes that truth is *not* relative in the required sense. Of more direct relevance to the issue of relativity would be pressure to endorse assignment by different communities of inconsistent predicates to the same object; but then there are familiar procedures—this is after all the grain of truth in empiricism—for resolving such disputes (in all but highly theoretical cases) in a way that readily gives the lie to wholesale epistemological relativism; from this viewpoint, it is both depressing *and* heartening that much contemporary scepticism about moral value should have been reinforced by an implausible (Cartesian) and un-Kantian scepticism concerning the possibility of our objective knowledge of the natural world. But once the Cartesian gulf between thought and world is bridged via the common-sense idea that our concepts directly identify *real* features of an external world—rather than projections on to something intrinsically unknowable by individual or collective subjectivities confined to the circle of their own ideas—the way is clear to a more apt view of the relationship of facts to values; in brief, it becomes clear given the way the world is why human beings have largely the values they do—why courage is valued in a hazardous world, why co-operation is prized where projects are beyond the skill and strength of single individuals, why honesty is needed in the interests of social co-operation, and so on.

Indeed, recognizing various conceptual errors at the heart of modern and postmodern moral theorizing may help us understand why that thinking is so bizarrely at odds with our ordinary pre-theoretical intuitions about moral life. For example, recent literature on moral education—including some from official sources (Ofsted 1994)—suggests that the question ‘whose values?’ is a profound one to ask in the interests of moral clarity. In fact, this question—which leads right up the primrose path of moral relativism—is deeply ambiguous in a way seldom critically addressed by those inclined to raise it. For, of course, one may explain why someone is going to the dentist for a painful extraction by saying that dental health care is what she values—implying (correctly) that dental health might well have been something she didn’t value. But to infer from this that the value of attending to an abscess depends only on ‘individual choice’ is quite absurd; given what we know about the connection between good dental hygiene and human well-being, and the fact that (all things being equal) we cannot but as humans desire such well-being, going to the dentist is of human value whether someone actually values it or not. The assimilation of value to (individual or social) choice here merely confuses the *grounds* of value with the *sources* of value; it is a form of the ‘genetic fallacy’.

A closely related confusion involves assimilation of the difference between facts and values to the so-called ‘is—ought’ distinction. From the recognition

that moral life is a matter of free or ‘autonomous’ choice rather than mere heteronomous conformity to external considerations it is *rightly* inferred that observations about how the world is do not straightforwardly condition our choices; apart from anything else, since we are often faced with painful value conflicts in circumstances where whatever we do is liable to cause some harm to ourselves or others, we need the freedom of choice inherent in the is—ought distinction to act in whatever way we judge to be for the best. But this precisely presupposes the *dependence* of values on facts rather than otherwise; it is because we know that lying misleads people in ways that do not conduce to human flourishing that we generally seek to refrain from lying—and because we also know that telling the truth here will land a friend (to whom loyalty is also humanly important) in real trouble, that we find ourselves in circumstances of painful moral dilemma. Morality is barely intelligible apart from the consideration that our actions have serious consequences for the actual harm or well-being of others—and this is the (small) grain of truth in a view such as utilitarianism; but we should not be scared by the bogey of consequentialist overstatement of this point into the absurd position of denying any dependence of values on facts—or into an equally implausible existentialist/prescriptivist assimilation of moral decision to criterionless choice among groundless values.

Hence, though it takes human beings to entertain them, moral and other values are surely grounded in objective ‘extra-personal’ considerations and are not just products of the free play of human creative fancy; how else, after all, could they be grounded? But isn’t irreconcilable disagreement and conflict just the very stuff of morality and moral enquiry, to the extent that we can have no other course in morally problematic circumstances than to respect the sincerely held decision of a given individual or community? Once again, this vague intuition about moral life enshrines a complex web of confusions and ambiguities that fatally confounds two quite different respects in which moral life is prey to serious conflict. A major mistake here is to assume that because there is a genuine sense in which *some* moral problems are insoluble that *all* moral disagreement between individuals and communities is disagreement of this radically irresolvable kind. But this is belied by the more reasonable claim that there has been much liberation from moral ignorance and error in the course of human history: that there is, indeed, *progress* in moral as in other forms of human enquiry. Thus, just as we really do not regard (contrary to what some modern epistemologists seem to have suggested) post-Newtonian science as merely a currently fashionable alternative to its predecessor, but as an important scientific advance, so we do not seriously regard widespread civilized rejection of slavery, wife-burning and infanticide as just an aesthetic alternative to the traditional endorsement of such practices by some past and present cultures.

Indeed, the contrary and counterintuitive view that human bondage is just a moral alternative to freedom could only rest on the enlightenment

fact-value distinction and (but a further development of that idea) that postmodernist assimilation of morality to local culture which we have seen good philosophical reasons to reject. Apart from such considerations there can be no reason to hold that moral perspectives—like scientific theories—cannot be just *wrong*. Moreover, their wrongness is often enough plainly demonstrable by direct appeal, for the most part, to the ways in which some traditional practices seriously violate anything reasonably conceivable as ‘human welfare’—and, further, to the ways in which such forms of human subjection or repression as forced child labour, upheld as integral to a given human culture, are often nothing more than cynical economic exploitation. We should not here, by the way, be detained by the red herring that any such cross-cultural moral judgement must represent a kind of chauvinistic cultural imperialism; such judgement need not be in the least chauvinistic—since we can and often do criticize the practices of our own culture in light of the superior moral wisdom of other societies. We can, of course, readily agree that moral perspectives are not straightforwardly answerable to observable *facts* of human welfare as some have alleged scientific theories are answerable to empirical facts; but it is by now well accepted that science does not progress in this naively inductive way either. It is now a commonplace of modern coherentist philosophy of science that scientific statements face the test of experience not singly but as a body (Quine 1953). But moral perspectives as coherent wholes cannot evade assessment in terms of their particular implications for human needs and interests regarded as in some sense not wholly captured by extant personal and social conceptions of those needs and interests; indeed, just as we know—in the light of what human progress there has been—that past personal and social moral sensibilities seriously failed to register real human needs and interests, so we can be sure that other moral needs, currently beyond our present ken, await discernment through further sensitive reflection and interpersonal engagement.

All the same, there *is* a very real sense in which moral problems can be said to differ from scientific problems by virtue of their insolubility—in which, perhaps, it is in the *nature* of a moral problem to be insoluble. Indeed, it could be said, if a practical problem *is* soluble, it can only be because it is not a moral but a technical problem; from this point of view, those modern pragmatist conceptions of moral deliberation that have sought to construe moral reasoning in terms of problem-solving skills seem deeply at odds with the intuitions of moral theorists as otherwise diverse as Aristotle and Kant. Moreover, ethical particularist critiques of enlightenment moral universalism—to the effect that moral development lies less in the direction of greater abstraction and generalization, more in that of fine-grained appreciation of the nuances of human association—seem to be supported by a pre-theoretical experience that shows that deeper moral reflection invariably *complicates* rather than simplifies our moral lives. But if by taking thought to familiar circumstances we merely make things more complex in

this respect—and, indeed, it should not be forgotten that much of the complexity may consist in ever-increasing moral disagreement with others—does this not speak as eloquently as could be wished for the non-cognitivist view that moral experience and reflection are but subjective projections upon a non-moral reality?

One of the first and greatest of moral particularists, of course, was Aristotle; we have already noted how Aristotle opposed Plato's idea of the good basically on the grounds that the growth of moral understanding is not a matter of ascent to the universal but of descent into the particulars of human experience. In view of this, however, it is something of an irony that Aristotle is nowadays generally regarded as the main founding father of those modern communitarian and anti-liberal critiques of enlightenment ethical and social theory that assimilate moral to social outlooks via the idea of rival moral traditions—for he shows no sign of the post-Cartesian (or Platonic) scepticism about the relationship of thought to world that engenders modern doubts about value objectivity. Indeed, Aristotle's particularism is indexed not to the fine grain of received culture—since it is an important role of moral reflection to critique received values—but to a specific form of moral deliberation (*phronesis*) primarily concerned with the cultivation of dispositions and traits of character traditionally known as 'virtues'. But, to that extent, a virtue-centred moral theory such as Aristotle's again seems very much in tune with basic pre-philosophical intuitions about moral life (for some contemporary defence of virtue theory, cf. Slote 1992; Nussbaum 1988).

First, virtues are *real* qualities of character which serve as necessary correctives to the real harms and evils which follow in the wake of vice; traditional virtue theory is therefore morally 'objectivist' and Aristotle regarded certain actions—such as adultery—as absolutely morally unacceptable. But second, since the virtuous life gives rise to value conflicts which may preclude our meeting simultaneously the requirements of (say) honesty and loyalty, we have to make principled moral choices on the basis of our available knowledge of the circumstances. Third, however, this requires the judgements of a morally wise agent to be tailored to circumstances (according to Aristotle's famous doctrine of the 'mean') in the interests of the best exercise of the most appropriate virtues. But it now follows not only that a given virtue such as courage or temperance may be differently exhibited by the same person in different circumstances—but also, more radically, that we may recognize the virtues of honesty, justice and courage in beliefs and actions significantly at odds with our own. And, of course, this is further consistent with the form of ordinary moral evaluation; despite what social relativists say about the culturally conditioned nature of virtue, I have no trouble recognizing the local Hindu shopkeeper as a just and honourable man, though I do not share his beliefs, and those of my own nation, race or culture who persecute him as cowardly and intolerant bigots.

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Understanding this, however, is not a matter of blanket application of abstract moral generalizations of the kind canvassed by latter-day enlightenment moral constructivists—but, on the contrary, of ever more detailed knowledge of the nuances of human association, including sympathetic appreciation of the differences that divide. But again, why should we construe any such more detailed appreciation as leading to greater moral subjectivity—when we should not ordinarily take the same view of more detailed knowledge and understanding in any other area of human enquiry?

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VIRTUES AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

A teleological justification¹

Jan W. Steutel

Introduction and formulation of the problem

In ‘Educating for the good life’—a pioneering article which deserves rather more attention than it seems to have received—William Frankena (1970) makes a distinction between the moral or morally good life and the happy or otherwise non-morally good life. In virtue theory these two kinds of good life are normally called the ‘virtuous’ life and the ‘flourishing’ life. After a brief and tentative exploration of this important distinction, Frankena argues that we should also distinguish between two kinds or parts of education—namely, moral education or educating for the virtuous life, and non-moral education or educating for a flourishing life. It is the main aim of his paper to map the dispositions that the latter kind of education should seek to engender.

An interesting issue merely touched upon in Frankena’s article is that of the relationship between a virtuous life and moral education on the one hand, and a flourishing life and non-moral education on the other (Frankena 1970:18–19, 38–9). Suppose that leading a virtuous life is *sufficient* for a flourishing life; in that case, educators might confine themselves to preparing the child for a virtuous life—since a flourishing life would follow as a matter of course. According to Frankena, however, it is doubtful whether any such relationship obtains—or, at any rate, he does not seem to believe that the relationship in question is a conceptual one. In my view, moreover, his doubts are well-justified. The idea that living virtuously would in some way guarantee a flourishing life, is intuitively implausible. Anyone’s welfare can be undermined by uncontrollable contingencies, and even the life of a stoic can be ruined by adversity and disaster.

However, one could maintain that leading a virtuous life is *necessary* for a flourishing life—in which case the claim would be rather that no one can

flourish *without* leading the virtuous life. Although this view is also contentious, it has at least no implausible implication that the life of a virtuous person cannot be miserable. Given this relationship, cultivating the virtues could be regarded as indispensable to preparing the child for a flourishing life; in short, non-moral education would require moral education.

But is educating for the virtuous life a necessary component of educating for a flourishing life? Frankena seems inclined to such a view—or at least some version of it (1970:39). With regard to this issue, his views are fully in line with those of many so-called ‘virtue ethicists’, especially with the ethical theories of antiquity. Indeed, it is arguable that viewing a virtuous life as necessary for a flourishing life is a defining characteristic of an ethics of virtue. According to Conly (1988), for example, it is a mark of such ethics to take notions of human flourishing as criterial of virtue and vice—to regard the traits of character that we need in order to flourish as virtues, and traits detrimental to human flourishing as vices.

Moreover, the basic idea that a virtuous life is necessary for a flourishing life may be considered one of the criteria which distinguish the virtue approach to moral education from other leading approaches—in particular from Kohlberg’s cognitive-developmental theory. To be sure, in successive phases of his thinking, Kohlberg characterizes the central aims of moral education in terms of virtues and their constituents; it would therefore be wrong to locate the defining feature of a virtue approach in the fact that moral educational aims are largely interpreted as virtues (cf. Steutel 1997). The difference between the two approaches lies rather in the *justification* of moral educational aims: that is, in the reasons offered to explain why certain traits of character are to be regarded as virtues. It is characteristic of the cognitive-developmental approach that the justification in question is ‘deontological’: certain traits are identified as moral educational goals because they enable their bearers to fulfil their key moral duties. In the first phase of his thinking, for example, Kohlberg considers the main aim of moral education (Kohlberg 1970) to be the virtue of *justice*—a complex trait which he values precisely insofar as it motivates and equips its possessor to determine what is morally right and act accordingly. However, it is typical of the classical virtue approach that the justification of the aims of moral education is not deontological but ‘teleological’: certain traits of character are regarded as virtues not only because they are conducive to the flourishing of a community or society, but also because we cannot ourselves flourish in the absence of them (cf. Sher 1992:92–3). But is such a justification consistent with our intuitions? Is it really true that we need to be just or brave in order to flourish? Indeed, if we want a child to have a flourishing life, might we not better teach the child *not* to act justly or bravely in at least some circumstances?

To be sure, any such purported teleological justification has interesting

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epistemological implications. For if it were true that a virtuous life is necessary for a flourishing life, it might be possible to defend a strong form of ‘non-relativism’ concerning moral education.

In ethical theory, particularly in that branch of it which could be called moral epistemology, it is common to distinguish different forms of relativism. According to so-called ‘descriptive’ relativism, the ethical beliefs of diverse societies just do *as a matter of fact* diverge to the point of incommensurability and conflict. This form of relativism can be regarded as amounting to an *empirical* claim that there simply *is* no universal agreement about values, even quite basic ones. A second form of relativism, however, is often called ‘normative’ relativism. On this view, what is regarded as right or worthwhile for one’s own society should not thereby be regarded as right or worthwhile for other societies. Contrary to descriptive relativism, the normative claim is that it is illegitimate or reprehensible to condemn the differently value-based practices and customs of other cultures. But a final form of relativism goes by the name of ‘meta-ethical’ relativism. This epistemological perspective denies any possibility of justifying ethical principles to each and every rational person. There is on this view no ethical *truth* because any ethical justification is inevitably internal to a particular tradition or culture; there are, in short, no *universal* rational criteria, on the basis of which ethical beliefs could be justified cross-culturally.

Now suppose that the virtuous life is indeed necessary for a flourishing life. Then one would have a strong argument in favour of a certain kind of meta-ethical ‘non-relativism’. Assuming that there is such a relationship between virtue and flourishing—in other words, that one cannot flourish without living virtuously—leading a virtuous life would be in the interest of each person. And because it can be expected that every rational person attaches some value to his own interests, we could give a non-relative justification of leading a virtuous life. Regarding certain traits as virtues could be considered *objectively* grounded in the sense that their value depends on reasons that do not derive (merely) from local traditions and practices. Moreover, if this relationship of virtue to flourishing can be made out, educating for the virtuous life would be indispensable to educating for a flourishing life. In that event, however, it also seems possible to give a non-relative justification for the *promotion* of virtues—namely, that any such educational intervention is in the interest of the child.

It is some such justification that we seem to find in the writings of David Carr—undeniably an advocate of the virtue approach to moral education. A principal characteristic of his work on virtue and education is his determined opposition to moral relativism. In his view, descriptive relativism is mistaken insofar as virtues are transcultural or culture transcending—though he grants that the *interpretation* and *expression* of particular virtues may be relative to specific traditions, beliefs or customs (Carr 1991:5–6, 260–5; 1995/96:38–9; 1996). Moreover, in defending the view that the basic values enshrined in

the virtues are to be regarded as universal criteria for assessing local moral traditions and codes of conduct, he would appear to repudiate normative relativism (Carr 1991:264–5; 1995/96:39; 1996:358–9, 362). But more fundamental is his teleological defence of virtues as traits of character conducive to or constitutive of human well-being or flourishing. This defence, if correct, would not only explain why certain traits do everywhere seem to be regarded as virtues, but also justify our everywhere morally *regarding* such traits as virtues. Moreover, when Carr speaks of human flourishing, he refers not only to the welfare of community or society, but also to what is in the interest of the virtuous agent as such: ‘a sensible man regards it as in his own interest and therefore wants to be wise, courageous, just and temperate’ (1991:226; 1995/96:37). It is therefore a present concern to ask whether such a meta-ethical *teleological* justification of moral virtues—and, consequently, of their educational cultivation—is tenable.

Preliminary specifications

This presentation of the question, however, is still somewhat imprecise and cannot be adequately addressed without further specification; indeed, in relation to philosophical questions, the greater part of the labour invariably consists in the clarification of meaning via disambiguation and/or marking of appropriate distinctions.

First, then, I am presently only interested in a possible relationship between human flourishing and *moral* virtues. In the introductory section I identified the morally good life with the virtuous life. Strictly speaking, however, a morally good life is identical only with the *morally* virtuous life—for many virtues are non-moral by nature. Thus, for example, it may be well to distinguish such virtues as self-control, perseverance, consistency and patience—which may be loosely called virtues of will-power—from such typical moral virtues as justice, benevolence, honesty and generosity. By definition, the bearer of virtues of will-power has a *strong* character, but—unlike the bearer of moral virtues—not necessarily a *morally* good character; persistence, industriousness, iron self-control and resolution in the face of hardship, are all too often qualities of brute dictators and cunning criminals—but it can hardly be maintained that such persons are morally good (cf. Warnock 1971:78–9).

How to draw the line between moral and non-moral virtues is, of course, a subject of dispute. However, it is at least arguable that moral virtues, unlike virtues of will-power, are necessarily *other-regarding*. By calling a virtue a moral virtue, we seem to suppose that such a trait involves—or is at least expressive of—concern for the well-being and intrinsic dignity of our fellow human beings; thus, the morally virtuous person is at the very least someone mindful of the needs, rights and interests of others as ends in themselves.

Second, although my enquiry will focus mainly on moral virtues, the

teleological justification I wish to explore is clearly *prudential*. And since it is typical of a prudential justification to justify an action, an activity or a certain way of life by offering reasons that refer to self-interest only, asking whether the morally virtuous life is in some way conducive to a flourishing life is tantamount to asking whether leading the moral way of life can be justified in terms of self-interest. Thus, by restricting this question to the morally virtuous life, my enquiry will concentrate on other-regarding virtues and, by discussing the feasibility of a prudential justification, I shall aim to examine the possibility of justifying these other-regarding traits in terms of self-regarding reasons.

It may be wondered, however, whether a prudential justification can be considered a meta-ethical one. Is not the term ‘ethical’ synonymous with ‘moral’—and is a meta-ethical justification not *by definition* a justification from the moral point of view? But, insofar as ethical discourse employs many evaluative terms which are not specifically moral, this use of the term ‘ethical’ is surely too restricted. Thus, for example, such terms as ‘admirable’, ‘excellent’, ‘advisable’ and ‘rational’ all play important roles in ethical discussion—but none is tied especially to moral evaluation (cf. Slote 1992). Indeed, even such central ethical terms as ‘virtue’ and ‘good’ have significant non-moral uses—as when, precisely, we speak of self-regarding traits. Consequently, the justification I seek—a justification of the morally good life in non-moral terms—may reasonably be called a meta-ethical justification.

Third, it is important to distinguish between *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* relationships between virtuous and flourishing lives. To construe the relation extrinsically would be to regard the virtuous life as a means, instrumentally conceived, to a flourishing life—as, in other words, productive of certain effects (clear conscience, good reputation, reciprocal support, trust-based relationships and so on) conducive to our worldly prosperity. However, construing the relation intrinsically, would be to regard the virtuous life as ‘part and parcel’, even as ‘coincident’ with a flourishing life. In that case, a life of virtue would be one that did not only cause certain extrinsically beneficial effects, but one which was of inherent benefit to the agent (still speaking prudentially and as yet not morally) whether or not it also yielded such external benefits.

In modern ethics, of course, it is usual to interpret prudential justifications of moral life in terms of extrinsic relationship (cf. Sayre-McCord 1989). In ancient Greek ethics, however, the relation between virtue (*arete*) and flourishing (*eudaemonia*) is largely construed in intrinsic terms. Thus, it is often indicated that Aristotle gives two accounts of flourishing—namely, a narrower intellectualist account in which the life of contemplation is regarded as most *eudaemon*, and a broader account which interprets *eudaemonia* in terms of living the political life in accordance with certain excellences of character and practical wisdom. Whatever one may think of the

compatibility of these views, human flourishing is on both of them constituted (partly) by virtuous activity and is improperly construed as an external end to which virtuous conduct is merely instrumental. Moreover, this Aristotelian conception of the relationship of virtue to flourishing is generally characteristic of virtue ethics. Indeed, though it is usual to regard virtue ethics and utilitarianism as both teleological theories of value, an ethics of virtue, in contradistinction to utilitarian ethics, invariably interprets the relationship between moral life and human well-being as an intrinsic rather than extrinsic one (cf. Carr 1995/96:34–6).

Since I want in this chapter to assess the plausibility of such an intrinsic relationship, the question of whether or not living virtuously is instrumentally beneficial in consequentialist terms will be put aside. Given this restriction, we will focus primarily here upon the idea of the virtuous life rather than upon particular virtues as such. In line with Aristotle, Frankena (1970:20) rightly points out that the non-morally good life consists of conscious activities and experiences. In themselves, however, virtues are neither activities nor experiences, but traits of character. Thus, assuming these points are correct, it would be their *manifestations* in conscious activities and experiences, rather than the virtues themselves, which go to make up the flourishing life. More broadly, only leading the life that a virtuous person would lead can be intrinsically beneficial.

At all events, most virtue ethicists regard living virtuously not only as conducive to a flourishing life, or as a possible part of a flourishing life, but—more strongly—as *constitutive* of such a life; on such a view, the relationship of virtue to flourishing is a non-contingent one. Thus, the issue of present concern is whether leading the morally virtuous life is indeed a necessary or constitutive part of having a flourishing life—furthermore, whether educating for the morally virtuous life is not only of instrumental or utilitarian interest to the community, but also in the *inherent* or personal interest of the child.

Is a morally virtuous life necessary to the flourishing life?

It is impossible to answer this question satisfactorily without reference to some plausible theory of human flourishing. As is well-known, different philosophical accounts of the concept of human flourishing or personal well-being have been attempted. Such accounts are often classified according to three main categories: hedonist or related mental state theories, objective or objective list theories and desire or preference theories (cf. Parfit 1984:493–502; Kagan 1992). Recent ethical literature concerning this issue indicates that current preferences are mainly divided between the second and third of these categories—namely between (certain versions of) the ‘objective list’ theory and the (so-called) ‘informed desire’ theory. I shall take these as useful points of departure in pursuit of a reasonable response to our central question.

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According to the first of these views, certain things are objectively good for a person to have—whether or not they give him pleasure, and whether or not he desires them. Which of these should be included on the list is a matter of dispute, but such goods as friendship (or other deep personal relationships), knowledge and understanding, autonomy and freedom, enjoyment—as well as accomplishment or achievement—are often mentioned.² The more we have or realize these goods, the more we may be said to flourish.

The other view, sometimes also called the ‘rational preference’ theory, aims to account for human flourishing in terms of the fulfilment of desires according to at least two criteria. First, advocates of the theory distinguish between extrinsic and intrinsic desires—between desiring something as a means to some further thing, and desiring something as an end in itself or for its own sake—regarding only the satisfaction of intrinsic desires as relevant to determining someone’s well-being. Second, in order to contribute to our flourishing, desires should also be required to meet the criterion of informedness. Philosophers disagree about how exactly to define an informed desire (or a rational preference); however, one might roughly require any candidate for this label to stand the hypothetical test of *ideal* deliberation—understood as critical reflection on desires, in a cool hour and a clear state of mind, without logical error, and on the basis of all relevant information. Only desires able to survive this test—only, that is, desires not contaminated by illogical reasoning or based upon false beliefs—can function as a measure of someone’s flourishing.

It may be questioned whether these two accounts of human flourishing—in terms of realizing objective goods and fulfilling informed desires—are actually compatible. Despite this, proponents of these theories often regard much the same things as general or central prudential values. Thus, for example, items regarded as objective goods by advocates of the former theory—such as achievement and deep personal relationships—are also regarded as typical rational objects of desire by adherents of the latter theory (cf. Griffin 1986:29, 54–5).

Is it possible, on the basis of these theories, to give an affirmative answer to our main question about whether virtue is necessary to flourishing? To begin with, then, let us see how far we get with the objective list theory. First, achievement or accomplishment is generally considered an item on any list of objective goods—and one can rightly argue that leading the morally virtuous life is a definite instance of an achievement. Frankena (1970:38–9; 1973:93–4, 115), for example, distinguishes between different kinds of excellent activities and claims that morally good or right action is one of them. Moreover, Carr (1991:209–10, 228) argues that becoming morally virtuous is a form of self-improvement which should be regarded as a significant personal achievement. Thus, assuming these views are not mistaken, leading a morally virtuous life may be considered intrinsically

beneficial to the agent and, consequently, contributory to a flourishing life.

However, our main question is not whether the morally virtuous life can be considered a part of human flourishing, but whether it should be regarded as *constitutive* of a flourishing life. If we could demonstrate such a necessary connection, leading the morally good life would be in any agent's interest and, consequently, could be justified for each and every rational human being. But it seems unlikely that any such demonstration can be given from the perspective of the objective list theory (cf. Hooker 1996:148). First, achievement is only one of the goods on the list; consequently, it cannot be excluded that a life without achievement, but with many other goods, can be just as flourishing—even perhaps more flourishing—than a life with achievement but without any of these other goods. Second, even if the objective list theory regarded achievement as an indispensable part of a flourishing life, living the morally virtuous life is still only *one* kind of achievement. This would allow that leading a non-moral life via other achievements (for example, being a creative artist or a successful businessman) can be just as—perhaps even more—*self-interestedly* good than leading the morally virtuous life. In short, the objective list theory, as described, does not exclude the possibility of flourishing without moral virtue.

Is it, then, possible to give a convincing teleological justification of virtuous living by appeal to the informed desire theory? Certainly the morally virtuous life can also be *part* of a flourishing life on this theory of well-being. First, moral virtues imply certain desires and/or aversions: for example, the virtue of benevolence encompasses a desire to help people in distress; the virtue of honesty implies an aversion towards fraud or deceit; and the virtue of justice involves a desire to give everyone his due. Perhaps some allegedly virtuous desires and aversions may not survive the test of ideal deliberation—but the desires and aversions typical of moral virtues, in the sense indicated in the second section of this chapter, are normally informed or rational (cf. Brandt 1979:143–5, 208–212). But such desires and aversions can also be regarded as intrinsic by nature. The objects of virtuous desires, like relieving pain or fair treatment, are constitutive of a virtuous life and desiring such things for their own sake is characteristic of the virtuous person. On the other hand, such objects of virtuous aversion as stealing, cheating or promise-breaking are constitutive of a vicious life—and such deeds are in themselves repellent to the morally virtuous person. Thus, if this characterization of morally virtuous desires and aversions is correct their satisfaction is of intrinsic benefit to the agent. And because satisfying these desires and aversions amounts to leading the morally virtuous life, such a life can rightly be regarded as an intrinsic good.

However, it would also seem impossible to demonstrate that a morally virtuous life is *constitutive* of a flourishing life on the basis of the informed desire theory; indeed, on this view, living virtuously may not even be part of

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a flourishing life for everyone—let alone a constitutive part. For, to be sure, agents may be only *extrinsically* motivated to lead the life that the morally virtuous person would lead; they keep their promises, refrain from cheating and give everyone their due—but only because they expect doing so to accrue to their advantage. In that event, leading the morally virtuous life is only instrumentally, not intrinsically, beneficial. In short, living morally virtuously can only be part of a flourishing life for the person of morally virtuous motivation.

We may conclude from all of this that whilst both theories generate important prudential and self-regarding reasons for living virtuously—according to the objective list theory for anyone and according to the informed desire theory only for those with virtuous desires and aversions—they do not support the ideological justification for which we have been seeking. Any such justification would require the demonstration of a necessary connection between morally virtuous and flourishing lives—and, with regard to this point, both theories fail. In short, we could take such theories to support the conclusion that living virtuously is necessary to a flourishing life, and consequently in the interest of everyone, only by dwelling upon the possible *effects* of virtuous living—for example, the realization of other objective goods or the fulfilment of this or that non-moral desire; but this fails to recognize that such extrinsic relations between virtue and flourishing do not amount to the desired intrinsic connection between moral virtue and flourishing.

Despite this, we might argue that living the morally virtuous life is a necessary or constitutive part of a flourishing life for at least *one* class of persons—namely, *the morally virtuous*. It is sometimes claimed that satisfying morally virtuous desires can frustrate the fulfilment of other desires—insofar as the satisfaction of virtuous desires may well conflict with the agent's self-interest (cf. Hooker 1996:144). However, as far as the morally virtuous agent is concerned, this view seems counter-intuitive. Certainly, it cannot be denied that satisfying morally virtuous desires can frustrate the satisfaction of non-moral desires—or that such frustrations may constitute a loss to the morally virtuous agent. But it is also characteristic of such a person that any failure to satisfy his morally virtuous desires, in cases of conflict with non-moral desires, must always constitute the *greater* loss.

This characteristic of morally virtuous persons is clearly explicable on a sophisticated version of the informed desire theory. On this view, our well-being is a function of the *strength* of our informed desires and, the stronger the desires fulfilled, the more we flourish. However, it would be wrong to interpret strength (solely) in terms of motivational force. Suppose that two of my desires conflict—for example, the desire to finish this section and the desire to go for a bicycle-ride—and, further, that whilst the latter has greater motivational force, I rationally prefer the satisfaction of the former desire. In that event, going for a ride will *not* constitute my greatest benefit. In

short, the strength which counts here is not (or at least not only) motivational force but *rank* in a preference ordering that can stand the test of ideal deliberation (cf. Griffin 1986:14–15). If our ranking is not based on faulty reasoning or mistaken beliefs, the higher a desire is rated, the more its satisfaction will contribute to our flourishing.

Now it is typical of morally virtuous persons that their morally virtuous desires, compared with their non-moral desires, are stronger in the ranking or preference senses of the term. Perhaps this provides the most plausible interpretation of the well-known criterion of ‘overridingness’. Whilst this criterion is often introduced as a distinguishing feature of a moral judgement, it may be rather more persuasive to regard it as a characteristic of morally virtuous agents; in short, we may expect such persons to want morally virtuous desires to *override* their non-moral desires in cases of conflict between moral and non-moral desires. In such cases, the benefit of satisfying morally virtuous desires will *outweigh* the loss of not satisfying some rival non-moral desire; how, then, could satisfying morally virtuous desires ever be against a virtuous agent’s interest?

So, even without considering possible extrinsic beneficial outcomes of leading a morally virtuous life, it is reasonable to suppose that such a life is necessary to the flourishing of the morally virtuous agent. Thus, whilst the objective list theory has the advantage, in contrast with the informed desire theory, of showing that the morally virtuous life must be of some benefit to everyone, the informed desire theory surpasses the objective list theory by showing that living such a life cannot run counter to the interest of the morally virtuous agent: that, therefore, the teleological justification for which we have sought is feasible in at least such cases.

Is education for the morally virtuous life in the interest of the child?

The problem to date, however, is that we do not appear to have demonstrated that *everyone* needs to live morally in order to flourish and, consequently, that living the morally virtuous life is in each person’s interest; to that extent, we are as yet unable to sustain the claim that educating for the morally good life is in the interest of the child. To be sure, we may well have succeeded in showing, on the basis of the informed desire theory, that once the overall aim of moral education has been attained—in other words, once the child has grown into a morally virtuous person—living the morally virtuous life will be in his interest. But we have not so far shown that *preparing* the child for the morally virtuous life—namely, *pursuing* the general aim of moral education—will also be in his interest.

However, it would be wrong to conclude from this that a teleological justification of the morally virtuous life, as previously explained, is unattainable. The most we are entitled to infer from our analysis is that any

such teleological justification is not available on the basis of (certain versions of) the objective list theory or the informed desire theory. But it might just be that these theories are mistaken or limited accounts of personal well-being—and, if that is so, a teleological justification of the morally virtuous life may still be possible via some other route. In short, we might still show that moral virtue is necessary to flourishing on the basis of an account of human welfare which is different from the objective list theory or the informed desire theory.

In exploring this possibility, it is important to remind ourselves once again of the restrictions we have imposed on our enquiry—in particular the requirement to lay aside any considerations concerning the instrumental benefits of leading the morally virtuous life. According to Hare (1981:190–8), cultivating the moral virtues *is* in the child's own interest—not least because of the interpersonal rewards and penalties that attach to socially beneficial and harmful acts. All the same, though these social outcomes *can* be regarded as good reasons for adopting the morally virtuous life, we are concerned here only with the claim that educating the moral virtues is in the interest of the child insofar as possession of such traits is in itself *constitutive* of a flourishing life. Can such a claim be justified apart from reference to the objective list and informed desire theories of human well-being?

I am inclined to answer this question affirmatively. In my view, the claim that the morally virtuous life is a necessary component of a flourishing life can be supported by arguments presupposing a kind of 'prudential perfectionism'. I choose the term 'prudential' because, in some contrast with moral and aesthetic perfectionism, the conception I have in mind is predominantly focused on considerations of human well-being; the values that it draws to our attention are prudential more than moral or aesthetic ones. But I also use the term 'perfectionism', because the argument I wish to explore explicates human flourishing largely as a function of the development or perfection of human nature. Perhaps, however, I should make clear here that I do not subscribe to any metaphysics of human nature, which would assign essential ends or natural functions to human nature as such. Notwithstanding this, it does seem reasonable to suggest, on the basis of *empirical* observation and research, that inclinations of more and less (individually and socially) positive kinds are a central part of human nature and that perfecting and expressing such natural inclinations might be regarded as a precondition of human flourishing.

Thus, although it has been common to regard human nature as a bundle of self-regarding dispositions and anti-social impulses which require to be controlled via the imposition and inculcation of moral rules and principles, there are nevertheless theories of morality and moral education which presuppose a rather more positive account of human nature. In particular, on those theories which are grounded in Aristotle's ideas, human beings are often conceived as social creatures with an inbuilt interest in and concern

for the welfare of others. In his own virtue-theoretical account of moral education, for example, Carr distinguishes virtues of self-control from a group of traits he calls virtues of ‘attachment’; in his view, these virtues, which include such typical moral virtues as consideration and benevolence, derive from the deliberate cultivation of natural pro-social inclinations and attachments (Carr 1991:191–208).

Moreover, this rather more positive view of human nature has in recent decades received considerable support from research of a purportedly scientific character—in particular from sociobiology and work on early child development (cf. Brandt 1996:208; Lapsley 1996:166–70). Of course, any such enquiries are liable to remain the focus of much controversy. But if such theories do indeed succeed in disclosing pro-social desires and empathic dispositions as a crucial part of human make-up, the way might be open to a promising reconstruction of the ideological account of the value of moral virtue. The first premise of such a teleological argument is that the welfare of any person is liable to be adversely affected if certain central natural tendencies or dispositions are curtailed rather than perfected and expressed. The second premise is that other-regarding tendencies constitute a substantial part of human nature. The third premise is that cultivating or perfecting these natural tendencies is tantamount to the promotion of dispositions characteristic of the morally virtuous person. It may be concluded from these premises that the perfection and expression of other-regarding natural inclinations—that is, leading the morally virtuous life—is constitutive of human well-being.

Although this teleological justification presupposes a certain kind of perfectionism, it makes no direct appeal to the objective list theory—one main characteristic of which is that the prudential value of objective goods is regarded as independent of our desires, inclinations, likes or dislikes. Indeed, the prudential value of leading the morally virtuous life *is* clearly dependent on such subjective states and dispositions in the alternative account we have just given—for, insofar as pro-social inclinations are part of our nature, living virtuously can be regarded as beneficial in terms of the satisfaction of our true desires and interests. All the same, the fact that our teleological justification links prudential value to natural human inclinations does not imply its reduction to the other influential account of human well-being, the informed desire theory. For whereas this theory takes human welfare to be an exclusive function of the satisfaction of informed desires, the prudential value of living the morally virtuous life is not, according to the alternative we have been defending, a function of the satisfaction, but of the *perfection*, of natural desires.

We should concede that our teleological justification is still somewhat imprecise and speculative; to be sure, much in the way of further work is needed to substantiate its claims.³ Nevertheless, the idea that human flourishing is essentially dependent on the perfection and expression of

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central natural inclinations has considerable plausibility and appeal. And if such perfection is tantamount to leading the morally virtuous life, it can only be in a young person's interest to educate him for virtue; education for the morally virtuous life will be an indispensable part of education for the good life as such.

Notes

- 1 The author is grateful to David Carr and Ben Spiecker for their comments on an earlier version of the paper.
- 2 Why not put the moral virtues on the list? Because then the teleological justification for which we are seeking would be nothing but a *petitio principii*: the validity of the claim to be justified (i.e. the claim that leading the morally virtuous life has prudential value) would already be presupposed in the justifying reasons.
- 3 For example, on the basis of scientific research it may be claimed that some children (a very small percentage) have a strong genetic disposition to anti-social behaviour or psychopathy. Such a claim, if well-justified, would restrict the scope of the second premise of our teleological justification.

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Part III

THE WIDER SOCIO- POLITICAL CONTEXT

THE POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE AND COMMON EDUCATION

Eamonn Callan

1

Many people believe that their culture is the core of the one life worthy of human beings or that those who belong to supposedly inferior cultures count for little or nothing.¹ I call such beliefs and the conduct they motivate ‘chauvinism’. The word names a familiar evil, at work not only in the horrors of ethnic cleansing but also in the pettier bigotries that fuel so many social conflicts around the world.

A common idea in much postmodernist social thought is that the tradition of liberal politics we inherit from the Enlightenment is morally defunct because it is inherently chauvinistic. By ‘the tradition of liberal polities’ I mean a family of ways of thinking about good government and the good society. Liberalism is rooted in the ideal of free and equal citizenship, and although its adherents often differ about how that ideal is best interpreted, they agree that institutions and policies must be assessed on the basis of their contribution to the well-being of citizens rather than, say, the glory of God or the success of some transcendent group project. Liberals will also say that acceptable terms of social co-operation must include a framework of individual rights that secures for all such goods as liberty of conscience and privacy.

The cardinal values of the liberal tradition have powerful educational implications. For they imply that future citizens must learn to adopt the shared public morality that sustains the tradition, and if these values are indeed inherently chauvinistic, this should be evident in the education they support. Much of Iris Marion Young’s influential and avowedly postmodernist critique of liberalism is levelled against the culturally assimilative education it entails.² Young is a useful focus for my purposes because she is always a lucid and often a perceptive social critic who tries to give some tangible form to what many others only gesture vaguely towards—

the possibility of a society that would make cultural difference its sovereign value while moving decisively beyond the confining limits of liberal individualism. Against Young, I argue that so far as the allure of her ‘politics of difference’ depends on our antipathy to chauvinism, her political prescriptions cannot really be distinguished from the liberal tradition. That is so because a world without chauvinism depends on an education that would establish the moral discipline of liberal politics.

The charge of chauvinism against liberalism is typically enmeshed with sceptical claims about reason and knowledge as these have been construed within western philosophy, and Young’s argument is no exception in that regard. But I doubt that the current attraction of the postmodernist label can be dissipated merely by criticizing what its advocates say about the relation between language and the world, truth and power, the authority of reason or the like, however cogent the criticism might be. I suspect that such criticism is often resisted because people think something *morally* powerful is expressed through the postmodernist indictment of liberal modernity. To reject postmodernist strictures on reason, impartiality and kindred concepts is somehow to remain mired in chauvinism, or so the argument goes. Therefore, it becomes important to examine postmodernist politico-moral themes in a way that does not begin and end with the anti-rationalist polemic within which the themes are typically enunciated. I return to the problems of postmodernist anti-rationalism as my argument unfolds, but until Section 3, these will not be in the foreground. In fact, I hope to show that there is something true and important in postmodernist anti-rationalism. That is the rejection of something I call ‘moral hyper-rationalism’. Moral hyper-rationalism is both closely related to chauvinism and a prominent vice in the imperfectly liberal polities in which we live. But liberal ideals and the education they would support are not discredited by debunking hyper-rationalism, and although a more thoroughgoing anti-rationalism undermines liberalism, it also lays waste to any ethical viewpoint that could take the problem of chauvinism seriously.

2

Young espouses an ‘ideal of city life’. The city is her focus because existing cities intimate, albeit very imperfectly, the social relations that would flourish were the politics of difference to prevail against the homogenizing imperatives of liberal modernity. ‘City life’ signifies ‘the being together of strangers’. To be sure, the city is a place where communities of different kinds proliferate. But there we also mingle with strangers whose identity is so utterly different from ours that whatever delight or insight our relations might afford, they cannot yield the dissolution of self and mutual transparency intrinsic to full-blown community. Furthermore, the ‘eroticization’ of difference in the city means that its cultural variety becomes

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internalized. Citizens learn to find the free play of difference both within and without, as their kaleidoscopic social world arouses a restless longing for the strange and the exotic (Young 1990:236–41).

Set aside for now the question whether ‘city life’ is a persuasive vision of the good society. Why do we need to forsake liberalism if we are as taken with the charms of urbanity as Young would like us to be? Her answer is that city life requires practices that are ruled out by assumptions of liberal politics. Prime among these assumptions is the idea that individuals have moral standing only in abstraction from group differences and, therefore, group rights or even policies that foster group identity have no role to play in a liberal society.

In liberalism as Young depicts it, difference is transcended in the civic sphere. The common viewpoint of citizens is fixed by an ideal of impartial, homogeneous reason that abstracts from the dense particularity of their lives. Young contends that this ideal is a figment because all thought is ‘situated’, shot through with the partialities that make us irredeemably different knowers and choosers. The real social function of impartiality is to seal a veneer of rectitude on the interests of those with power and privilege (Young 1990:114–15). What presents itself as impartial judgement ‘reinforces oppression by hypostatizing the point of view of privileged groups into a universal position’ (112).

The politics of difference requires the creation of a ‘heterogeneous’ public: ‘we require real participatory structures in which actual people, with their geographical, ethnic, gender and occupational differences, assert their perspectives on social issues within institutions that encourage the representation of their distinct voices’ (Young 1990, 116). The necessary institutions include a system of collective rights that would empower marginalized groups (240–1). Yet something should be salvaged from the detritus of liberalism. Basic individual rights must be protected against ‘each majority’s whims’ (93–4). Young’s depiction of liberal politics involves some distortion. But she is alert to something crucial even on some less uncharitable reading of the tradition than the one she gives. Liberal politics must include a project of cultural assimilation, a project that Young describes as ‘the transcendence of group difference’ (157). Citizens must, as a rule, become alike in certain ways. They must receive a common education that furnishes whatever knowledge and instils whatever habits of thought and feeling that participating competently in the government of a free people requires. Under the conditions of pluralism that obtain in liberal democracies, many kinds of separate education will thrive alongside the common education that assimilates all to a shared civic perspective. Furthermore, liberal theorists, and ordinary citizens as well, may disagree about what measures a state can justly pursue in support of the assimilative process of common education. And of course, it is one thing to say that some assimilative process is necessary and quite another to suggest that *what* future

citizens are assimilated to is chauvinism with a mask of impartial moral reason.

Although Young says little explicitly about the educational practices that would perpetuate the politics of difference from one generation to another, she evidently thinks they could not be assimilative. 'In public life [in the ideal city] the differences remain unassimilated' (1990:241). But a glance at the distance between our world and city life shows that the latter is not a place where 'differences remain unassimilated'. Many existing differences that are constitutive of identity for us have disappeared in Young's ideal. That means the progress of the politics of difference from our fallen state to the Utopia of city life must assimilate those whose lives are now marked by these pre-postliberal differences.

The relevant differences derive from the many conceptions of the good that do not revolve around a playful engagement with the exotic; instead, the good is conceived in terms of a creed or a fixed set of priorities, and although those who reject these are tolerated, even respected, alternative ways of life hold no attraction save as sources of temptation and distraction. The salience of such differences in our world should be obvious—religious diversity is only its most obvious manifestation. In city life, all this has been transcended because we have all become connoisseurs of cultural flux.

The exclusion entailed here is more than an oversight. City life cannot be rid of its latent assimilative agenda merely by saying that all of us will be welcome there, after all. The exclusion of credal and related differences from Young's city is implicit in her interpretation of the subjectivity proper to members of the heterogeneous public. Overcoming oppression demands a 'revolution' in the subject of political judgement because otherwise we confront differences with an amalgam of fear and loathing: 'Rather than seeking a wholeness of the self, we who are the subjects of this plural and complex society should affirm the otherness within ourselves, acknowledging that as subjects we are heterogeneous and multiple in our affiliations and desires' (Young 1990:124). Those who have not experienced the revolution in subjectivity that Young prescribes are still burdened with civically unsavoury ideas of inner wholeness, and so they, or at least their children, would require enlightenment if they were to become morally qualified members of the heterogeneous public.

The assimilative thrust of Young's politics of difference extends further. A world populated exclusively by mercurial connoisseurs of difference might also be a war of all against all. So diversity must be tamed by the cultivation of certain moral uniformities. At the very least, the structures necessary to the politics of difference—for example a scheme of group rights—will have to be made stable, and that will presumably require that citizens learn to care about those whom the structures protect. But that, too, is not enough. Justice will depend on the public deliberation that proceeds within the structures Young endorses. The reliability with which deliberation serves

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justice hinges on the discernment and character of those who participate, which will in turn depend on the common education that all receive.

The task that faces Young's heterogeneous public is to overcome oppression. But the public must understand oppression in a more nuanced fashion than mainstream political theory has acknowledged. Young identifies five 'faces' of oppression—exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, powerlessness and violence—whose significance is obscured by our inordinate preoccupation with the distribution of material or quasi-material goods. 'Objective' criteria mark the five faces of oppression (Young 1990:65). That is to say, the criteria can be either applied correctly or not, and if the heterogeneous public is to reason as it should, those who learn to apply them correctly had better be more numerous than those who do not. Whatever individual and group differences stand in the way of that outcome must be transcended if the politics of difference is to succeed.

If liberalism is chauvinistic, this should come to light once we juxtapose it with some more culturally accommodating way of conceiving the good society. Young's conception of city life and its politics of difference are supposed to provide the needed light. But the outlines of the contrast are becoming severely blurred. A common education that cultivates the moral discipline of citizenship is as essential to Young's vision as it is to the liberalism she abjures. The question we now face is whether the particular discipline that common education would impose under Young's ideal polity is preferable to what liberal common education would exact, given that an antipathy to chauvinism is our criterion of choice.

Before addressing that question directly, I want to distinguish it from another, vaguely similar question that might appear to be a serviceable substitute for the one I have posed. Will there be *more* cultural difference in city life than there is in liberal societies? The question is foolish. Suppose two societies are alike in all respects save this: in one a practice that instantiates a 'face of oppression' continues—a practice of child-rearing, say, that involves violence towards children. The same practice had died out in the other society. Where the practice continues, it is a focus of identity for a particular social group. Notice how preposterous it would be to say that the society that tolerates the oppressive practice is better because it contains 'more' difference. True, it does contain a wider cultural diversity. But this detracts from the goodness of the society according to the very criteria that Young says give us the measure of the society's goodness.

The foolishness of the question—which society contains *more* cultural difference?—is worth stressing because it is easy to think that once we take the sin of chauvinism seriously the question becomes important. If we forswear *any* judgement about other cultures, and conceive the good society simply as one that welcomed indiscriminately as many cultural differences as possible, then it might seem that we were as far away from the risks of chauvinism as we could get. This 'non-judgemental' pluralism is one current

among others in Young's thought, and it provides a way of creating some contrast between a liberal polity and city life. But the contrast is created only by repudiating the resources of moral criticism that are necessary to the construction of any credible social ideal, liberal or otherwise. If we want a world without chauvinism, we need to learn to make whatever moral judgements its avoidance requires, and so far as some cultures are carriers of chauvinism, we need to condemn them. An antipathy to chauvinism and an indiscriminate embrace of difference are not just distinct attitudes—they are incompatible.

The problem of moral discrimination on which non-judgemental pluralism founders is not solved by the revolution in subjectivity that is central to Young's assimilative agenda. Although she writes as if learning to find a plenitude of suppressed desires within ourselves teaches us appropriately to respond to the differences that abound in our social environment, that merely displaces the problem of moral discrimination. Simone Weil said somewhere that if she entered a room of Nazis singing patriotic songs something deep within herself would make her want to join them. Weil rightly thought this was no reason to include Nazis within the scope of the cultural differences we should celebrate. The welter of desire within any psyche is as much in need of moral scrutiny as the flux of culture that flows without.

3

The common education intrinsic to the politics of difference teaches us to prize cultural differences. How much distance does this put between the education Young wants and what liberal politics would commend?

Two important issues in recent liberal theory (and practice) are these: whether free and equal citizenship can be adequately protected by a system of political rights that ignores differences of ethnicity and gender, for example, where these yield sharply divergent interests some of which will be systematically slighted under that system; and whether a polity that ignores the fragile condition of some minority cultures can treat all with the dignity appropriate to citizens, given the intimate connection of cultural affiliation to self-respect (cf. Phillips 1995; Spinner 1994; Kymlicka 1989, 1995). These are complicated questions. The best answers might not always be the ones Young would give. But they are questions *inside* the wide spectrum of liberal discourse that a good common education would encourage future citizens to address. So long as the questions are pressed within that setting, group rights and cultural recognition are understood in terms of their possible contribution to 'the prosperity of individual human beings' (Raz 1994:163). In other words, the relevant rights and recognition might be endorsed because of the benefits they bring to people who would otherwise be unfairly disadvantaged; they will not be chosen because cultures have a moral significance that supersedes their importance for individuals. But since Young

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thinks that the claims of groups cannot justify the oppression of individuals, she is evidently on the side of liberalism here as well (Young 1990:174).

A real distinction does separate an education that would insist on the unassailable correctness of something like Young's views on what is needed to affirm cultural differences and a liberal common education that approaches these matters in a more Socratic spirit. The latter would present liberal politics as a fluid set of beliefs and practices that properly evolves in response to local contingencies, broader social changes and the challenge of criticism. Throughout the processes of re-invention, a thread of continuity is sustained by an abstract ideal of citizenship and a reverence for the dignity of individuals. The question of how hospitable the just society can be to group differences has been a prominent motif within the tradition since its inception, and liberal education in a Socratic spirit will question established orthodoxy on such matters without attempting to install some heterodox dogma in its place. But not only is an antipathy to chauvinism consistent with common education in a Socratic spirit; it is necessary if we are to combat chauvinism, or so Young herself would seem to imply. The identification of chauvinism by those who live under institutions that encourage it presupposes independence of mind, and Young believes we live under institutions that corrupt us in just that way (for example, Young 1990:134–5).

However, Young might object to education in the Socratic spirit on the grounds that any appeal to the independence of mind proper to free citizens invokes the nefarious ideal of impartial moral reason. This takes us to the heart of the matter. If Young is really recommending a wholesale rejection of impartiality, she is driven to non-judgemental pluralism. Alternatively, if her argument is read as supporting a contextually sensitive interpretation of impartiality, its congruity with liberal conceptions of moral reason becomes obvious. Since non-judgemental pluralism is inconsistent with an antipathy to chauvinism, only the latter, liberal construal of her position can provide the basis for an acceptable common education. Therefore, the gap between a morally credible politics of difference and liberalism has vanished.

We deem judgements, laws, and so on, impartial when we think they are unaffected by bias—that is, by illicit preference for the interests of some individual or group. A preference for the interests of some may count as illicit according to either of two, potentially conflicting perspectives: the range of reasons that rightly informs moral choice or whatever considerations are defined as relevant to choice by the rules of a given institution. Corresponding to the moral and the institutional charge of bias, we have moral and institutional conceptions of impartiality.

This distinction brings into relief what should puzzle us about Young's rejection of impartiality. She cannot mean that the rules shaping institutions in existing, professedly liberal societies are tainted by moral bias towards many who are marked as culturally different, with the consequence that the impartial application of those rules is oppressive. Her case would then be a

paradigmatic liberal argument about the conditions of equal citizenship and the failure of existing institutions to embody them. Young's target must be the *moral* impartiality to which liberals appeal if she is to open up any distance between her politics of difference and the liberal tradition she disavows. How is Young's argument to be understood if that is indeed her target?

I suggested that impartiality acquires a moral content when it is coupled with principles and ideals that tell us what is morally relevant to our choices. According to one line of thought within liberal modernity, moral impartiality is achieved by prescinding in some drastic way from the context of deliberation, isolating a sparse array of reasons that is the same always and everywhere (for example, Kohlberg 1981). Young treats this particular version of impartiality as if it were the only possibility. But this is in fact a rather grotesque misconception. Moral judgement is as susceptible to error through discounting the relevant as it is through heeding the irrelevant, and I am as likely to be tempted to make the first as the second mistake by illicit preferences for particular individuals or groups. Therefore, the ascent to a more abstract level of thought will sometimes betoken bias rather than the pull of moral impartiality on its best interpretation.

This is a crucial point for an adequate understanding of moral impartiality. Unduly abstract conceptions of impartiality will hide morally significant contingencies from view, including those that have to do with cultural differences. Therefore, we should expect excessive abstraction to appeal to those who, for morally deplorable reasons, want cultural differences ignored. If I want to maintain the unjust disadvantages under which some group lives, I will want to find a way of talking about politics that dismisses their disadvantages as irrelevant, and hence my chauvinism can masquerade as impartiality. A better conception of moral impartiality will militate against that pretence by specifying values that bring what was occluded by excessive abstraction into the light of common deliberation. That is what Young seems to be trying to do when she talks of traditionally neglected 'faces of oppression'. But if all Young wanted were some more capacious, contextually sensitive understanding of moral impartiality, she would be making common cause with liberal theorists who make just the same point (for example, Johnston 1994). Young's willingness to take the further step and discard impartiality, root and branch, is what makes her politics of difference genuinely postliberal. But that step turns out to be self-defeating.

Adapting Theodor Adorno's argument against 'the logic of identity', Young claims that impartial moral reason is but one example of the more general pathology of Western thought that Adorno diagnosed. The pathology consists in the urge to 'think things together, to reduce them to a unity'. However, the reduction does violence to the richly variegated world on which the logic of difference is imposed: 'Reason, discourse is already inserted in a

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plural, heterogeneous world that outruns totalising comprehension.’ Because the world ‘outruns’ our rational categories, what impartiality really does is to dichotomize rather than unify. ‘Not satisfied then to admit defeat in the face of difference, the logic of identity shoves difference into dichotomous hierarchical oppositions: essence/accident, good/bad, normal/deviant’ (Young 1990:98–9). I am not competent to decipher the mysteries of Adorno’s critique of the logic identity. But the one small point I wish to make is independent of these.

All conceptions of impartial moral reason purport to tell us what matters in general to our decisions about how to live, including what is valuable or tolerable difference on the one hand and unacceptable deviance on the other. If all conceptions of that kind fall prey to the critique of ‘the logic of identity’, then impartial reason has no legitimate purchase on our lives. The trouble is that if we are consistent in our avoidance of what the critique condemns, we have effectively adopted non-judgemental pluralism. Any attempt to judge the practices of some group as chauvinistic will install those very dichotomies—good/bad, normal/deviant, etc.—that Adorno’s critique has taught us to relinquish. Since an antipathy to chauvinism cannot be reconciled with non-judgemental pluralism, whatever reasons we have to reject chauvinism must also be reasons to reject Adorno’s critique, at least on any reading of the critique which takes it to entail the rejection of moral impartiality.

Non-judgemental pluralism is a way of giving up on moral reason. Therefore, the deliberative task that face Young’s heterogeneous public, who attempt to see and overcome the oppression in their midst, must succumb to silence if they are consistent in their rejection of impartiality. Nevertheless, there is something to Young’s argument against impartial reason that I have yet to bring into clear view, something that is, I suggest, the most interesting reason why postmodernist anti-rationalism has come to seem so morally wholesome to many.

Suppose my general conception of impartiality is not marred by excessive abstraction. Nothing in the moral values to which I subscribe necessarily blinds me to morally significant particularities. But I assume that when my judgement is rid of bias and the other vices of unreason, I will agree with all other reasonable people about how to live. Inclusive agreement among reasonable people is the feasible goal of moral reason, and whenever we fall short of agreement, it must be because some of us are biased, irrational, uncivilized or the like. This is ‘moral hyper-rationalism’.

Notice the attitude towards cultural differences that hyper-rationalism will support in the following circumstances. My cultural identity ties me to groups who have traditionally dominated my society. I am a conscientious person, and I try to judge impartially in the beliefs I form and the choices I make qua citizen. Nevertheless, the upshot of my efforts are convictions and choices that are generally typical of people with cultural affinities like my

own. People who belong to more marginal groups in my society tend to see things differently. But if I am confident that I have succeeded in being impartial, I must be equally confident, by virtue of hyper-rationalism, that all who disagree with me are guilty of bias or some other culpable lapse of reason. To whatever extent I see cultural differences as causally implicated in our disagreement, I must also see minority cultures as sources of error and evil. Of course, this could all be badly wrong. Those who disagree with me are perhaps no less reasonable than I am. And in that event, my commitment to impartiality has modulated into chauvinism or something pretty close to it.

But the slide from impartiality towards chauvinism depends on hyper-rationalism, and we have good reason to resist hyper-rationalism. Why? The reasons are many and complex, but something of their cumulative force can be conveyed here (Rawls 1993:54–8). Moral concepts are subject to hard cases. Their application includes a range of cases where reasonable people can be expected to disagree. Second, to a degree we can never precisely determine, judgements reflect particularities of sensibility and individual history, as well as wider cultural differences and conflicts of interest, whose influence we cannot surmount with certainty, no matter how scrupulously we reason. Third, the moral concepts we use in shaping what we take to be a good society are linked to the many different ways of life that people rationally choose. The concepts we employ may be designed so as to be broadly accommodating to diversity—the concept of a right to freedom is the prime example of this. But it would be foolish to suppose that even the feasibly best society will be equally congenial to all worthwhile ways of life. A social world that is equally welcoming to Salman Rushdie and conservative Muslims is an impossibility. Not all good lives can thrive equally in a good society. Therefore, the moral concepts we employ in politics will be ethically selective, and this in turn will create room for reasonable disagreement about how judicious our selectivity really is.

All this suggests that much of our disagreement about how to live together is not to be explained by a propensity to bias or any other remediable failure of intelligence or goodwill. We are divided by reasonable as well as unreasonable disagreement. Even when the shared exercise of moral reason is laudably impartial, the inherent frailties of human judgement are such that we will often fall short of consensus. But hyper-rationalism tells me that when you and I disagree, only one of us can be reasonable, and since I cannot think that the reasonable one is you without ceasing to disagree, I cannot see your viewpoint as one that merits my respect. You *must* be biased or morally or intellectually derelict in some other way. So whenever political disagreement follows the fault lines of cultural differences, hyper-rationalism will marginalize whatever distinctive perspective minorities might have, and it will make any accommodation with them seem like a surrender to ignorance or worse. Furthermore, the harm wrought by hyper-rationalism

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will tend to escalate as any society becomes more culturally diverse, either through the fragmentation of established cultures or immigration. Increasing cultural diversity will tend to increase the scope of reasonable political disagreement. At the same time, hyper-rationalists will infer only that more benighted people now clutter their world, people whose views they must, after impartial consideration, simply dismiss.

But it is calamitous to think that due sensitivity to reasonable disagreement in politics and its entanglement with cultural differences mean we should abandon the ideal of impartiality. Recall that one reason Young gives for doing so is the fact that we all think and choose in ways coloured by culture. When that point is re-cast as an objection to hyper-rationalism, it makes good sense: it becomes a humbling reminder that just because our own best moral judgements are reasonable they may not be uniquely so. But if we take her point literally as a general repudiation of impartiality, it becomes a licence to stop worrying about the difference between our best judgements and our raw prejudices. The bias we hope to overcome in struggling towards our best judgement is really intractable because our partiality is relentless. To change one's mind is only to discard one bias for another. Respect for reasonable differences becomes impossible here because differences cannot be adjudicated on the basis of reason. So we are back to non-judgemental pluralism, and the disintegration of any discourse that could take oppression seriously.

I will not deny that hyper-rationalism is a sin that has loomed large in the history of liberal theory, to say nothing of the often sordid reality of politics in avowedly liberal societies. But a commitment to moral reason is fundamental to the liberal, and any other credible social ideal. And if the kernel of insight in arguments for a politics of difference is the imperative to respect reasonable disagreement, the insight is central to much contemporary liberal philosophy (for example, Macedo 1990; Rawls 1993; Gutmann and Thompson 1996). More important perhaps, the insight lies within the virtues of moderation and principled compromise that characterize ordinary liberal politics at its honourable best.

4

I have said much here and implied still more about the common education proper to a liberal democracy. What I have said and implied will be challenged by many who have little sympathy with the politics of difference. An education that encourages children to grapple with the sources of reasonable pluralism, for example, harbours an ideal of personal autonomy that may be corrosive of some established religious groups. Some liberals will say that the moral ends of common education should be set more modestly, securing minimal ends of mutual tolerance rather than more strenuous and controversial ideals of civic virtue. Still others will doubt that

the liberal tradition, unless it is complemented or corrected through ideals of community and the common good to which the tradition has been intermittently hostile, can provide an adequate vision of the good society and the education it would support. I say nothing to resolve these disputes here, although I have said a lot elsewhere (Callan 1997).

But serious collective deliberation about the content of common education, in which the objections I have just mentioned are pondered, is the very foundation of educational endeavour for a free people. Without that, the idea of a national curriculum, for example, can be no more than an arbitrary imposition. My efforts here have been directed at one style of contemporary thought that threatens to undermine serious thought about common education. When it is not a kind of crypto-liberalism, the postmodernist case for a politics of difference descends into non-judgemental pluralism. Unfortunately, a world in which we wallow in unassimilated otherness is a poor substitute for a society in which justice might be done. But postmodernism is not the only cultural threat we face to serious thought about common education. Another, vastly larger threat confronts us. I will end by saying a little about that threat and its curious relation to Young's ideal of city life.

Western modernity is a far less monolithic cultural epoch than the coarse-grained caricature of much postmodern social criticism might suggest. One powerful idea that runs through so many aspects of the world we have inherited is the instrumentalist conception of practical reason. According to that conception, reason tells us how to pursue our ends successfully, but it can say nothing about what those ends should be. So instrumentalism must be silent on the questions of what is a good society and a good common education to the extent that these are about what ends we should pursue. But it does entail that we would be foolish to look for an answer more rational than any other because instrumentalism says there is none.

Suppose for the moment that we accept instrumentalism. It does not follow that we are at a loss to answer questions about social order. For many of instrumentalism's contemporary devotees, the market is the institution *par excellence* that co-ordinates behaviour without presupposing that anyone's ends are more rational than anyone else's. A market in religion allows people to shop around for the church that meets their spiritual desires just as a market in television allows you to select the channels that you want. And if this works for religion and television, it will work for education. Let people choose the educational products they want in the market. Talk of common education is idle chatter or a means by which powerful groups impose their ends on others. By this train of reasoning, instrumentalism seems to lead to a radical diversification of educational provision, without a thought for the common education that might be forfeited thereby.

Instrumentalism will seem friendly to difference in another way. When

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instrumentalists have different ends, at least one source of conflict is dissolved by their shared recognition that ends are not amenable to reasoned assessment. They understand that their difference does not mean that one is right and the other wrong. Indeed, they may come to enjoy differences that in a less enlightened world would occasion distress or conflict. Diversity has its delights. A city with many different ethnic restaurants is nicer than one with just a few. A city with many different cultures is more charming than one with just a few, or so the connoisseur of difference might suppose.

This takes us back to the question I set aside in Section 2. I asked there if Young's city life is a persuasive vision of the good society. No doubt different readers will respond differently to that question. But I think those who will be enticed are at least latent instrumentalists. A world in which we unambivalently celebrate difference could not be a world where those differences are invested with any ethical meaning. It would have to be a place where differences were reduced to mere objects of desire, that only a fool would think were subject to reflective evaluation. But because many of the differences we find in our world, both within and across cultures, are ethically significant for us, enmeshed with rival understandings of good and evil, right and wrong, we cannot without bad faith respond to them with the welcoming embrace that connoisseurs of difference would evince. Postmodernism and instrumentalism might seem like strange bed-fellows, but in their hostility to moral reason they share much.

Liberal politics offers another accommodation of diversity, one that does not extirpate ethical difference for the sake of a convivial harmony. Without requiring us to surrender our divergent ethical beliefs, it asks us to adjust these in light of the fact of reasonable disagreement, and to live in mutual respect with those who disagree reasonably with us. There is much room for cultural difference in that world, and none for chauvinism. It is a world that depends on a common education that the siren song of instrumentalism/postmodernism would distract us from. It is also a world we do not yet have, and perhaps too few of us want it anyhow.³

Notes

- 1 A longer and better version of this chapter would say much about the concept of culture that is relevant to the charge of chauvinism. Very roughly, 'culture' in the sense that matters here signifies established systems of convention that constitute the institutions under which people live. See Kymlicka (1995:76–9).
- 2 The explicit target of Young's case against liberalism is not education. But her emphasis on the way moral capabilities and perceptions are malformed in liberal politics makes her argument substantively an argument about education.
- 3 I am most grateful to Ken Strike for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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EPISTEMOLOGY, POLITICS AND CURRICULUM CONSTRUCTION

D.C.Phillips

Introduction

If you can't convince them, confuse them.

(Harry S.Truman)

Over the past few decades, a massive amount has been written in what might loosely be called the field of 'curriculum theory'. And yet, sadly, as Philip Jackson points out on the opening page of the gargantuan *Handbook of Research on Curriculum* that he edited in 1992:

Indeed, were one to choose a single word to capture both the state of affairs reported on as well as the recurrent mood of those doing the reporting, it would have to be the adjective 'confused'. 'Confusion' is the dominant condition remarked on by observer after observer.... Others speak of a field that is 'amorphous' and 'elusive'.

(Jackson 1992:3)

It will be my aim in the following discussion to convince the reader that amidst this confusion there are some important points that ought not be lost, but there also are errors aplenty—not the least of which is the distressing tendency to draw conclusions that go far beyond those that might be warranted by the arguments and evidence advanced. I shall take as my canvas not the whole field, but rather that portion of it that treats what are claimed to be the political or ideological functions of curriculum. But first a preliminary point needs to be made to set the stage.

Not so long ago there were many members of the analytic movement in

philosophy of education who held the belief that essential questions about education could be settled by a careful analysis of certain key concepts: ‘education’, ‘learning’, ‘teaching’, ‘indoctrination’, and so forth (Phillips 1985). In other words, it was held that a philosopher could give normative advice, warranted by the analysis that had been done on some foundational concept. There is something to this, of course; for example, if you were to get clear about what is meant by ‘science’, you would then be in a position to tell budding scientists what they must do if they wished to be called ‘scientists’—in essence, this is what was done by philosophers of science like Karl Popper. It might be thought that what is sauce for the philosophy of science goose should also be sauce for the philosophy of education gander!

There is an important difference between what these two groups of philosophers attempted, however. Popper (to stick with this example for a moment) based his account of science not on how normal speakers of English (or German) used the *word* (or its German equivalent), but rather on the *activities* pursued within the field generally publicly accepted as being science, and his analysis of the logic and epistemology underlying these practices; even so, however, his conclusions have been hotly disputed by other philosophers, historians and sociologists of science. The analytic philosophers of education to whom I am referring, however, based their normative endeavours squarely upon analyses of the ‘normal usage of terminology’, which turned out to be a problematic procedure which has been widely although not universally abandoned (see the discussion of these issues in Gellner 1979, Phillips 1985, and Barrow 1994—the latter being more positive about the ‘ordinary language’ programme than I have been).

The issues here need to be pursued a little further. Undoubtedly we can deduce from the concept of a square that if we want to draw such a shape we have to draw something with four equal sides and four equal internal angles, and logical deduction can join with analysis of ordinary usage to assure us that if we wish to remain bachelors or spinsters, we need to remain unmarried. But the situation in the field of education is different. To take an example, we cannot deduce from the concept of the curriculum—‘the curriculum is the total offerings of the school’, or some such—what those offerings should be. (For one thing, there is a single accepted definition of ‘a square’, but there are many incompatible definitions of ‘the curriculum’.) Nor can it be deduced from the concept of education *alone* that the study of the Bible should not occur in schools but that perusal of Shakespeare’s plays or Marx’s political writings ought to, or that it is wrong (or right) for teachers to insist that students be punctual or respectful to their peers (for the simple reason that the concept of education does not have an in-built reference to these things). In sum, epistemological or other philosophical analysis cannot, by itself, settle the question of the nature of the school curriculum. Indeed, I would extend this point further: no very general or abstract position, philosophic or scientific or other (a list that includes, *inter alia*, both

postmodernism and neo-Marxism), has—by itself—‘implications’ for the content of schooling; such very general positions need to be linked to the phenomena of schooling by a chain of reasoning, one that often needs to be quite complex (Phillips 1980).

This seems a simple enough point, but it certainly manages to trip up some of the recent breed of curriculum theorists. Consider the examples of Slattery and Doll, both of whom recently have written books relating postmodernism to curriculum (Doll 1993; Slattery 1995). Postmodernism (or, more precisely, the philosophical rather than the aesthetic/literary branch of it) challenges the certainty and the hegemony of modern science; following the lead of Jean-François Lyotard, postmodernists are ‘incredulous’ about the ‘justificatory metanarratives’ that have been devised to warrant our ‘modernist’ belief that science provides an objective, and true, picture of the world (Lyotard 1984:xxiii–xxv). Strangely, for Doll and Slattery this postmodern ‘incredulity’ about science leads to a love affair with chaos theory—itsself a product of modern science and mathematics, but one which can be interpreted as undermining some traditional scientific notions (for example, chaos theorists reject the view that many complex natural systems, such as global weather, are the products of simple causal mechanisms that produce results that are, in principle if not yet in practice, predictable). It seems a large leap from the chaotic nature of the weather to the content and processes of schooling, but these authors make it in one bound. Consider these two remarkable passages from Slattery (examples from Doll may be located in Doll 1993: Chapter 4).

Prigogine and Stengers (1984) have demonstrated that systems in equilibrium and disequilibrium behave differently, and that order can emerge out of chaos. James Gleick (1987) and Paul Davies (1988) contend that there is an emerging science of complexity that is built in part on the fact that hidden in apparent chaos are complex types of order. The postmodern curriculum encourages chaos, nonrationality, and zones of uncertainty because the complex order existing here is the place where critical thinking, reflective intuition, and global problem solving will flourish.

(Slattery 1995:230–1)

Curriculum models based on modern versions of Newtonian physics have attempted, like a clockwork universe, to impose uniformity. Every lesson, every goal and objective, must conform to predetermined principles, cultural forms, social structures, or curricular guides. The postmodern curriculum, on the other hand, is based on a new science: a complex, multidimensional, kaleidoscopic, relational, interdisciplinary and metaphoric system (Slattery 1995:233).

On the face of it, there is what analytic philosophers would call a serious ‘category mistake’ in these passages—chaos theory applies to physical and mathematical systems, not to what educators offer to students in schools. It is the same mistake as would occur if one were to take a biological description of what used to be called picturesquely the ‘dance of the chromosomes’ during cell division, and to claim that this directly implies the form that should be used in choreographing all ballets that are performed in the future! Ballets and chromosomes belong to different categories—and so do school curricula and complex physical systems that operate under causal conditions producing chaos—and it is a mistake to assume that what applies to one will automatically apply to the other. Another way of putting this is that there is an immense logical gap between the two categories which—if it is to be bridged—requires a complex and detailed chain of argument. To put it in a nutshell, theories about the state of physical systems are in the same situation as abstract philosophical theories—they do not yield, in any straightforward and direct way, ‘implications’ for education. (For further discussion of this point, using a much simpler example, see Phillips 1980.) The only chaos to be found here is located in the logic of Doll and Slattery.

It is time to broaden the scope of the discussion to include other contemporary curriculum theorists whose main interest lies in the political and ideological functions and impact of schooling.

The political and ideological functions of curriculum

An overview

Postmodernist writers see the school curriculum as based on modernist or ‘Enlightenment’ notions; it embodies a faith in universal reason and technical control over man and nature that no longer can be regarded as justified. As I wish to be fair to these authors, I shall quote their own expositions; thus, Henry Giroux has said that

the dominant features of public schooling are characterized by a modernist project that has increasingly come to rely upon instrumental reason and the standardization of curricula. In part, this can be seen in the regulation of class, racial, and gender differences through rigid forms of testing, sorting, and tracking. The rule of reason reveals its Western cultural legacy in highly centered curricula that more often than not privilege the histories, experiences, and cultural capital of largely white, middle-class students. Moreover, the modernist nature of public schooling is evident in the refusal of educators to incorporate popular culture into the curriculum.

(Giroux 1996:65)

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In contrast, postmodernists have a different perspective; as the feminist postmodernist Patti Lather has written,

The ground of postmodernity is the disappointed hopes engendered by optimistic confidence in the continuing progress and imminent triumph of Enlightenment reason, especially 'the debacle of instrumental reason'.... To position oneself in the twilight of modernity is to foreground the underside of its faith in rationality, science and the human will to change and master: Auschwitz, Hiroshima, My Lai, Three Mile Island, Chernobyl.

(Lather 1991:87–9)

On this basis, then, postmodernists want a curriculum in which science is not taken to be the only model for valid inquiry; in which a post-disciplinary orientation dominates; in which the values of males are no longer dominant; in which the values and knowledge-systems of non-western cultures are taken seriously; and where modernist individualism is replaced by more co-operative, communitarian and globalist perspectives (Slattery 1995:19).

In contrast, writers in the neo-Marxist and critical theory traditions give a different account, although there is overlap on several points. They see that power—which goes hand-in-hand with ownership of the economic forces in society—shapes the legitimation of knowledge, and they hold that what is explicitly taught in schools serves to solidify the social class structure and maintains the status quo. Citing a number of sources from the past few decades, Burbules summarizes the position in these terms: According to these theorists,

the reproduction of a class of workers was the central task of schools in capitalist societies, and that this task had two components: the training of vocational skills and the development of appropriate attitudes and dispositions (the most important of which is the acceptance of one's class role as fair, or at least as unavoidable). In capitalist societies, working-class students receive an education in routine and largely manual work skills, within the context of a structure of classroom relations—relations of authority, obedience, and orderly discipline—that prepare them for their later roles as supervised workers in an industrial system. Correspondingly, students from more privileged classes receive an education that stresses independence, self-reliance, creativity, and initiative.

(Burbules 1994:3618)

But it is not only the *explicit* or *manifest* curriculum that has this political/ideological function; the *hidden* curriculum of schools also functions in this

way—for this, as Michael Apple puts it, is ‘the tacit teaching to students of norms, values, and dispositions that goes on simply by their living in and coping with the institutional expectations and routines of schools day in and day out for a number of years’ (Apple 1990:14).

It is important to note that both these traditions are far from static; postmodernists are splintered into a number of different groups each emphasizing slightly different things (see the interesting account given by Peters and Lankshear 1996), and the neo-Marxist and critical traditions have become more sophisticated over the years (but have always been rather splintered—see Burbules 1994). Michael Apple’s personal intellectual history is interesting here (Apple 1993: Appendix). In his early years as an academic he seems to have accepted the somewhat simplistic ‘correspondence theory’ of Bowles and Gintis (and Carnoy and Levin), according to which there was a simple and direct correspondence between the needs of advanced capitalism and the functions carried out by schools—a view that often has been parodied by supposing that there must have been many secret meetings between leading industrialists and school superintendents at which the former group forced the latter to carry out their will in schools. Later Apple realized this was over-simple, and he adopted a more complex position:

Yet the powerful are not *that* powerful. The politics of official knowledge are the politics of *accords* or *compromises*. They are usually not impositions, but signify how dominant groups try to create situations where the compromises that are formed favor them.

(Apple 1993:10)

This brief sketch should be sufficient as a launching point for discussion and assessment, which will be set out in the form of a number of points.

Critical discussion

Neither of the traditions described above seem to question that one of the functions of schools is to transmit knowledge; what they attack is the *nature* of the knowledge that currently is transmitted, and the *reasons* that are given to justify its place in the curriculum. Some issues of great complexity arise here.

1

In the first place, it is a perfectly respectable task—indeed it is a vitally important one—to ask probing questions about the nature of subjects that currently have a place on the curriculum, and to investigate the claims that are made about these subjects. This task is one in which, in a democracy, individuals of all political and intellectual persuasions should be franchised

to participate. So, widening the dialogue to include modernists, postmodernists and neo-Marxists (who have a foot in both these previous camps) is to be welcomed.

2

This being said, however, I want to suggest that the reasoning of many postmodernists is problematic and convoluted at key points. Consider, as a particular instance, their attacks on the status accorded to science by those of us with so-called ‘modernist’ leanings. Many of these critiques are based upon an uncritical reading of sources such as Lyotard, or social constructivists such as Latour and Woolgar. Lyotard expresses ‘incredulity’ at the ‘justificatory metanarratives’ that serve to underwrite our belief in science—which of course is nothing particularly new (except for its tone), for within the modernist tradition of the past several hundred years itself, from at least the time of David Hume, there have been active and at times heated discussions of the epistemic status of science. While there are few present-day modernist philosophers of science who believe that the claims of science are all likely to be true, there also are few (if any) who believe that it is not rational to at least tentatively accept the current ‘findings’ of science—these might not be absolutely justified, but there *are* reasons for accepting them.

Those influenced by Lyotard, however, and who take his ‘incredulity’ seriously, become quite negative about the truth-claims of science. In contrast, when one reads a little further in Lyotard it turns out that his position is a little less clearcut. He asserts that science is supported in the postmodern world not because it is a path to the truth, but because of its undoubted ‘performativity’:

the goal is no longer truth, but performativity—that is, the best possible input/output equation. The State and/or company must abandon the idealist and humanist narratives of legitimation in order to justify the new goal: in the discourse of today’s financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power. Scientists, technicians, and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power.

(Lyotard 1984:46)

Although he has probably correctly identified what motivates the captains of industry, for whom the ‘bottom line’ (and therefore ‘performativity’) is sacrosanct—an analysis that the neo-Marxists can also warmly embrace—Lyotard actually gets himself into something of a bind here. In prose that is a little less than direct, he treads warily enough around a dangerous false dichotomy—for the fact is, finding truth and bestowing power are not

mutually incompatible, indeed it is a piece of conventional wisdom that the truth *confers* power. This, no doubt, is why he states that performativity ‘also increases the ability to be right...[it] cannot fail to influence the truth criterion’ (Lyotard 1984:46). But, if he grants this (ignoring for a moment the fact that he has it the wrong way around), what has happened to his incredulity about the truth-finding capacity of science? The point becomes clearer when one asks how science is able to deliver the goods to industrialists—in virtue of what feature or features is science able to achieve ‘performativity’ and hence become able to enhance the power of the giants of industry? If in fact science is a sham (or the postmodernist equivalent)—if its claims to the truth possess no legitimacy, or are incredible—then it would be expected that the ideas it produces, and the inventions that are developed in its name, would be utter failures (rather as the treatments delivered by quack doctors and ‘snake oil salesmen’ were doomed to fail in the Wild West). In treating the performativity as *real*, then, Lyotard has underscored the epistemic standing of science rather than having undermined it, *for the obvious explanation for why science can ‘perform’ is that its claims are true (or are close to the truth)*. Thus it is truth that leads to ‘performativity’, and not vice-versa as Lyotard stated it. It also seems clear that he cannot have *both* incredulity and performativity, for the one undermines the other.

Thus there are real tensions here for postmodernists. Some are less strident in their attacks on science, and seem merely to want to update the accounts of its methodology and epistemology (the term ‘merely’ is intended to indicate that this is not a radical attack on science for—as pointed out earlier—accounts of its epistemology have constantly been updated by ‘modernists’ over the past couple of hundred years); but others write with a strongly anti-science tone (as Lather 1991:104 recognizes). Some of the latter even outdo Lyotard:

the world that made science, and that science made, has disappeared, and scientific thought is now an archaic mode of consciousness surviving for a while yet in degraded form.

(Tyler, quoted by Lather 1991:103)

And yet, in their daily lives, postmodernists use the products of modern science unabashedly—they have displayed confidence that the modernist laws of nature upon which science is built are not likely to let them down catastrophically as they listen to their in-flight entertainment while cruising to speaking engagements at 35,000 feet. This is not meant to be a flippant complaint, although some postmodernists will no doubt treat it as such; it seems problematic to attack the epistemic solidarity of science while relying upon it so completely, given that Lyotard’s ‘incredulity’ is so foundational to their position. Some will argue that their critique applies not to the physical but only to the social sciences (which opens another can of worms, see

Phillips 1992) but many, apparently including Lyotard, want to include the physical sciences as well.

3

A similar set of issues arises if the postmodernists want to reject the ‘totalizing’ aspects of modernism, and thus wish to broaden (and break down the rigid categories of) the typical curriculum of western schools—although it is not entirely clear what a postmodern curriculum would look like (see Doll 1993: Chapter 7, Slattery 1995: Chapter 1). Including new topics is not particularly problematic, for the disciplines that currently have a place on the curriculum, and the topics that are treated within these disciplines, reached their current state by a complex and no doubt idiosyncratic process the results of which certainly could be improved upon (Ivor Goodson stresses the need for detailed historical case studies in the field of curriculum studies, see Goodson 1995: Part One). But problems arise if we wish to stress that there are ‘alternative ways of knowing’, for these often turn out to be alternative ways of *believing*. Although the distinction between knowing and believing is a modernist one, and is thus liable to be treated with ‘incredulity’, we nevertheless ignore it at our peril. Consider, as an example, the suggestion that we should introduce students to such alternative ‘modes of knowing’ as the belief systems of other cultures—say, for argument’s sake, African tribal cosmologies and epistemologies. If the aim of this proposal is to extend the horizons of students, and to drive home the point that others do not believe as we do, well and good. But to suggest that these frameworks of belief are genuine ‘alternatives’ to our own seems to me to be ludicrous, and to embody an untenable relativism. From the fact that other people believe different things to be true, it does not follow that these things *are* true, although this mistake in logic is not uncommon and is often backed up with a metaphysics that stresses there are multiple (rival or incompatible) realities (see the discussion of this, in the context of some specific examples, in Phillips 1996). One has to examine the reasons (including the evidence as well as the ‘justificatory metanarratives’) that are advanced in support of the claim that beliefs are true, and despite Lyotard’s qualms, western beliefs are on much firmer epistemic ground here than many of those held in, say, traditional tribal cultures (notwithstanding the fact that some of our beliefs will eventually turn out—by our own standards—to be false). Indeed, it seems ingenuous to stress that modernist beliefs are ill-founded and may be false, without assessing the chances of other belief systems being even worse!

Despite the popularity of the expression, it has never been made sufficiently clear what exactly an ‘alternative way of knowing’ *is*. (Recently I suggested to my colleague Elliot Eisner, when he used this expression, that he must be after ‘unjustified belief, since this is a genuine alternative to the traditional ‘justified belief’ account; when his hackles rose at this, I pointed

out to him that wanting to liberalize what was to count as a justification or warrant—which is what I suspect he had in mind—was to work within the scope of the traditional account.) Sometimes ‘narrative knowing’ is proffered as a candidate, but I have argued elsewhere that supporters of so-called ‘narrative inquiry’ have steadfastly avoided advocating the use of any criteria that are relevant to judging the epistemic status of a story, preferring instead to use criteria such as ‘has an engaging plot’. (The problem being, of course, that even sheer fiction and tissues of falsehood can meet this epistemically irrelevant criterion. See Phillips 1994, 1997b.)

4

A false dichotomy similar to the one drawn by Lyotard between science being performative and it being true, appears in the work of the so-called social constructivists (who can be found among the ranks of the postmodernists, neo-Marxists and feminists). These are theorists who stress that all knowledge is ‘socially constructed’, and who then draw the moral that political factors (such as the use of power and the protection of one’s own economic interests) rather than epistemic factors are the ones which explain why certain things get to be regarded as knowledge. The following passages are typical: First, Cleo Cherryholmes sees scientific research as being a species of practice, and therefore ‘human interests, myths, ideologies, values, and commitments shape what researcher-theorists claim to know’ (Cherryholmes, quoted in Phillips 1997a:87), a passage which strikingly leaves out the fact that the world itself exercises some constraint on what a researcher can believe about it. Second, Latour and Woolgar wrote in their now famous study *Laboratory Life* (1986) that:

there is little to be gained by maintaining the distinction between the ‘polities’ of science and its ‘truth’...the same ‘political’ qualities are necessary both to make a point and to out-manoeuvre a competitor.

(Latour and Woolgar, quoted in Phillips 1997a:87)

The error lies in supposing that there is a conflict between a knowledge-claim being true, and it also being (in some sense) a social construction. Clearly, the theories about quarks that are produced at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center (SLAC) are social constructions, for it is the case that four or five hundred scientists and a similar number of engineers and technicians, with all their complex interactions (political, power-seeking, or otherwise), are involved in the production of these theories—but so also is the collection of data, the testing and the calculations done by these people, the results of which warrant the belief that their scientific claims are true. Or, to jump to another example, I believe it to be true that the cells of my

body contain forty-six chromosomes, even though this piece of knowledge was socially constructed. (For detailed criticisms of the work of Latour and Woolgar, and exposure of the astounding assumptions underlying their famous work, see Slezak 1994: Parts One and Two; Phillips 1997a.)

The result is this: The fact that some domain is a social construction *is no bar—by itself—to it being regarded as genuine knowledge*, nor should this alone prevent it being included in the curriculum! Furthermore, if we were to exclude social constructions from the curriculum, we would have to close down our schools, for it is trivially true that *every possible candidate* for inclusion in the curriculum is a social construction. But there is another implication: If for example Cherryholmes, and Latour and Woolgar, were right, then the account of science that we give to students would have to be altered significantly (that is, the account of the ‘syntactical structure’ of science, to use Schwab’s terminology from several decades ago—see Phillips 1987: Chapter 11); although they are not right, there is still reason to suppose that the social aspects of the construction of scientific knowledge, which certainly at present are absent from standard accounts found in school textbooks, ought to be included. But this sort of material supplements, and does not replace, the standard epistemological account (which also needs updating in the light of advances in philosophy of science).

5

As shown in the earlier outline of the work of Apple and other curriculum theorists of broadly neo-Marxist orientation, it has been claimed that the curriculum serves important ideological and political functions—for example, it serves to sort students into categories, each with different intellectual skills and dispositions, and it helps perpetuate the class and power structure of society. It seems to me that this work would be stronger if it more clearly distinguished between *functions* (both manifest and latent), *consequences or effects*, and *unanticipated consequences*.

The discussion should start with a simple case, based on the familiar fact that a cause can produce one or more effects. Let us suppose then, that teaching a curriculum unit C produces a range of effects. It is important to distinguish between a number of situations: (a) One or more of the effects of teaching C might in fact have been intended by the teacher or by the educational body that designed the curriculum (or both)—these are the ‘manifest’ reasons that C was presented to students; (b) some of the effects (the same, or different ones) may serve the interests of certain groups in society such as industrialists or military dictators, and it was to achieve these effects that they lobbied (secretly or otherwise) to have C taught; (c) some effects might turn out to serve (or not to serve) the interests of such outside groups or individuals, but this was completely unintended.

Those theorists like Apple, who stress the political and ideological

functions of the curriculum, are in effect holding that category (b) is the causally important one—it is for this reason that the curriculum exists. In his more recent writings, however, Apple backs away a little from this hard line, for he realizes (as the earlier Apple and the supporters of the so-called ‘correspondence theory’ did not) that the ruling capitalist forces in society do not have matters all their own way; while he still sees them as attempting to bend the shape of the curriculum to suit their own political purposes, in democracies like the USA they have to come to some accord with other groups who have other hopes for the curriculum:

It has been argued in considerable detail elsewhere that the selection and organization of knowledge in schools is an ideological process, one that serves the interests of particular classes and social groups. However, as I just noted, this does not mean that the entire corpus of school knowledge is ‘a mirror reflection of ruling class ideas, imposed in an unmediated and coercive manner.’ Instead, ‘the processes of cultural incorporation are dynamic, reflecting both continuities and contradictions of that dominant culture and the continual remaking and relegitimation of that culture’s plausibility system.’

(Apple 1993:55–6)

What Apple has in mind, then, is something like this: Whatever is taught—for example topic or subject C—will turn out to result from a compromise between various interests. Some individuals will have wanted C, or some rival topic, taught for educational reasons; others will have wanted C taught for the way in which it will support their political interests; and others might have supported (or opposed) C for, say, religious reasons. As a result of conflict and compromise, C will end up on the curriculum. Apple’s words in the passage above indicate that not the *whole* corpus of the curriculum will turn out to support the interests of the ruling class, which suggests that *much* of it will (after all, if little of it supports their interests, there would be no reason for such a song and dance). Taken literally, it seems to me that much in this account is quite implausible; but there is also an important insight that ought not be lost.

First, I think it is implausible to suggest that the decision to teach algebra and geometry, foreign languages, physics and chemistry and biology, literature, history, a little art and music, and so forth, results from compromises in which capitalists largely (or even slightly) get their way with other pressure groups in society. If the capitalist ruling class really wanted to produce a large underclass which was pliant and non-rebellious, it seems to me that they would be backing the wrong horse to allow the teaching of the subjects listed above—it is not intuitively clear how algebra and geometry, foreign languages, physics and chemistry and biology, literature, and the

rest, serve the interests of capitalists so much that they would fight to have these subjects included in the curriculum. Capitalists would be more advised to read their Plato, and to support the sort of curriculum and the sort of educational system that he devised in the *Republic*—only the future guardians were allowed to pursue education beyond an elementary level, and the ‘myth of the metals’ was instilled into all to serve the ideological function of legitimating the almost impermeable class divisions that were to exist. (It is interesting to note that many of the ruling class who supported introduction of compulsory education in the English-speaking world had this more realistic orientation; they supported only elementary education for all, and the purpose explicitly was to make the lower classes more docile and law-abiding partly by giving them the skills to read the Bible and to appreciate the moral lessons therein. In this case, Apple’s analysis might be more directly on target. There is a disquieting fact reported by Goodson, however: The ‘high status knowledge’ associated with the education of children of the ruling class throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth—at least in Britain—has not been of the kind that one would expect on Apple’s neo-Marxist economic analysis, but rather has been academic and classical in nature (Goodson 1995:162). This is not a problem, of course, if we are prepared to argue in a circle: High status knowledge is whatever children of high status get presented with.)

Several other points need to be made here.

(a) As mentioned earlier, it is beyond dispute that all curriculum units produce a range of effects, some of which can be useful to one or another group in society. But it does not follow that because group G , say, finds that some of its interests are served by effect E of curriculum² unit C , that members of that group intended (or lobbied³ for) the inclusion of C in the curriculum. In most cases it is much more likely that E was an unintended consequence of C ; and to show that it was not, further² evidence—such as detailed historical case studies of curriculum development—would be needed. The point is, one cannot point to E as evidence that there has been some sort of conspiracy! Thus, for example, there is no reason to believe the fantasy that some enterprising and far-sighted capitalists (far-sighted in the sense that they were fully aware of what their interests were, and what steps would be likely to support these interests), reached agreement among themselves that they would advocate the inclusion of pre-calculus algebra into the high school curriculum since this was a sure way to produce many failures who could then be channelled into jobs in factories. The fact that some students do fail to learn algebraic material, and that their failure may have major consequences, is not sufficient to establish that such behind-the-scenes shenanigans took place.

(b) The fantasy described above, however, is not *entirely* fantastic; there are many cases where the actions of pressure groups in exerting deliberate influence over the curriculum can be quite adequately documented—but

these cases do not involve capitalists so much as organized religious groups, groups at the extreme liberal and conservative ends of the political spectrum (which cross class boundaries), and even the professional associations of academics. (Michael Apple himself has done some interesting work on the factors affecting textbook publishers; see Apple 1988.) One such case is the struggle over excluding evolutionary theory from, or including creation science in, the high school science curriculum; the opposing forces here belie any simple stereotyping in terms of ‘capitalist ruling class’ versus ‘the rest’ (see Venezky 1992:447–8). Another case involves the furore over a proposed version of the ‘new social studies’ programme in the USA, ‘Man: A Course of Study’ (MACOS), which had been devised by Jerome Bruner in the 1960s (Marker and Mehlinger 1992:839).

(c) Whether or not effect E turns out to serve the political or economic interests of some group or another, and whether this was foreseen or not, is certainly an interesting issue; and it might become of great concern if it were to turn out that the majority of effects of the curriculum were serving (planned or not) the interests of only one powerful class or group in society. Personally, I would take a lot of convincing about this matter, but I could be convinced by the right kind of detailed, rigorous scholarship.

But there is another issue that should be of even greater concern: Items included in the curriculum need to be ‘educationally justified’; that is, there should be among the strong effects of the curriculum at least one that either was specifically intended by educationists who had good warrant for so intending, or if unintended, would be an effect that could be strongly endorsed on educational grounds. The point is that the ‘manifest function’ of the curriculum is to foster the educational development of individual students, and to override this and assert that the chief purpose of the curriculum is to achieve some *latent* function requires some extremely hard and sophisticated argumentation. (The neo-Marxist curriculum theorists would need to avoid setting up yet another false dichotomy here; for it is false to suppose that either an effect is in the student’s educational interest, or it is in the interest of some other individual or group. An effect can be in *both* interests.) That the curriculum does not yet foster every student’s educational development is a sad state of affairs, but it is not an argument that this is not its manifest function.

What constitutes satisfactory educational development, of course, will likely remain a matter of dispute between the neo-Marxists, the postmodernists, and modernist liberals. And so the nature of the curriculum is likely to remain an ‘essentially contested’ topic.

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FEMINISM, EPISTEMOLOGY AND EDUCATION

Shirley Pendlebury

Hesitant forays

The feminist challenge to mainstream epistemology and related approaches in philosophy of education has been warmly welcomed by some and cursorily dismissed by others. Still others find themselves blowing hot and cold—supporting the feminist project in spirit, yet concerned about too radical a repudiation of ‘masculinist’ tools of philosophical analysis. In this chapter I consider whether, how and at what educational cost recent feminist work in epistemology serves to challenge those liberal approaches to education that rest on a ‘forms of knowledge epistemology’.

Of course, there is more than one feminist position and within each more than one challenge to mainstream epistemology. Similarly, there is no homogeneous feminist philosophy of education and, apart from some of Jane Roland Martin’s essays (for example, Martin 1981), little sustained feminist criticism of forms of knowledge epistemology in education. Nonetheless, philosophers working from a range of feminist perspectives do give grounds for challenging the kinds of educational and epistemological claims canonized in the three influential volumes edited by Dearden, Hirst and Peters (1971), and by their heirs. What held this group together was not common consent to Hirst’s forms of knowledge thesis but the view that the constitutive aim of education is the development of reason and understanding. Proper attention to reason and to the nature of human knowledge seemed to promise objective curriculum choices unhampered by fashion, ideology or politics. This optimism and its supporting arguments were a far cry from the naive empiricism of so much of what passed—and still passes—for a science of education. While Hirst and colleagues celebrated reason, they gave neither the emotions nor morals short shrift; they regarded objectivity as a matter of inter-subjective agreement, facts and values as

interdependent and language, meaning and truth as bound up with one another.

How far can feminist challenges to ‘masculinist’ epistemology be taken as challenges to forms of knowledge epistemology in education? I undertake this appraisal with trepidation. Three predicaments fuel my anxiety. Personal though they may seem, they also take us to the heart of current concerns in feminist epistemology and so suggest an agenda for the chapter.

For a start I do not believe it is possible to undertake any appraisal whatsoever without some recourse to the tools of traditional philosophical analysis; yet the strongest feminist challenge to epistemology consists precisely in a rejection of these analytical tools. Some form of argument, for instance, seems to me to be indispensable. On the face of it, this drives me to one of three equally unsatisfactory choices: either I use some of the rejected analytical tools to show that the ‘radical position’ is tenable, or I use them to show that it is not, or I simply assume (without offering any reasons) that it is untenable or tenable, in which case I will have refused the invitation to appraise the position.

Second, little of my previous scholarly work—in philosophy, curriculum or teacher education—has been written from an explicitly feminist standpoint. Does this not disqualify me from undertaking the assigned task? After all, an editor of a collection on contemporary issues in philosophy of science would not normally invite a contribution from someone who had done no work in the field; nor would it do for me to declare like Sojourner Truth ‘Ain’t I a woman?’, as if being a female person guarantees epistemic authority on matters of feminist theory. If I use tools of ‘masculinist epistemology’ and write from a perspective developed outside of an active participation in feminist theory-making, both method and standpoint are bound to be suspect. Add the fact that I am one of only three women invited to contribute to the volume, possibly in the interests of gender balance, and it seems I have no business accepting an invitation to write a chapter on ‘the feminist challenge’.

Finally, a single chapter is too confined to permit a deep, textured and context-sensitive account of a full range of feminist work in philosophy of education. While space permits a brief taxonomy, mere taxonomies are tedious and misleading, taxing the patience of readers already familiar with the field and making false promises to those who are not. Dictates of clarity, economy and rigour suggest instead that I take some claims and submit these to critical scrutiny. Yet this route not only involves taking sample claims out of context and presenting them as if they were the whole story, it also offers the easy temptation to laud, bolster or bash a group of straw women and so escape the more daunting task of responsible critical appraisal.

Even as these predicaments impede my project at its start so they set an agenda for its progress. The first arises from too easy a slide into ‘blind’ logic, coupled with dismissive presuppositions about what is entailed in rejecting

the methods of traditional epistemology. A more substantial account of feminist challenges to ‘masculinist epistemology’ may dissolve the predicament. The second predicament is not merely personal for it points to a controversy about whether and how a knower’s subjectivity is relevant to an appraisal of her knowledge claims. It raises the question ‘Who knows or claims to know?’ and, in education, the related question ‘Who may come to know?’, a question concerning whether and how a learner’s subjectivity is pertinent to acquiring knowledge. The third marks a controversy about whether and when, without risk of distortion, claims to knowledge can be detached from their context and from the conditions and purposes of their production.

Indelible tracks

Which aspects of traditional philosophical analysis are primary targets for feminist repudiation? Answers range from ‘the lot’ to concerns about how philosophical analysis construes the nature of reason and objectivity, how it construes or ignores the identity of the knower and how it construes or ignores the nature of emotions. ‘The lot’ is surely an absurd answer, one which undermines the very possibility of a strong feminist project and sounds an obituary for education. For the moment I shall set aside this extreme position and focus on four targets of repudiation, all of which parade under the banner of what Lorraine Code labels ‘*S*-knows-that-*p*’ epistemologies (Code 1996, 191).

Feminists have challenged:

- 1 The view that assumes an isolated unencumbered knower, a view that is both a-topic and a-chronic, that is, from nowhere and no time (for example, Walker 1996; Nelson 1996).
- 2 The view that assumes the identity of the knower is irrelevant and thus ignores subjectivity (for example, Harding 1991; Code 1996).
- 3 The view that assumes rigid conceptions of rationality and objectivity and thereby excludes emotion both from the domain of discovery and from the domain of justification (for example, Jaggar 1996; Rose 1994).
- 4 The view that assumes that knowledge is knowledge of objective reality (for example, Haslanger 1996).

Each line of repudiation incorporates a concern with subjectivity, as may be seen in the following counterclaims (some actual, others possible):

- 1 Knowledge claims are perspectival; they are always made by someone, or some epistemic community, at some time.
- 2 The identity of claimants is crucial to a proper assessment of knowledge claims, regardless of whether the claimants are individuals or an epistemic community.

- 3 Both our sensitivities and our senses are vital to what we claim to know and how we justify our claims. Love and hate, pride and prejudice, passions of heart and mind, jealousies and jeopardies may all impinge on justification as well as discovery. Memories of time past may do as much as clean reason, if not more, to shape our intellectual habits and pursuits.
- 4 There is no way of reaching the world except through our conceptual apparatus. Different epistemic communities have different conceptual apparatuses. How we come at the world is partly a matter of who we are and where we belong.

We should not be surprised that subjectivity is so strong a theme in feminist criticism of mainstream epistemology. Feminists of many different stripes argue that subjectivity-blindness perpetuates ‘the hegemony of masculinist epistemology’. Putting subjectivity into the picture is thus an important feminist project. In its most robust version the project takes subjectivity as central both to the logic of discovery and to the logic of justification.

What happens to objectivity in this project, in its robust version especially? How, if at all, is it possible to give due regard to subjectivity without collapsing into subjectivity? More to the point for present purposes, how is it possible in educational practice to give subjectivity its due without ditching, or at least seriously compromising, critical understanding and justification—without ditching education itself, some might wonder. (These are obvious questions for anyone who takes the constitutive end of education to be the development of reason. Give up this conception and it may seem that education is under no deep threat from the feminist project. Yet it will not do to take too simple a line here. As I shall argue later, some ways of putting subjectivity back into the picture are as much a threat to the feminist educational project as they are to any other educational project, just as other ways of putting subjectivity back into the picture are vital to sustaining teaching as a practice in which learners matter, not only for what they know and may come to know, but also for who they are and the kind of world they inhabit. Without a much fuller picture of what is intended, it is risky to take a stand either for or against the project of putting subjectivity back into the picture.)

An intriguing response is that objectivity and, we might add, critical understanding and education, *are not possible unless subjectivity is taken into account*. Lorraine Code follows this line, as an attack on and a corrective to mainstream epistemology or ‘*S*-knows-that-*p* epistemologies’. Whatever their differences, both coherentism and foundationalism are ‘*S*-knows-that-*p* epistemologies’ because they share the assumption that ‘the places *S* and *p* can be indiscriminately filled across an inexhaustible range of subject-matters’ and ‘knowledge worthy of the name must transcend the particularities of experience to achieve objective purity and value neutrality’ (Code 1996:194). No doubt some readers will flinch, as I did, at this crude

caricature, now made even cruder in my minimalist sketch. Rather than questioning Code's account of mainstream epistemology, I shall consider what she proposes instead and examine some educational implications of her proposal.

Against 'S-knows-that-*p* epistemologies' Code proposes an account that requires as much attention to the nature and situation of *S* as traditional epistemologists commonly apply to the content and justification of *p*. The circumstances of *S* are taken to be central to logic of discovery as well as to procedures and logic of justification and evaluation. How so? Just as there are no dislocated, disinterested observers so there is no homogeneous 'we' in whose name philosophers may speak, Code argues, following a line that is neither new nor uniquely feminist. Arguments against the view from nowhere abound within mainstream epistemology as well as in its counter currents and side eddies, as do arguments against singularity. A feminist version goes like this: traditional epistemology operates from a position of presumed political innocence but is an artefact of 'a small, privileged group of educated, usually prosperous, white men' whose circumstances enable them to believe that 'they are materially and affectively autonomous, and to imagine that they are nowhere and everywhere, even as they occupy an unmarked position of privilege' (Code 1996:197). Any artefact bears the marks of its makers, so the point of feminist criticism is not to censure traditional epistemology for its male traces. Rather, it is to debunk the objectivist ideal: 'if the ideal of objectivity cannot pretend to have been established in accordance with its own demands, then it has no right to the theoretical hegemony to which it lays claim' (200).

To reject the objectivist ideal is not inevitably to go down the slippery slope of subjectivism. The slide is prevented by a realistic commitment to achieving empirical adequacy in the pursuit of knowledge, with the proviso that this is taken as involving a situated analysis of both the knower and the known. In short: objectivity requires taking subjectivity into account. What does this mean, especially for education? I shall take two routes towards an answer: one via an analysis of objectivity, the other via some feminist work in education.

Tethered by reality

Suppose that objective theories, observations, claims and methods of enquiry are those constrained either by the facts of the matter or by some non-arbitrary criteria and so are not determined by our wishes about how things ought to be. To illustrate: I may wish that my body did not limit the range of things I might choose to do; but wishes aren't horses and no amount of begging or wishful thinking could coax my body to sprout wings and fly. The fact of the matter is that I am not a winged creature, whatever my flights of fancy.

In supposing that objectivity requires non-arbitrary criteria—that is, some

world independent of ourselves—we need not presuppose that an objective theory or observation springs from or yields a god’s eye-view; nor need we presuppose value-free inquiry or foundational certainty. These are distinguishable claims, not a take-it-or-leave-it package deal. So long as standards for the non-arbitrary are not set impossibly high, there is no inconsistency in requiring non-arbitrary criteria for objectivity and contending that all human practices—theoretical or otherwise—are perspectival, value-governed and vulnerable to vicissitude.

To borrow a distinction from the work of the feminist philosopher of science Helen Longino (1990): some of the values governing a practice stem from its constitutive ends; others from contextual ends.¹ If the constitutive aim of a practice—scientific enquiry, for instance—is to produce reliable theories, then, ideally, the practice will be regulated by a truth principle and by such epistemic values as explanatory power, coherence, consistency and evidential fit. Yet contextual goals and values, both virtuous and vicious, may also guide scientific practice.

For example, environmental research may be shaped by a concern for social justice (clean air for all and not only for those who can afford to live and work beyond the reach of belching factories and flatulent exhausts) or by a demand, covert perhaps, to cover the tracks of greed and negligence. In the latter case, contextual concerns appear to override the epistemic values which constitute and sustain the practice. So, too, might they in the former case—for data may be doctored in good causes as well as bad. Yet there may be nothing so blatant as data-doctoring in either case. What counts as evidence depends not only on the relationship between a theory or hypothesis and a state of affairs but also on the background beliefs and related values, constitutive and contextual, of the epistemic community concerned. Acceptable hypotheses are never determined by epistemic values alone, for background beliefs always involve contextual values—or so one line of feminist argument goes.

So we return to the idea of artefacts bearing their makers’ fingerprints. Strong objectivity (Harding 1991), or taking subjectivity seriously, requires us to look for these fingerprints, not to erase them—for they are indelible—reminding ourselves that impartiality is impossible. Every view is a partial view and permanent partiality is definitive of all our theories, observations and claims (Haraway 1990; Harding 1991). But this brings us full circle: Is a commitment to permanent partiality not the start down the slippery slope of subjectivism?

Much depends on how we understand the notion of permanent partiality. A weak reading, Miranda Fricker (1994) suggests, takes permanent partiality as an expression of the situated nature of knowledge, whereas a strong reading takes permanent partiality as an epistemological ideal. On the weak reading, permanent partiality is a methodological imperative for the knowing subject to place herself within the critical field and be open to how her own situation may influence her beliefs. Or, to put the matter in communal rather

than individual terms, permanent partiality may be read as an injunction for an epistemic community to place itself within a critical field of reflection. To say that permanent partiality is an epistemological ideal is to say, crudely, that the more partial the view, the more reliable the beliefs issuing from it. The danger here is that once partiality of perspective is presented as epistemologically desirable, there is no justification for halting its progress:

this has the devastating consequence that there is no way of justifying the maintenance of any shared belief-system without committing a pernicious act of coercion: the eclipsing of the perspective or potential perspective of some person or group. Without a shared belief-system we clearly cannot sustain the minimal realism which I have argued is necessary to feminist politics...nor can we maintain norms for belief; nor sustain any systematic self-critical practice.

(Fricker 1994:102)

Strong permanent partiality seems to rule out the possibility of education. For now, I shall accept the weak reading, although not quite with warts and all.

The notion of situated knowledge is closely related to the idea that evidence and justification depend on contextual as well as epistemic values. Knowers and would-be knowers are all always somewhere—at once enabled and constrained by their locations and their position in relation to other epistemic subjects. But there are very different ways of characterizing this ‘somewhere’, which is seldom singular. More often than not we are situated in multiple, overlapping communities and social positions. One such ‘somewhere’ is the place of the subjugated (women, ethnic minorities, slaves, children and other legally defined minors). For some feminists, this view from below has special epistemic authority.

Two considerations compel me to reject the presumption in favour of the view from below: one concerning its sweep, the other concerning its consequences for the practice of education. While the view from below may be the most telling view for some kinds of knowledge claims, it cannot be so for all. More seriously, in education, granting special epistemic authority to the view from below leads to the absurd, albeit perhaps seductive, idea that pupils have epistemic authority over their teachers. But education cannot get off the ground unless we grant *teachers* some sort of epistemic authority and unless we recognize *pupils* as being capable of coming to know.

Safe homes and disappearing acts

What might it mean to take subjectivity seriously in education? Or to put it in more formal, analytical terms: What is involved in paying as much

attention to *S* as to *p* in locutions of the form ‘*S* knows that *p*’? Who is *S* in an educational situation? Teachers or learners or those about whom they learn? Individuals or epistemic communities?

I approach these questions via a brief critical discussion of two sets of feminist challenges to mainstream education, each of which echoes aspects of feminist challenges to mainstream epistemology. One—apparently gentle and humane—falls under the rubric of caring and seems to some of its critics to control through cosy domestication; the other—a pedagogy assertive in intent and motivation—is designed to disappear at the moment of its own performance. Both caring theory and performative pedagogy take subjectivity seriously in ways that may undermine the enabling conditions for education; nonetheless each is rich in insights into educational practice and its dilemmas.

Caring theorists (see, for example, Gilligan 1982; Martin 1981, 1992; Noddings 1984, 1992) challenge liberal education on at least four counts. For a start they argue that the declared universalism of liberal education is not universal at all since its singular ideal of an educated person assumes the person to be male. In emphasizing the ‘masculine virtues’ of rationality and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, the liberal ideal is seen to cast women either as uneducated and feminine or as educated but failed women. Second, caring theorists argue that reason- and justice-based frameworks for education ignore the fact that reason and justice require caring, at least as their complement if not as their ground. Third, they reject both instrumental and generalized conceptions of care: caring and other ‘private sphere’ values are not limited to performing a service on behalf of justice and other ‘public sphere’ values; nor can pupils’ needs be determined outside a personal relationship where the teacher attends to the particularities of each pupil. Like knowing, caring is situated and it is a primary not a parasitic virtue. In education, caring is no pedagogical sweetener but the very ground of curriculum meaning and value. This brings us to a fourth challenge. Caring theorists reject both disciplinary-based and content-saturated curricula. Instead, curriculum should have its basis in what Jane Roland Martin (1992) has called the three Cs of care, concern and connection, and not in bodies and bits of knowledge.

In several respects these challenges to liberal education match the feminist challenges to mainstream epistemology I listed earlier in the chapter. To wit: there is no disinterested view from nowhere from which teachers can properly see what their pupils need in order to flourish; a pupil’s identity is a crucial consideration in founding and sustaining a pedagogical relationship; care and love are central to the content as well as the processes of teaching and learning. Caring theorists take subjectivity seriously by requiring teachers to respect and nurture what is special in each pupil and to nurture in pupils an attitude of respect and care for others.

Even so, from the vantage of feminist epistemology, caring theorists turn

a blind eye to crucial aspects of subjectivity by failing to place themselves and their ideas in the critical field. They ignore their own and pupils' subjectivity by neglecting to ask what trust and caring mean when teachers and their pupils belong to different ethnic groups or social classes; when, to quote Audrey Thompson's example, 'the teacher is Anglo and the students are Ute, or the teacher is middle-class and the students from poor families' (Thompson 1997:338). Caring theory thus fails the test of strong objectivity in so far as it takes the meaning of caring for granted.

Also, although caring theorists criticize liberal education for its rationalism, their arguments for a homelike school seem to rest on the notion of a school as an idealized home, a 'rationalised, purified environment' where teachers become surrogate mothers (Thompson 1997:337). Here, too, caring theorists may stand accused of failing the test of strong objectivity because they seem to ignore the role that one version of a caring ethic has played in sustaining a social order inimical to women's empowerment. In short, despite their professed feminism, caring theorists take subjectivity seriously in ways that put the feminist project at risk.

What of the educational project more broadly conceived? Does caring theory promote or impede education? By singling out individuals for attention, perhaps it pays too little heed to the importance of sustaining and invigorating epistemic communities, their practices and their bodies of knowledge. Education, in my view, is centrally a matter of getting people to care about practices that might otherwise have meant nothing to them, a matter of getting them to care about evidence and justification as well as about other people. It is partly a matter of socializing them into traditions and practices so that they might, in time, use the language of those practices to criticize, advance and perhaps overturn them; as well as a matter of habituating character through critical and disciplined practice for the purpose of nurturing practical reasoning.² But I am casting ahead. I shall pick up and offer some defence for this position in the final section of the chapter.

Feminists who advocate performative pedagogy reject traditional teaching as well as the standard views of reflective teaching and critical pedagogy on the grounds that all presuppose the possibility of one self coming to know and understand other selves (see, for example, Orner *et al.* 1996; Phelan 1993).³ In their view, such 'inter-subjective' understanding between teacher and learners can be accomplished, if at all, only at the cost of reducing the historical and embodied richness of self to one who is present in the classroom in the form of a rational argument. Here the teacher maintains superficial order by banishing all other aspects of self to a private world, outside the classroom. Feminist teachers who reject the discourse of reason face the challenge of giving full play to learners' expressive selves and yet exerting sufficient authority to meet feminism's normative ideals, ideals that require the teacher to alter the learners' perceptions and concerns.

How is it possible for a teacher to change her pupils' perceptions without

either imposing her own views or silencing theirs and without exacting a class of pared-down selves? Through enactment not teaching, through performance not argument, say the advocates of performative pedagogy. Performative pedagogy honours the ‘situatedness’ and ‘contingency’ of learners’ responses by opening ways for their personal meanings to emerge in a series of exquisite pedagogical moments that leave no visible trace and can neither be planned nor repeated. Hence the description: a pedagogy for disappearance (Phelan 1993). It aims to elicit personal responses not coherent understanding, multiple readings not singular arguments or teacher-led dialogue. As one line of feminist attack on the discourse of reason, it opens the closet of the ‘private’ and allows outlaw emotions out. (‘Pandoras all’, a nervous rationalist might brand these feminists of performative bent. Be that as it may, the principle of multiple readings also allows for a Pandora whose remaining hope is not to recall the pestilential emotions and trap them once more beneath the lid of authority but rather that they might go into the world and shake up reason’s tyranny.)

Performative pedagogy calls on the teacher to see her own slippery position, to be aware and wary of her own authorial and authoritative positioning. It takes subjectivity seriously through a radical turn to specificity, an ever-shifting play of relationships, perspectives and voices where, if anyone has authority, it is the learner—and then only at the moment of expression. Learner-centredness here rests on an apparent presumption in favour of the view from below—apparent because it involves something of a pretence by the teacher and because there is no singular view from below, but many.

Taking subjectivity seriously in this way thwarts the very project it intends to quicken and undermines the constitutive goods of teaching. How so?

For a start, without normative benchmarks, anything goes. By treating all voices and views as equally valid, Carmen Luke (herself a feminist) argues, the feminist teacher risks a dangerous sameness: ‘Views and voices from everywhere and every body potentially are views and voices from nowhere and no body’ (Luke 1996:291). If anything goes, then changing learners’ perceptions becomes a matter of chance and if the teacher has a role at all, it is to play stagehand to happenstance. Here teaching would seem to be thoroughly luck-dependent, leaving the teacher without resources to establish the enabling conditions for fulfilling the definitive ends of her practice (cf. Pendlebury 1995).

Authority of some sort is among the enabling conditions for teaching to accomplish its ends and sustain its goods. This is a formal point and in no way presupposes agreement on the substantive goods of teaching. In her critique of performative pedagogy, Yael Shalem (1997) argues for the importance of what she calls pedagogical authority. Roughly, the argument runs as follows. Every teacher worth her salt conducts some kind of epistemological labour to bring learners into a working relationship with

the traditions and practices that inform the curriculum. Save by luck, performative pedagogy can accomplish neither its feminist nor its educative ends without the teacher selecting and sequencing texts and other artefacts to be presented for students' responses. Like it or not, this epistemological labour puts the teacher in a position of pedagogical authority in relation to the learner. For it is the teacher who selects the pedagogical entry point into a tradition and who casts ahead, listening attentively for points of resolution to signify the end of a pedagogical episode.

Of course, a teacher can't plan or replicate an exquisite pedagogical moment any more than she can make the moon rise over the sea on a cloudless night. Yet it is these moments that teachers long for and cherish. Neither longing nor planning can ensure them. Preparation of the right kind may invite them. In order to thrive, teaching surely needs attentive planning as well as situational attunement; discipline as well as imagination and insight; serendipitous and intimate moments as well as controlled activities and respect for privacy; responsive teachers as well as responsive learners. Caring theory and performative pedagogy remind us, in rather different ways, of some of these requirements and the impediments to meeting them. They remind us of the role of the expressive self in learning, of the many contradictions of classrooms as contexts for education, of the difficulties of teaching across difference, of the fact that human flourishing requires much more than a bloodless pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. But it would be a bad mistake, I think, to remember these things at the cost of forgetting the crucial place of reason, evidence and disciplined inquiry in education.

Human flourishing and habitable epistemic communities

At the start of the previous section I asked what it might mean to take subjectivity seriously in education. Or, to put the question in formal and rather restrictive terms: what is involved in paying as much attention to *S* as to *p* in locutions of the form '*S* knows that *p*'? An answer depends partly on who is taken as *S*—the teacher, the pupils, or the subjects of study (Emily Dickinson, the colonizers of Africa, the author of this or that historical text). Caring theory and performative pedagogy are examples of feminist approaches that attend to the subjectivity of learners and teachers in ways which, I have argued, thwart the feminist project and underplay or threaten the enabling conditions for education and teaching.

So: can we heed the feminist call to take subjectivity seriously without compromising education? And are there ways of taking subjectivity seriously in ways that support with the constitutive ends of teaching? I want to say a resounding 'Yes' to both questions and to add that not taking subjectivity seriously in the right ways may be as thwarting to education as is taking it seriously in the wrong ways.

FEMINISM, EPISTEMOLOGY AND EDUCATION

My defence of these claims rests on an assumption that education is centrally—although not solely—concerned with opening ways for people to become members of one or more epistemic communities. I take this concern to be a constitutive end of education and of educative teaching. I draw my conception of an epistemic community from two sources: some recent work in feminist epistemology (for example, Nelson 1993; Walker 1996) and Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of a practice (MacIntyre 1984). No doubt some readers will find the two sources somewhat incongruous. So be it. What I offer here is a provisional sketch of a promising idea, not a definitive or detailed account of a fixed or pure position.

An epistemic community is a group that shares and maintains resources for acquiring and developing knowledge. Resources include procedures for qualifying and disqualifying evidence, a language of description, other conceptual tools and a critical mass of practitioners who have the virtues (or habits of character and mind) necessary for sustaining the community and its definitive practices. All would-be knowers are situated in epistemic communities. What we know depends inextricably on the shared knowledge, concepts, standards and practices of the various epistemic communities to which we belong. Active and fully-fledged members of an epistemic community will reconstruct their prior understandings on the basis of current standards and evidence, revising if need be their views about who knows what and how. Other members stagnate, holding on to the comforts of long cherished beliefs despite new and compelling evidence to the contrary. Still others are newcomers who may gradually come to know the ways of the community or who may hover at its periphery, feeling anxious or alien.

A central concern of education, I have suggested, is to provide access for membership in a range of epistemic communities, to give people a taste for typical practices and to help them acquire some of the disciplined ways of doing things within those communities. In so doing, education also helps to constitute selves. This is not to say that we are nothing without education. People are already always members of some or other epistemic community. Taking subjectivity seriously in educational practice is partly a matter of taking account of current memberships and how these might enable or constrain access to other epistemic communities. This is why it is fitting to ask 'Who claims to know? And under what conditions and in what company does she so claim?'. Quite simply, in a teaching situation, how one assesses a knowledge claim (or its functional equivalent) depends very much on how old the claimant is, what concepts she has, what counts as everyday knowledge for her—and, of course, the kinds of reasons she offers for her claim. For example, a child who can use Dienes blocks to show how she solved a mathematical problem also shows that she has a sense of how to justify her claims mathematically, even though she does not yet have (and may never have) the kind of language and theoretically rich arguments that mark a fully-fledged mathematician. Notice that this way of taking a

learner's subjectivity seriously is not a matter of 'anything goes'.

There is an additional way in which subjectivity is pertinent to educational practice. Feminist epistemologists have argued that strong objectivity requires us to take subjectivity seriously. This suggests a teaching desideratum: when a teacher introduces pupils to a novel, an historical text, the causes and effects of volcanoes or the relationship of form and function in organisms, part of her task is to help them to see what part other people have played in generating these artefacts and facts. So we return to the importance of evidence and justification and debates about them. We also return to the idea of an epistemic community, of a group of practitioners who have special ways of going about their business but who nonetheless are vulnerable to challenge and criticism. Alasdair MacIntyre (1984) makes a similar point, I think, in his claim that to enter a practice is to enter into a relationship with its practitioners, present and past, especially those who have extended the reach of the practice through their achievements.

The idea that all would-be knowers are situated in epistemic communities whose standards, concepts, goods and practices both constrain and enable the knowledge and experiences of their members assumes that, in some sense, knowledge and our experience of the world are socially constructed. Nothing in the assumption commits us to the view that there are no facts of the matter. Nor does the claim that there are many overlapping epistemic communities mean that all have equal footing. Epistemic communities that are worth sustaining through education should be both reliable and habitable. I take these as normative criteria. If the collective wisdom and standard procedures of an epistemic community lead us to act in ways that are self-defeating through illusion, ignorance, false beliefs or sheer pig-headedness about what is possible and what is not, they are not worth sustaining. Although the term 'epistemic community' may not have featured in the work of Paul Hirst and his colleagues and intellectual heirs, I think they did much to explore and analyse the features of reliable epistemic communities and the educational conditions for sustaining them. Feminist writers—in education, epistemology and ethics—remind us, in a myriad of ways, that the quality of our lives is affected by the kinds of epistemic and moral communities of which we are members.

Notes

- 1 The distinction between constitutive and contextual ends is similar to Alasdair MacIntyre's distinction between the internal and external goods of a practice (MacIntyre 1984).
- 2 I am assuming a rich conception of practical reasoning, of the sort described in many of Martha Nussbaum's essays (for example, Nussbaum 1990).
- 3 My discussion of performative pedagogy owes much to the work of my colleague Yael Shalem (forthcoming).

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Part IV

KNOWLEDGE AND LEARNING

LEARNING AS INVENTION

Education and constructivism

*Christopher Winch***Introduction**

The idea that learning is not only active but creative has recently become popular. Its origins, however, can be traced back to Plato's *Meno* and the view that in learning we discover what is already in us. Rousseau popularized the claim that learning is a process of active discovery, while Kant gave systematic expression to the claim that we can only know the world through the lens of pre-existing mental categories. However, none of these writers doubted our ability to distinguish objectively between truth and falsehood and, for them, discovery meant learning about objective truth. When Europeans discovered America, they found something that had existed beforehand, independently of themselves, they did not bring it into being.

In recent times, however, the idea that statements are true by virtue of reference to any form of independently existing objective order has come under attack in both philosophical and educational quarters. The idea that knowledge must be grounded in certainty has been trenchantly criticized (Wittgenstein 1969) and the claim that truth can be defined as what serves human needs best has become more influential through the work of pragmatists such as James. The Rousseauian celebration of learning as discovery has been given apparent scientific authority through the work of psychologists such as Piaget. Finally, Descartes's contention that much of our knowledge is already in our minds at birth has been revived by Chomsky and his followers. Doubts about objective truth, growing confidence in humanity's ability to shape the world according to its desires and a belief that a lot of what we know is, in a sense 'already there', have combined to produce a heady brew called 'constructivism', which sees learning not as 'discovery', or finding out, but as 'invention', or fabrication by means of imagination. I hope to show that this brew, while popular, has hallucinogenic properties, leading to a distortion of educational methods and objectives.

Innatism and constructivism

Innatism, largely associated nowadays with Chomsky and his followers, proposes that much learning involves the activation of pre-existing categories or concepts and the mapping of experience on to them. For example, we learn to recognize and make judgements about cats when our innate concept of *cat* is activated and associated with the word ‘cat’, and applied in assertions and acts of judgement to the relevant animal. ‘We simply learn the label that goes with the preexisting concept’ (Chomsky 1988:190–1).

Constructivism, associated with Piaget, claims that mental structures rather than concepts are innate and that they are activated through the experience and activity of the learner (Brown and Desforges 1979:21). An important assumption shared by modern innatists and constructivists is that learning is largely autonomous. Adults can provide the right conditions for learning to take place but they cannot bring it about that a child learns; indeed they are likely to cause more harm than good in trying to do so. As Chomsky asserts: ‘What the student learns passively will be quickly forgotten’ (Chomsky 1988:136).

Constructivism has intellectual antecedents which lie in the Enlightenment, particularly in the work of Kant and Rousseau. From Kant comes the idea that experience is organized in innate mental structures. From Rousseau comes the idea that learning is intrinsically motivated through ‘*amour propre*’ or the human drive for material, social and moral well-being. Modern constructivism makes use, in a modified form, of both these ideas, but the one that concerns us is the former. According to Kant, intuitions (which are nonconceptual) are mediated through forms of sense; the categories operate on intuitions to provide the framework within which empirical concepts are formed. Categorical concepts such as that of causality are innate preconditions of empirical knowledge. The categories and the forms of sense together ensure that a meaningful distinction can be made between subjective and objective experience. When the categories are applied to our intuitions, they will turn up the same result in our judgements, for example, that of the objective causal succession of two events.

Piaget modifies Kant’s framework by proposing a process of development during the course of childhood in which the innate structure changes according to a pattern. For Piaget, as for Kant, the categorial structure is not merely a useful descriptive device for tracing intellectual development but a description of real mental structures. In Piagetian developmental theory, as the categorial structure of the mind changes during growth, so the character of judgement and perception changes. As the categorial structure changes, so does the child’s conceptual scheme, because his empirical concepts are governed by that overarching structure. This approach to early learning gives rise to problems, both generally and in relation to specific subject matters. The general problem is that, according to a developmental

schema such as Piaget's, the conceptual structure of a child is different from that of an adult in important respects. It follows that the judgements a child makes will, at times, fail to correspond to those of adults. This means either that they are false (Carr 1988) or that they are incommensurable since, irrespective of surface linguistic commonality, judgements made in different conceptual schemes, even if expressible in the same sentences, do not employ the same concepts if those judgements are not subject to the same truth conditions.

First, let us assume that they are false. Despite the fact that there is intersubjective agreement amongst children at the same developmental stage, their judgements do not agree in important respects with those of adults. Through a large part of their early education children are systematically coming to believe what is false rather than what is true. This remains the case when truth is defined in terms of *viability* because conceptual schemes that have to be abandoned are clearly no longer viable. (For a constructivist account of truth in terms of viability, see von Glasersfeld 1989.) So what is the point of education? One possible answer is that the transition from the lower to the higher level of understanding is not automatic, it depends on passing through the lower stages. On this view, early education is necessary for children to achieve knowledge through the prior experience of falsehood. It appears then that children are acquiring what is false, but this is necessary so that they learn later what is true. So what exactly are they acquiring?

They come to believe something which is not completely devoid of use since it serves to provide a platform for later learning of what is true. There is, then, an important sense in which they *invent* what they believe, that is they come, through their own cognitive activity, to believe something that is not true. They are not finding out (discovering) but fabricating (inventing), even though what they invent is, because of identical individual innate structures at the same developmental stage, intersubjectively agreed. What they have come to believe is not true, but their judgements satisfy some of the commonly supposed attributes of truth: they are intersubjectively assented to; they are replicable and they enable children to lead a normal life. What they have acquired is, if not true, at least temporarily sustainable. In the same way a group of people who set their clocks to the same wrong time can live together comfortably, so long as they do not come into contact with correct timekeepers.

On the other hand, if children's conceptual schemes differ significantly from those of adults, they cannot make the same judgements even when they use the same sentences to express their judgements. For if sentences express what speakers wish to express and this is different in both cases (what is expressed in each case has different conditions which make it true), then they are making different judgements (Newton-Smith 1981:34-7). Accordingly, it may be that for some of their childhood children make use of conceptual schemes significantly different from those of adults. In that case,

what they learn, since it has to be relative to *some* conceptual scheme, is relative to theirs, and since this is different from adults' it cannot make sense to criticize children's judgements for being erroneous—for, in so doing, one is criticizing them from an inappropriate point of view. (For the view that children's conceptual schemes are different from those of adults, see Sainsbury 1993, chapter 9.)

Anyone who thinks that education is concerned with truth cannot be happy with either alternative; both suggest that what goes on in the main period of compulsory education is unconcerned with initiation into truth except insofar as part of the educational process is a necessary detour *en route* to the achievement of knowledge. At least the view that some of what children acquire at early stages is largely false appears to leave the concept of truth intact, so that education can be fundamentally seen as a truth-imparting enterprise. Are matters as clear, however, in the case of someone who believes that alternative and incompatible conceptual schemes are equally valid? At first sight, the answer appears to be 'yes' since, on this view, truth is relativized to a conceptual scheme. Problems arise when relations between incompatible conceptual schemes have to be managed. If truth is relative to conceptual schemes then one scheme cannot be employed to form judgements about the truth of propositions in another, since the truth conditions for that judgement would not be acceptable to those who adhered to the other. This conclusion strikes at the heart of education as a truth-imparting exercise, as it suggests that there are no coherent grounds for supposing that adult rather than child conceptual schemes have any monopoly of truth.

Constructivism and truth

The position we have arrived at follows from taking seriously the contention that children's minds possess different categorial structures to those of adults. But it might be argued that the conclusion itself constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of such an idea. Would we lose anything by rejecting it? Quite apart from empirical evidence that appears to contradict the Piagetian schema (for example, Brown and Deforges 1979; Donaldson 1978; Tizard and Hughes 1984), what is useful in such claims can be restated less contentiously without talk about real mental structures. The claim might be that the human mind undergoes perceptible changes between birth and adolescence and that it is descriptively useful to have some way of classifying those changes, without saying that those descriptive categories are real mental structures (Donaldson 1992).

One of the original aims of constructivism, however, was to question the dichotomy between innatist and empiricist accounts of learning. Can this aim be pursued without the categorial accretions of developmental theory? It may first be helpful to distinguish between innatism and constructivism.

EDUCATION AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

Both claim that there are innate ‘abilities that are necessary conditions for learning’. The key ability is that of being able to form hypotheses and to test them. One very popular view, articulated by Fodor, is that the only serious account of conceptual learning is that children frame and test hypotheses (Fodor 1975:95–6). Fodor’s claim concerning learning by hypothesis seems to have been widely accepted by educationists (for example, Sainsbury 1993; Smith 1985), though the accompanying innatist thesis has been less so. According to innatism, we learn to match words in our native language with given concepts by hypothesizing about the meanings of words.

A constructivist account of learning seems more modest than the rather surprising claims of conceptual innatists. Constructivists deny that concepts are innate, but suggest that the ability to form and test hypotheses is. (Cf. Carruthers 1992, chapter 7. Carruthers, while sceptical about the case for innate concepts in general, is more enthusiastic about the innateness of the concept of *inference to the best explanation*.) On this view, learning and concept formation take place through the framing and testing of hypotheses. This approach seems modest, but because the claim that learning only takes place through hypothesis formation is retained, learning is radically detached from the pursuit of truth. This is not obvious at first sight so it may be helpful to outline the problem step by step. On the innatist proposal,

the word ‘W’ signifies concept C

is verifiable because induction is not involved. ‘W’ belongs to a finite disjunctive set of possible signifiers of C and once all the other members of the set have been rejected by the learner, it follows that ‘W’ signifies C. This set is given by the number of plausible candidates in the appropriate grammatical category. For example ‘cat’ could mean *cat*, *dog*, *animal*, etc. By elimination, a child comes to realize that ‘cat’ means *cat*. Once the innatist proposal is discarded no determinate concept C is already held by the learner. The formation of concepts, as well as other kinds of learning, has to take place through the formation and testing of hypotheses. The general form of learning is, then, as follows:

- 1 the formation of an hypothesis
- 2 the generation of a prediction from that hypothesis
- 3 the testing of that prediction
- 4 the retention or rejection of the hypothesis

This appears to mean that the conceptual schemes and propositions based on them receive supporting evidence when predictions are true but cannot be conclusively verified. The exception is when a null hypothesis is falsified. For example, if ‘There is no relationship between X and Y’ is false, then it is true that ‘There is a relationship between X and Y’. But such a procedure

yields 'thin' non-specific knowledge and cannot substitute for statements like 'The relationship between X and Y is of strength S'.

Hypotheses are operational as long as they continue to receive supporting evidence. Since conceptual schemes are a complex kind of hypothesis they are in the same position. Hence learning through hypothesis formation appears to entail that some rival conceptual schemes are instrumentally viable even if they are not true, so long as they do not generate obvious internal inconsistencies, do generate propositions that are intersubjectively assented to and do promote the practical purposes of their users. At most, such learning would be compatible with a modest pragmatic definition of truth of the kind apparently favoured by William James.

Any idea upon which we can ride, so to speak: any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labour; is true for just so much, true in so far forth, true *instrumentally*.

(James 1910:58; cited in Scheffler 1965)

Unfortunately, such a definition of truth, interpreted in its broad sense as meaning 'what is true is what serves our purposes' rather than 'what is confirmed by experience' falls far short of what many would think was an appropriate educational aim. If reading a historical myth serves our purposes then apparently it would count as true, but few would be happy with the incorporation of myth into history teaching on such grounds. The pragmatist might reply that what serves our purposes has to be confirmed by experience. But, according to the method described above, all that experience can do is to generate propositions that are consistent with our hypotheses.

One problematic assumption underlying constructivism is that learning should always involve discovery. Much of what we take to be true rests on induction, is 'confirmable by experience' and does not need the hypothetico-deductive method, although it is arguable that the method needs *it* (Newton-Smith 1981:67–70). What we take to be true is passed on through education. If induction yields truth and accurate recounting of truth preserves it, then instruction, when applied to material that is true, is truth-preserving. One does not need to get into problems generated by hypothetico-deductivism to teach effectively. *These* problems arise from another assumption which constructivists following Rousseau also make; that learning only proceeds through *intrinsic* rather than extrinsic motivation. (The moral psychology underlying this assumption is described in Dent 1988). On this view, self-initiation with a minimum of external intervention is the best way to ensure intrinsic motivation and, since hypothetico-deductivism, theoretically at least, requires no outside intervention, it is the best route to intrinsic motivation.

But what of truth? Constructivists are critical of the 'naive' idea that there

is one standard of truth and that it is the job of education to teach according to it. They may try to force a dilemma on the anti-constructivist: either we (individual or social group) construct truth (or whatever we make do with *in lieu* of truth) or truth is timeless and absolute. Constructivism maintains that absolute truth is not an attainable educational goal (for example, von Glasersfeld 1989:122). So long as rival conceptual schemes are linking things satisfactorily' there is no need to choose one against the others. The natural move for the conservative educator would be to prioritize the preferred conceptual scheme, so statements uttered within this scheme are true irrespective of changes to other conceptual schemes. They will, relative to the preferred conceptual scheme, be timelessly true. The conservative educator seems, then, to be obliged to cleave to an absolutist concept of truth that parts company with the ordinary one.

However, the ordinary concept is not absolutist. We do not teach children that whatever is true is timelessly true and completely certain. We teach them that what is true is currently confirmable according to the appropriate methods of a particular discipline. What then happens when parts of the curriculum become obsolete? Three sorts of cases are possible:

(1) Propositions once thought to be true are now considered partially true. For example, if the Labour Party had claimed that the Conservatives would increase VAT from 7 to 15 per cent and they subsequently increased it to 14 per cent, then Labour's claim is partially true (Searle 1995:213). Most subjects need to be revised from time to time to take account of the fact that propositions once thought to be true are now only partially so.

(2) Theories thought to be true are now thought to have a smaller degree of verisimilitude than before. In a technical sense someone might say that whereas neoclassical economics was once thought to be 100 per cent accurate, now it is thought to be 80 per cent accurate; any sample of propositions deducible from its postulates will yield 80 per cent true propositions, whereas previously they yielded 100 per cent (Newton-Smith 1981:198–205) The curriculum needs to be revised in order to preserve theories of the greatest possible verisimilitude.

(3) Propositions and theories once thought to be true are now considered false. In this case they should be replaced with true, more accurate propositions and theories with a better degree of verisimilitude. For example, while a geographical syllabus that ignores the existence of the American continent should be dropped, it does not follow that those who wrote it 700 years ago were simply misguided. Given the knowledge available to the whole society at the time, it was as accurate as it could be expected to be and was confirmed by available experience. These are the usual criteria for accepting a proposition as true in most everyday contexts and they satisfy a Wittgensteinian criterion of knowledge that something *known* must be capable of *being doubted*. It is, therefore, clear that an educator who believes that the curriculum should promote truth and reduce falsehood is not thereby

driven to an absolutist conception of truth which commits him to considering true only what should be counted as certain for all time.

Constructivism and the curriculum

Two areas of the curriculum influenced by constructivist ideas will now be examined. Constructivism has a far wider influence than these examples suggest, but these two ‘case studies’ will, it is hoped, both show its temptations and how they can be avoided. In both areas, learning is held to take place through a process of hypothesis-formation and testing which can be construed as a kind of invention.

Literacy

We are familiar with the idea that a clear criterion for understanding and appreciating a text is that we grasp what the author intended it to mean. It is also sometimes said that rejection of a concern with authorial intention leads to subjectivism (Best 1992). While there may be some truth in this, it seems that *sole concentration* on authorial intention has the same effect. The rise of the idea of reading as a process of interpretation did not originate with, but was given a considerable boost by the ‘psycholinguistic’ account of learning to read, which itself developed Deweyan themes (Smith 1985; Connell 1996). According to this approach, learning to read involves the forming and testing of hypotheses about the author’s communicative intentions on the basis of scanning the text (Smith 1983, esp. chapter 2). Since we cannot test such hypotheses directly, we can only corroborate or reject them according to our interpretation of the rest of the text. But we can only do this if the whole in some way satisfies or makes reasonable sense to us. If our reading of the text is the true interpretation of what the author meant, it is so in the sense of James, quoted above, namely *instrumentally*.

However, we do not aspire to read the author’s intentions but what he wrote. Implicitly relying on the author’s sincerity, we assume that he meant what he wrote. In normal circumstances we read a text for its literal meaning; that is, the meaning expressed by words and sentences in ordinary usage. If there is no good reason to assume that the author was not employing language in other than an ordinary sense, one cannot have grounds for thinking that he means other than what he says. Therefore, there is no distinction between reading the literal meaning and understanding authorial intentions. This must be the way in which a child learns to read and how he develops a concern for accuracy in reading. Teachers can check whether or not he has grasped the literal meaning of the text and can correct him if he has not. There are, however, two objections: the first is that a reader needs skills which take him beyond a literal understanding of the text. The second

is the more radical objection that there is no such thing as the literal meaning of words. On this second view the print on a text is nothing more than a series of marks, a 'surface structure' which does not, of itself, bear meaning (Smith 1985:75). All it can do is to provide the basis for the interpretation of the 'deep structure' of the text, which is a more accurate reflection of authorial intention. But even this is hard to do since the printed text is, strictly speaking, meaningless. It is not therefore, surprising, to find proponents of this theory asserting, 'If there is to be any comprehension, it must come from the meaning that the listener or hearer *brings* to the language' (ibid.: 65).

Reading, then, involves discovery of authorial intention through interpretation of the text. But since the text is, strictly speaking, meaningless, the reader has to supply the meaning. The only constraint on this process is that the various interpretations have to be congruent with one another. The reading constructivist sets up literal meaning as an impossible ideal, and so drives us to look at authorial intentions. But since gaining certainty about these is also an impossible ideal, then we must settle for what is satisfying. By postulating an unrealizable (for the subject matter) ideal of truth, the constructivist invites us to settle for something far less. Since we can never really know what a text is saying (what the true interpretation of it is), we should be happy with a satisfying interpretation. But once one questions the distinction between the surface and the deep structure of the text, together with the claim that reading only takes place through the formation and testing of hypotheses, this edifice of reading-as-invention collapses. It no longer remains plausible to deny either that the text means something or that one can be trained to read. Reading programmes based on constructivism are likely to mislead children about what reading involves.

History

History seems to lend itself readily to a constructivist approach. It is not, after all, possible to directly verify the truth of historical, in contrast to scientific, propositions. Notoriously also, historians dispute about the *interpretation* of historical events at least as much as about their *occurrence*. It is plausible to suggest that what historians are after is interpretation rather than truth in a strict sense. Therefore, in initiating children into the craft of the historian, we should be showing them how to interpret events, rather than leading them to believe in the truth of historical statements. We may, in addition, stress the importance of *understanding* and, in particular, understanding the point of view of participants in historical events, as a more worthwhile goal than seeking a chimera of absolute historical truth. This view, associated with such idealist philosophers as Collingwood, represents one influential approach to the history curriculum (cf. Swain 1997). However, Collingwood was criticized by the historian G.R.Elton for

propounding the view that history is nothing more than what the historian dreams up (Elton 1967:138). It is important to ascertain whether a constructivist approach would be vulnerable to Elton's criticism, though it could be said that Collingwood, with his emphasis on *imagination* rather than *inference* as the dominant cognitive faculty in historical research, lays himself open to this claim (Collingwood 1946, esp. 231–49).

One way of putting Collingwood's thesis is that historical judgements of truth are the judgements of participants but, since a contemporary historian cannot ask the participants, he has to use his imagination to ascertain what those judgements would have been. If to this view is added the constructivist thesis that such judgements cannot be absolute, but must conform to other judgements of the historian in question, the way is open to a subjective interpretation of historical truth. However, most historians would maintain that historical objectivity was possible and that at least some historical propositions can be called 'true', provided that they conform to canons of historical truth; procedures agreed by historians for validating historical statements in the light of relevant evidence. Just because we cannot achieve the experimental accuracy of the natural sciences in historical truth-determination we should not abandon the search for truth. It would be more sensible to apply Aristotle's maxim regarding precision, and seek truth to the degree of precision appropriate to historical enquiry (Aristotle 1925:1, 3:3). Nor does it follow that, because historians are engaged, to a large degree, in interpretation, that this is *all* that they can or should do.

I want next to defend the idea of historical truth and the teaching of historical truth as a proper curriculum objective. It is important to note that the degree of precision obtainable in historical judgement is of a different order from that obtainable in other areas. Nor is historical truth absolute, in the sense of being certain and timeless, any more than is truth in other areas. A key characteristic of historical propositions is that they concern the past. A naive correspondence theory of truth would be committed either to claiming that such propositions could not be true because they do not correspond to any existing events or that they are true because they correspond to sempiternally existing states of affairs (cf. Hacker 1996:30). One can, however, adapt Aristotle's more spare account of truth—that to say of what is, that it is and of what is not that it is not—to the past; to say, namely, that true statements concerning the past say of what was that it was. This should not commit us to the view that historical statements are true of sempiternal states of affairs.

If history is nothing more than the study of alternative interpretations of the past, it may be asked what these interpretations are of? In answering this question it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that they are of particular events. For example, if a historian offers an interpretation of the origins of the Napoleonic Wars, it needs to be related to causally relevant

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events. The significance of these events may well be disputed. It may even be the case that the community of historians may never agree about their significance, but it cannot be denied that a historian needs to base judgement and interpretation on some commonly accepted minimal factual basis. (This claim is closely related to Dray's assertion that there are *descriptive* as well as *explanatory* histories, Dray 1964:29–32.) For example:

(1) The Second World War formally started in 1939

is a proposition that all historians will agree to and whose truth is established by well-attested means. The following are much less likely to be accepted by all historians:

(2) Britain's actions between 1918 and 1939 were the main cause of the Second World War;

(3) Churchill was an incompetent military leader (but see Charmley 1993).

However, the fact that there is widespread disagreement about (2) and (3) does not mean that they are merely personal interpretations, as a statement beginning 'in my view' might be. If it is possible to agree on what a principal cause in history is and if historians can agree on the truth of causally relevant facts like (1), then it is possible to establish whether or not (2) is true. Now, it might be much more difficult to reach agreement on this issue and it may be that, in the case of a failure to do so, (2) remains a matter of interpretation. But we should not assume that it *must* remain so, any more than we are prepared to assume that its negation:

(4) It is not the case that Britain's actions between 1918 and 1939 were the main cause of the Second World War

is *merely* a matter of interpretation. Even if we are not prepared to say that many such propositions as (2) can be established as completely accurate, it is still plausible to attribute to them a degree of truth greater than that of any other plausible proposition on the same topic, as in the case of the partial truth concerning Labour's claims about VAT mentioned above. This position is also compatible with Dray's point that a voluntary action incorporates judgements of value. The actions of those who precipitated the Second World War incorporated value judgements that what they were doing was for the best for their own societies. It does not follow that, in recognizing this, a historian incorporates those values in his own causal judgements (see Dray 1964:58).

Proposition (3) looks like a clear case of interpretation rather than fact.

But it would be rash to doubt its truth without further consideration. After all, most people in Britain hold that Churchill's being a great military leader is not *merely* a matter of interpretation since they believe that he was primarily responsible for winning the Second World War and achieving his war objectives. If, however, it could be shown that he was not *primarily* responsible for doing so and that he manifestly failed to meet his own war objectives then (3) is true. It is the task of the historian to establish, if possible, the truth of propositions like (2) and (3) according to canons of historical investigation, and the history curriculum should reflect this concern for truth.

Conclusion

Having shown some of the pressures that might drive one towards a constructivist pedagogy and curriculum, we can review the situation. We have seen that innatists attempted to show that a combination of the postulates of innate abilities and of learning by trial and error makes some truths obtainable without apparent effort (Chomsky). However, constructivists, who assign a larger role to experience, embrace the innatist thesis that learning takes place through hypothetico-deductive means, and then claim, on such grounds, that absolute truth is unobtainable. Having made it unobtainable, we are then asked to accept a relativized notion of truth as a realistic educational objective, perhaps along the lines sketched out by James. Constructivist pedagogy, which emphasizes the activity of the learner, implies that learning occurs through discovery without direct instructional intervention. I hope that it has been shown that such a pedagogy may well lead to invention rather than discovery on the part of the student, when applied in conjunction with constructivist assumptions.

The anti-constructivist is not, however, committed solely to the teaching of absolute truth through instruction and training, because he need not be wedded to the idea that one should *never* employ trial and error as a means of learning. Nor, as we have seen, need he be committed to absolute truth. As I have tried to argue, absolute truth is not at all the same as the objective truth required by particular disciplines. Lying behind the hypothetico-deductivist enterprise is an absolutist conception of truth that no amount of induction will ever allow us to reach. This conception rests in turn on a strengthening of Aristotle's austere formulation of general truth-conditions into an account of truth as undoubted conformity of propositions with sempiternal states of affairs. But the defence of objective truth does not require any such metaphysical account of absolute truth, only a respect for the kind of precision in truth-determination that is appropriate to a particular discipline.

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EDUCATION, KNOWLEDGE AND CRITICAL THINKING

Sharon Bailin

Introduction

The fostering of good thinking has been viewed by philosophers as a central educational aim at least as far back as Plato (1941), and its importance has been re-emphasized by philosophers as diverse as Rousseau (1979), Kant (1959), Dewey (1933), and more recently Passmore (1967) and Scheffler (1973). It is primarily in the past two decades, however, that the subject has received sustained philosophical attention and has become the focus of educational reform. This emphasis on critical thinking is likely due in part to a reaction against traditional pedagogical practices which were thought to promote the passive acquisition of knowledge, and in part to a concern with a perceived inability on the part of students (and adults) to assess evidence and arguments effectively. It is believed that critical thinking is central to the critical appraisal of information which constitutes a part of subject matter expertise; the generation of effective solutions to problems; the abilities to evaluate competing claims, cut through political rhetoric and emotional suasion, and to engage in open-minded discussions that are crucial for democratic participation; and generally to the development of autonomous responsible individuals who weigh the consequences of their actions, engage in advanced and thoughtful planning, and deal in effective and innovative ways with personal and social problems (Bailin and Case 1996).

Attempts to foster critical thinking aim, then, at the promotion of active learning, independent thinking, personal autonomy, and reasoned judgement in thought and action, and these particular goals are grounded in broader views regarding knowledge, reason and the person. They presuppose, for example, that our knowledge can never be certain but is always fallible, that there are such things as good reasons, and that personal

autonomy is an important value. Despite such shared goals and common underpinnings, however, there is not one common conception of critical thinking which is universally accepted among theorists and which grounds various particular educational efforts to foster critical thinking. Rather, there is considerable debate regarding how critical thinking is best conceptualized. Related to the problem of conceptualization is the issue of generalizability, that is whether critical thinking involves a generic skill or set of skills, or is specific to subject matter. Finally, much current debate has centred on challenges to critical thinking emanating from feminist and postmodern perspectives, some of these questioning the very legitimacy of the entire enterprise of critical thinking. In this chapter I shall examine and critically assess these debates, and, in the process, suggest a way of conceptualizing critical thinking which offers a possible resolution of some of these issues.

Conceptualizing critical thinking

Although there are important differences among the various proffered accounts of critical thinking, approaches can be categorized broadly into two kinds: descriptive and normative. Descriptive conceptions tend to be psychological in origin, are framed in terms of cognitive skills and focus on the mental processes or procedures involved in thinking. The process approach holds that being good at critical thinking is basically a matter of being proficient at certain mental processes. These processes are generally thought to include such things as classifying, inferring, observing, evaluating, synthesizing and hypothesizing. Kirby and Kuykendall, for example, hold that 'Thinking is a holistic process in which different mental operations work in concert' and they allude to 'intellectual skills training' (Kirby and Kuykendall 1991:11). The procedures version views critical thinking in terms of following a series of steps or procedures; for example, those constitutive of the problem-solving process or the inquiry method.

Both these types of descriptive approaches have been criticized by philosophers on a number of grounds. One difficulty is that mental processes, in the sense of what goes on in the brain, are unobservable, and it is impossible to determine whether particular mental operations correlate with particular cases of good thinking. Moreover, a description at the level of brain processes would not be very helpful in attempting to foster good thinking. It seems clear, in fact, that terms such as classifying, observing or hypothesizing do not refer to mental operations at all but rather to different tasks requiring thinking. Smith puts the point well:

The words all presuppose that something is going on in the brain (rather than in the liver or the lungs), but they do not specifically refer to what is going on in the brain. They refer to what the

person is doing.... [B]ecause English can find employment for at least seventy-seven words to make different kinds of statements about what people do when they think, it does not follow that there must be seventy-seven different kinds of thinking for the brain to do.

(Smith 1990:3)

Also problematic is the role assigned to knowledge in the psychological approach. When critical thinking is conceived of in terms of mental processes, then knowledge becomes simply the raw material that is processed. Yet the notion of neutral thinking processes that are separate from knowledge is highly questionable. For example, it makes no sense to refer to a process of interpreting which remains constant regardless of subject matter. Rather, what is involved in and even meant by interpreting varies with the context. Interpreting a graph is very different from interpreting a poem and both differ significantly from interpreting the expression in someone's voice. This is because the nature of the task indicated by the term 'interpreting' will vary with the subject matter. Thus interpreting a graph is a matter of applying the information schematized in graph form to the phenomenon in question and involves knowledge of graphing conventions, of certain mathematical relationships and of the phenomenon under scrutiny. Interpreting a poem is a matter of inferring the meaning of the poem and depends on knowledge of the particular genre, of various poetic devices and perhaps of other works by the poet. Interpreting the expression in someone's voice is a matter of reading non-verbal vocal and bodily cues and involves knowledge of the vocal inflection of the language as well as of the personality and mannerisms of the person in question.

The principle problem with a descriptive account, however, is that it lacks a normative dimension. Critical thinking is, however, essentially and centrally a normative concept. It refers to good thinking. It is the quality of the thinking which distinguishes critical from uncritical thinking, and this quality is determined by the degree to which the thinking meets the relevant norms and criteria. It is, then, the adherence to certain norms and criteria which is the defining characteristic of critical thinking. An account of critical thinking in purely descriptive terms leaves out what is most central to critical thinking.

To illuminate this point, let us take the example of someone faced with the decision of whether to support a controversial proposal for a new motorway. On a descriptive account, thinking critically would involve going through certain processes: for example, analysing the issue, generating possible resolutions, evaluating the consequences of the various alternatives and synthesizing the information obtained to come to a decision. It is clear, however, that any or all of these processes could be undertaken in an uncritical manner. One could, for example, analyse the issue in a superficial

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way, fail to take into account some important kinds of consequences (for example, social or health-related), evaluate some options in a biased or closed-minded way (for example, if one had an economic interest in the building of the motorway), or make invalid inferences in reaching the final decision. One could, in other words, fail to meet the relevant critical standards in one's thinking. But it is precisely the adherence to these standards which is the defining characteristic of critical thinking.

In contrast to these psychological accounts, all the main philosophical conceptions of critical thinking have as a central concept the idea of good reasons and are, thus, explicitly normative. Robert Ennis, for example, highlights the assessment of reasons in his highly influential conception of critical thinking. In his 1962 paper, Ennis defined critical thinking as 'the correct assessing of statements' (Ennis 1962:83). He described twelve aspects involved in critical thinking which he categorized according to three dimensions: the logical (understanding relationships between meanings of words and statements), the criterial (having knowledge of the criteria for judging statements) and the pragmatic (judging sufficiency in light of the purpose of the judgement). Ennis subsequently broadened the scope of critical thinking and by 1985 he was defining critical thinking as 'reasonable reflective thinking that is focused on deciding what to believe or do' (Ennis 1987:10). The list of abilities he proposes as basic to critical thinking is subdivided under the headings elementary clarification, basic support, inference, advanced clarification, and strategies and tactics, and includes the following:

- 1 focusing on a question
- 2 analysing arguments
- 3 asking and answering questions of clarification and challenge
- 4 judging the credibility of a source
- 5 observing and judging observation reports
- 6 deducing and judging deductions
- 7 inducing and judging inductions
- 8 making and judging value judgements
- 9 defining terms and judging definitions
- 10 identifying assumptions
- 11 deciding on actions
- 12 interacting with others.

Ennis also views judgement as necessary to critical thinking (Ennis 1987:10).

Harvey Siegel also puts reason at the centre of his account of critical thinking. For Siegel the critical thinker is one who is appropriately moved by reasons and one of the main aspects of critical thinking for Siegel is the reason assessment component. This means that the critical thinker is able

properly to assess reasons and their ability to warrant beliefs, claims and actions. Siegel views critical thinking as the educational correlate to rationality (Siegel 1988).

The assessment of reasons is also central to the conception of critical thinking put forward by Richard Paul, but for Paul such assessment must go beyond finding weaknesses in views with which one disagrees in order to reinforce one's own views. The latter Paul characterizes as critical thinking in the weak sense. He advocates, instead, critical thinking in the strong sense: thinking that probes the egocentric and sociocentric assumptions that underpin beliefs, including one's own, and that examines the world views in which beliefs are embedded. Strong sense critical thinking involves dealing with issues from multiple perspectives and is, thus, dialectical and dialogical (Paul 1984).

Criteria and standards are particularly prominent in the account of critical thinking proposed by Matthew Lipman. Lipman's view differs from the views previously described in that it focuses on judgement rather than on belief and action. He defines critical thinking as thinking that facilitates judgement because it relies on criteria, is self-correcting and is sensitive to context (Lipman 1991).

John McPeck's conception of critical thinking differs somewhat from those previously described in defining critical thinking as the appropriate use of reflective scepticism within the problem area under consideration. This definition limits the domain of critical thinking somewhat in that, for McPeck, critical thinking is not co-extensive with rationality but is a subspecies of rational thought which is used only when one encounters problems in the normal course of reasoning. According to McPeck, not all rational thinking is critical thinking. McPeck's conception also limits the domain of critical thinking to specific domains or problem areas (McPeck 1981).

Another commonality among the main philosophical conceptions of critical thinking is that dispositions are seen as constituting an important dimension of critical thinking. Siegel proposes the notion of the critical spirit to capture this dispositional dimension, which he sees as being of equal importance with the reason assessment component. The critical spirit indicates that a critical thinker values good reasoning and is disposed to assess reasons and to govern beliefs and actions on the basis of such assessment (Siegel 1988). Ennis has a list of tendencies or dispositions in his conception of critical thinking which includes: the disposition to seek a clear statement of the statement or question, to seek reasons, to try to be well-informed, to use credible sources and mention them, to take into account the total situation, to try to remain relevant to the main point, to keep in mind the original or basic concern, to look for alternatives, to be open-minded, to take a position when the evidence and reasons are sufficient, to seek as much precision as the subject permits, to deal in an orderly manner

with the parts of a complex whole, and to be sensitive to the feelings, level of knowledge and degree of sophistication of others (Ennis 1987). And dispositions, values and traits of character are central to Paul's strong sense critical thinking. Strong sense critical thinking involves not just a set of intellectual or technical skills but centrally certain dispositions or habits of mind. These include open-mindedness, sensitivity to the possibility of self-deception, and willingness to empathize with points of view with which one disagrees (Paul 1990).

It is evident that there are some significant differences in detail among these various philosophical conceptions of critical thinking. Nonetheless it is also important to recognize that they do all share a common vision about the nature and value of the enterprise. Indeed they must, since any normative conception of critical thinking will inevitably rest on certain underlying assumptions regarding the nature and value of reasons. A normative conception of critical thinking presupposes, for example, a fallibilist epistemology, that is, the view that our knowledge can never be certain but is always open to the possibility of revision in the light of new evidence and arguments. If we had certain knowledge, then the critical assessment of claims would not be an issue. It is because we cannot be certain that our current body of knowledge is true that the critical assessment of this knowledge in light of new evidence and arguments becomes central.

The practice of critical thinking also rests on a non-relativist epistemology. A radical relativist account of knowledge holds that all views are merely subjective preferences that are equally valid. The enterprise of rationally assessing claims makes no sense in this context. Critical thinking presupposes the existence of criteria for judgement and hence the possibility of justification.

The value of autonomy is also assumed in attempts to foster critical thinking. Kant, for example, strongly emphasizes the importance of autonomy, viewing immaturity as that state in which we let others do our thinking for us and Enlightenment as a release from this type of intellectual servitude (Kant 1959). And in a contemporary version of this view, Siegel argues that one of the grounds for justifying critical thinking is that it is necessary for the development of independent judgement required for self-sufficiency in adulthood (Siegel 1988).

Generalizability

One of the most contentious issues in the area of critical thinking is whether critical thinking is generalizable or subject-specific. It is an issue which is debated by both psychologists and philosophers. The psychological version of the debate is framed in terms of the issue of transfer; i.e. that of whether the thinker is able to apply particular processes learned in isolation to a

variety of contexts or transfer processes learned in one context to a different one. Subject matter knowledge is seen as separate from thinking skills or processes; the latter are applied to the former. This perspective is well exemplified by Beyer: 'To be proficient in a thinking skill or strategy means to be able to use that operation effectively and efficiently on one's own in a variety of appropriate contexts' (Beyer 1987:163).

Among philosophers, the debate tends to be framed in terms of subject-specificity: whether there are critical thinking skills which apply across domains or subjects or whether all such skills are specific to particular subjects. Ennis, an upholder of generalizability, argues that the proficiencies and dispositions which he describes are relevant to a variety of areas. McPeck, on the other hand argues against the existence of general skills. His main argument is a conceptual one, i.e., since all thinking is thinking about something, then the idea of a general skill which is not applied to any particular subject matter is incoherent. McPeck also argues that since knowledge of the particular subject is necessary for critical thinking, a general ability to think-critically could not exist. His final argument is that because different fields rely on different epistemologies, using different kinds of reasons and different types of arguments, what is involved in critical thinking varies from field to field.

Ennis (1989), Siegel (1988) and others (Govier 1983; Paul 1985) have pointed out some of the problems with McPeck's arguments. They have, for example, rightly noted that McPeck's conceptual argument is not valid: the fact that critical thinking must have an object does not in itself preclude the possibility of general critical thinking skills which apply to a number of subjects or areas. It has also been pointed out that supporters of generalizability acknowledge that knowledge is necessary for critical thinking, but the necessity of knowledge does not imply that there are no general skills. Finally, contra McPeck, most supporters of generalizability acknowledge that there are some field-dependent reasons and arguments, but claim that there are also some principles common to different fields.

The fact that there are weaknesses in McPeck's particular arguments against generalizability does not settle the generalizability issue, however. There are also some important insights captured by his position. But I would argue that there are some confusions inherent in the way critical thinking has been conceptualized and hence in the way that the generalizability debate has been framed which tend to mislead and to render some of the philosophical accounts subject to some of the same problems as the psychological accounts.

As mentioned above, the main distinguishing feature of philosophical accounts of critical thinking is that they are explicitly normative. Philosophers eschew descriptive psychological accounts because they recognize the problems inherent in locating critical thinking in mental processes. Nonetheless many of their conceptions are framed, at least to

some extent, in terms of skill. Thus, for example, Siegel writes of the critical thinker as possessing 'a certain character as well as certain skills' (1988:39), and makes reference to 'a wide variety of reasoning skills' (41). Similarly, Paul refers to critical thinking skills and describes them as 'a set of integrated macrological skills' (Paul 1984:5). Ennis maintains the existence of 'general critical thinking abilities' (Ennis 1990:15). And McPeck states that 'there can be no completely general set of thinking skills' but that there are 'some very limited general thinking skills' (McPeck 1990:12). Conceptualizing critical thinking in terms of skills, however, is potentially problematic.

One of the sources of the problem is that the term 'skill' is ambiguous. In some cases, skill is used to indicate that a person is proficient at a particular task. This is particularly true of the adjectival form (for example, a skilled reasoner) and the adverbial form (for example, she reasons skilfully). A skilled reasoner, for example, is one who is likely to reason well and to meet the relevant criteria for good reasoning. The focus, in these cases, is on the actual performance of the task and on the quality of the performance. Thus someone who is thinking critically can do more than cite a definition of the fallacy of 'begging the question'. She will notice circular arguments in particular argumentative contexts. She is skilled, then, in the sense that her thinking meets the relevant criteria.

The use of the noun form, 'skill', as in 'critical thinking skills', is potentially more problematic, however. The term in this case seems to refer to something within individuals, some inner entity or ability. Conceiving of critical thinking in terms of skill in this sense implies more than simply that an individual is a competent or proficient thinker. Skill is conceived of as an identifiable operation or inner possession and is thus a mentalistic concept. The problems involved in viewing critical thinking in terms of mental operations have been outlined above.

Although philosophers arguing over generalizability do make some reference to principles, reasons and arguments, the debate about generalizability is framed largely in terms of skills. But principles, reasons and arguments are very different sorts of things from skills. Principles, reasons and arguments are public entities, whereas skills are inner abilities. If critical thinking is viewed in terms of skills, the problem of generalizability becomes one of determining whether individuals can apply this inner ability in different domains or fields. The problem of generalizability collapses into the problem of transfer and becomes a psychological issue. In addition to the general problems with a psychologized view of critical thinking, there are particular conceptual problems inherent in the issue of transfer, for example, the vagueness of the concepts of domain or field (what constitutes or demarcates particular domains?), or the vagueness of the concept of ability (what exactly is it that is transferred?).

An alternative to skill talk

I believe that it is a mistake to conceptualize critical thinking in terms of skill. The focus must be placed, rather, on reasoned judgement, a point which is implicit in all the philosophical accounts, and explicit in the account offered by Lipman (1991). The pedagogical focus can then shift from issues relating to the acquisition and application of skills, with all the attendant conceptual problems, to the question of what one needs to understand in order to make reasoned judgements in particular contexts (Bailin *et al.* 1993).

This way of viewing critical thinking highlights its contextual nature. Critical thinking always takes place in response to a particular task, question, problematic situation or challenge (including solving problems, resolving dilemmas, evaluating theories, conducting inquiries, interpreting works and making life decisions) and such challenges always arise in particular contexts. Dealing with these challenges in a critical way involves drawing on a complex array of understandings (what colleagues and I have termed 'intellectual resources'), the particular resources needed for any challenge depending on the specific context.

Since adherence to the criteria that govern quality thinking and judgement in a particular area is the defining characteristic of critical thinking, it follows that the most important intellectual resource is knowledge of these criteria. These criteria are embedded in the critical practices that constitute our traditions of inquiry and provide the standards against which previously accepted beliefs, practices and institutions are criticized and revised. Another key type of intellectual resource is constituted by the many concepts that mark certain distinctions in an area or pick out certain aspects that are central to the area. Such concepts, such as necessary and sufficient conditions or premises and conclusion, provide invaluable tools for critical analysis and evaluation. Background knowledge in the relevant area is also an important determinant of the quality of thinking in the area and is thus central to the making of reasoned judgements. In addition, there may be some strategies or heuristics which, although not central to critical thinking, may be useful in the course of arriving at reasoned judgements. Finally, the mastery of the other intellectual resources is insufficient if an individual does not have a basic commitment to rational inquiry that disposes her to deploy the resources and the attitudes or habits of mind which characterize critical thinking. These include respect for reasons, an inquiring attitude, open-mindedness and fair-mindedness, among others (Bailin, *et al.* 1993).

An approach which focuses on understanding or intellectual resources rather than on skills reframes the issue of generalizability. The question is not, then, whether a certain mental ability transfers to a variety of contexts. It is rather what constellation of resources is required in particular contexts

in response to particular challenges and what the range of application is for particular resources.

Some resources seem to be particular to particular contexts. The principles which govern the conduct of inquiry and the criteria for evaluation in specific disciplines are examples of resources with a fairly narrow range of applicability. The principle requiring experimental control, for example, applies to experimental science but is irrelevant to literary criticism. Similarly, criteria for evaluation of sources in historical inquiry have no relevance to the evaluation of philosophical arguments. Ennis acknowledges this point in his discussion of what he calls the epistemological version of subject-specificity, that is, the view that 'in different fields different sorts of things count as good reasons, so critical thinking varies from field to field' (1989:7). He illustrates with the following examples:

- (a) Mathematics has different criteria for good reasons from most other fields, because mathematics accepts only deductive proof, whereas most fields do not even seek it for the establishment of a final conclusion; (b) in the social sciences, statistical significance is an important consideration, whereas in many branches of physics it is largely ignored; (c) in the arts, some subjectivity is usually accepted, whereas in the sciences, it is usually shunned.

(Ennis 1989:8)

Some intellectual resources have a wider range of application. Many concepts, for example the conceptual distinction between necessary and sufficient condition, are relevant to making critical judgements in a variety of contexts, from philosophical argumentation to scientific inquiry. As another example, the rules of logic have a very wide field of application. Indeed, they may be seen to apply in virtually every area of critical endeavour. And habits of mind, such as open-mindedness, fair-mindedness and a commitment to making judgements on the basis of reasoned assessment, are relevant to and necessary to thinking critically in any area. It is interesting, and somewhat puzzling, that the latter are rarely the object of interest in debates over generalizability.

It may initially appear that a skills approach and an approach conceptualized in terms of intellectual resources are quite similar, but there is one respect in which they are importantly different. While the former focuses on the acquisition of mental abilities, the latter focuses on the mastery of public norms and conventions. Thus the issue of generalizability is much less an issue for the latter, and to the extent to which it is, it is located in a different place. The problem becomes one of determining the range of use and application of the principles and criteria that inhabit our public traditions of inquiry rather than looking for general skills in the inner world of individuals. Thus the philosophers who discuss generalizability in terms of

the generalizability of skills, principles, reasons and arguments are conflating very different kinds of things. The question of the generalizability of skills is a very different one from the question of the generalizability of principles, reasons and arguments.

I believe that this approach captures the insights inherent in the accounts of both those who argue for generalizability and those who argue for subject-specificity. First, it captures McPeck's insight regarding the centrality of knowledge for critical thinking. McPeck is right to suggest that background knowledge in the particular area is a precondition for critical thinking to take place. I cannot analyse a poem if I do not know something about rhythm, metre and metaphor, and without an understanding of certain biological and geographic factors, I will be unable to evaluate competing theories regarding the cause of the extinction of the dinosaurs.

The role of knowledge for critical thinking goes beyond simply the role of background knowledge as an intellectual resource, however. It includes, as well, knowledge of certain critical concepts and of the principles and criteria of inquiry. And this type of knowledge, for example knowledge of the difference between a necessary and sufficient condition or knowledge of the principles of logic, is not just background knowledge but is central to what is involved in thinking critically. Critical thinking is not, then, a matter of applying critical thinking skills to various domains of knowledge, but rather of mastering certain kinds of knowledge in the domain or domains. Barrow makes the point thus:

What is clear, what is contradictory, what is logical, and so forth, depends upon the particular context.... To be logical in discussion about art is not a matter of combining logical ability with information about art. It is a matter of understanding the logic of art, of being on the inside of aesthetic concepts and aesthetic theory. The capacity to be critical about art is inextricably intertwined with understanding aesthetic discourse.

(Barrow 1991:12)

Facione sums up well this general point:

This domain-specific knowledge includes understanding methodological principles and competence to engage in norm-regulated practices that are at the core of reasonable judgements in those specific contexts.... Too much of value is lost if CT is conceived of simply as a list of logical operations and domain-specific knowledge is conceived of simply as an aggregation of information.

(Facione 1990:10)

In this way, the intellectual resources approach, focusing as it does on public traditions of inquiry, also captures McPeck's insight regarding the different 'epistemologies' used by different fields. Although referring to different epistemologies is somewhat controversial, McPeck's point regarding the domain specificity of at least some kinds of reasons, principles and arguments is well taken.

An approach which focuses on intellectual resources also acknowledges the insight of generalists such as Ennis that some principles have a very wide scope of applicability. This insight is often masked by or confused with issues regarding the range of application of skills, however. Ennis, for example does recognize the difference between the empirical version of subject (or domain) specificity, which focuses on the issue of transfer, and the epistemological version, which focuses on what counts as good reasons in different fields (Ennis 1989). Nonetheless he still tends to frame his discussion of generalizability in terms of the existence of general abilities (Ennis 1990).

Much of the debate about generalizability is motivated by pedagogical concerns and is fuelled by the question of how best to teach critical thinking. Ennis, in fact, introduces one of his articles on subject specificity with the following:

Perhaps the most controversial issue within the critical thinking movement these days is whether critical thinking should be taught separately (the 'general' approach), be infused in instruction in existing subject-matter areas (the 'infusion' approach), result from a student's immersion in the subject matter (the 'immersion' approach), or—an oft-neglected possibility—be taught as a combination of the general approach with infusion or immersion (a 'mixed model' approach...).

(Ennis 1989:4)

It is a question, then, of whether the skills of critical thinking can be taught in isolation to be transferred to different contexts or whether they must be or are best infused into instruction in particular contexts. The pedagogical issue looks quite different, however, when critical thinking is conceptualized in terms of a response to challenges that are always contextual and when learning to think critically is conceptualized in terms of the deployment of intellectual resources that are embedded in our critical practices. On this approach, the notion of teaching critical thinking separately is incoherent. And even the notion of infusion is problematic, as it seems to imply that critical thinking is something distinct from subject matter. Rather, learning to think critically is a matter of coming to understand the principles, concepts and criteria that constitute our critical practices and are inherent in our traditions of inquiry. It is important to note, however, that neither is this

approach the same as the immersion approach. It does not assume that critical thinking will automatically result from immersion in subject matter, particularly if this is meant to refer to traditional school subjects. Critical thinking is not limited to traditional school subjects and the latter are not synonymous with our traditions of inquiry. Nor does this approach necessarily preclude a separate focus on some principles and criteria that have a wide range of applicability, for example, the rules of logic (in addition to focusing on these in specific contexts), but this should not be seen as synonymous with teaching critical thinking. What it does imply is a pedagogical focus on the principles, concepts and criteria of particular modes of inquiry as they play a role in the making of reasoned judgements in particular contexts.

Rather than focusing on individual skills, then, this way of viewing critical thinking emphasizes traditions of inquiry and critical practices. Critical thinking is not a skill but the engine of our critical practices, or, perhaps, a way of describing what is entailed by them. The concepts, principles and criteria that constitute the intellectual resources for critical thinking can be seen, then, as inherent in these traditions and practices, as constitutive of them. They are not isolated, arbitrary and inexplicable, as many students seem to view them. I have argued elsewhere that students often have problems in thinking critically because they lack epistemological understanding, that is, understanding of the enterprise of knowledge creation and evaluation, an enterprise which is constituted by the offering and assessing of reasons (Bailin 1997). Thus particular principles, concepts and criteria may strike them as arbitrary and without reason because they fail to understand their place in the process of inquiry. They fail, in fact, to grasp the whole interconnected network of concepts, principles, procedures and purposes that constitute our critical practices. I have argued, further, that this dimension is not accommodated in conceptions of critical thinking that focus on skills and dispositions. A focus on critical practices as embodied in traditions of inquiry, however, brings to the fore this network of concepts, principles, procedures and purposes and makes clear the point of the practices and the place of particular principles and criteria within them.

Challenges to critical thinking

Despite the widespread interest in critical thinking, the enterprise and the theories which ground it are not without their critics. Indeed, considerable recent debate has focused on challenges to critical thinking. These criticisms, emanating particularly from feminist and postmodern perspectives, are thought to point to biases in critical thinking in that such thinking is seen to privilege the values and practices of traditionally advantaged groups and exclude those of groups traditionally lacking in

power. Some of the main criticisms are: that critical thinking neglects or downplays emotions; that critical thinking privileges rational, linear, deductive thought over intuition; that critical thinking is aggressive and confrontational rather than collegial and collaborative; that critical thinking is individualistic and privileges personal autonomy over a sense of community and relationship; that critical thinking deals in abstraction and downplays lived experience and concrete particularity; that critical thinking presupposes the possibility of objectivity and thus does not recognize one's situatedness (Bailin 1995).

The criticisms fall broadly into two kinds, one posing challenges to particular aspects of critical thinking theory and practice, and the other involving more fundamental challenges to the very underpinnings of the entire enterprise. The former have as objects some contingent aspects of current theory and practice, aspects which, to the extent that they truly are problematic, are remediable without doing violence to the foundations of critical thinking. Let us take, as example, the claim that critical thinking is aggressive and confrontational rather than collegial and collaborative. It seems clear, however, that there is nothing in critical thinking theory which necessitates or even recommends a confrontational manner, that critical thinking can be conducted in a collegial manner, and further, that attention to the interpersonal context for critical thinking may better serve our purposes as critical thinkers. Indeed, prominent among the habits of mind necessary for critical thinking are respect for others even when one disagrees with their views. Similarly, the appropriate place for emotion and for joint and communal inquiry in critical thinking can be acknowledged without violating the fundamental aspects of the concept. These types of criticisms recommend changes in the way critical thinking has been conceived of and practised, but are based on an acceptance of the role and importance of critical thinking (Bailin 1995).

Another type of challenge posed to critical thinking is much more fundamental. The essence of this challenge is that critical thinking represents the practice of a particular group but that it has been privileged as the only legitimate mode of understanding, to the exclusion of those of groups lacking in power. Thus the criteria inherent in rational inquiry are seen as biased and arbitrary. Critical thinking is seen, then, as one ideology among others and its advocacy is seen as a kind of cultural imposition. For example, the claim that critical thinking privileges rationality over intuition implies that intuition is an equally appropriate basis for deciding what to believe and do and that critical thinking has been unjustifiably put forth as universally appropriate when in fact it constitutes only one way of proceeding. This type of challenge puts into question the criteria that form the basis for reasoned judgement and, in fact, undercuts the appeal to and demand for reasons, evidence, and justification.

A number of responses can be made to this type of radical challenge.

One problem with the claim that critical criteria and principles are biased and partial is that it misrepresents the nature of these principles and criteria. They are not arbitrary or based merely on people's interests but are embedded in traditions of inquiry and critical practices and are conceptually related to purposes. Nor are they fixed and absolute. Rather, these principles, procedures and criteria represent attempts to embody rationality and to promote rational inquiry, and the prime characteristic of rational inquiry is that it is self-correcting. To quote Lipman, 'The most characteristic feature of inquiry...is that it aims to discover its own weaknesses and rectify what is at fault with its own procedures' (Lipman 1991:121). Thus the criteria offered by critical thinking are subject to alteration in light of criticisms and our purposes as thinkers. And traditions of inquiry are not static and monolithic but are, rather, dynamic, open-ended, plural, and often contested. Thus the critical modes of inquiry provide for the possibility of evolution of the traditions themselves in the light of new evidence and arguments and problems and limitations discovered during the course of inquiry, but also in the light of insights and criticisms from other traditions and frameworks. Rational inquiry spawns criticism, and criticisms of a tradition inevitably grow out of the traditions which they criticize, appeal to values inherent in these traditions, and presuppose rationality by appealing to reasons. Indeed, it could not be otherwise, since any attempt to engage in questioning, criticism and inquiry presupposes rationality and a recognition of the force of reasons (Siegel 1988). Criticism, including the criticisms of rationality itself, rests on rationality and any proposed alternative would ultimately have to be assessed on the basis of critical thinking principles and criteria (Bailin 1992).

Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated problems with descriptive accounts of critical thinking characterized in terms of mental processes and have argued, instead, for a normative conception, one which focuses on reasoned judgement. I have also argued that the focus on skills in contemporary philosophical conceptions tends unwittingly to reintroduce the psychological dimension with all its inherent problems. The approach that I suggest centres instead on understanding or intellectual resources. This shift reconceptualizes the generalizability issue by situating critical thinking within public traditions of inquiry and critical practices. This emphasis also helps respond to challenges to critical thinking by making clear the epistemological status of the criteria for reasoned judgement and the epistemological underpinnings of critical thinking.

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ASSESSMENT AND THE CHALLENGE OF SCEPTICISM

Kevin Williams

Introduction

Although of intense interest to those most intimately concerned with teaching and learning (pupils, teachers and parents), the issue of assessment has not greatly exercised the minds of philosophers of education. Some general works of philosophy of education have chapters devoted to the topic (for example, Wilson 1977 and Kleinig 1982) but, unlike issues to do with parents' rights, indoctrination or multiculturalism, the issue of assessment has not been a traditional preoccupation of philosophers of education. Of late, however, the subject has featured on the philosophers' agenda either directly or in connection with the notion of competence-based education (Davis 1995, 1996; Winch 1996; Winch and Gingell 1996; Bridges 1996; Hyland 1993). This is a welcome development because assessment is one area where notions of truth, accuracy and fairness have a very practical purchase in everyday life.

The aim of this chapter is to make a case for assessment which avoids positivistic excess but which at the same time firmly rejects the challenges of epistemic pessimism—both the general or global scepticism of the relativist as well as the more particular scepticism of the traditional advocate of liberal education. The opening section of the chapter affirms the necessary connection between learning and assessment and defends attempts to devise forms of assessment that are more comprehensive, detailed, searching, precise and accurate in terms of what is assessed and how this assessment is conducted. This defence is developed in the final section of the chapter. But first two general epistemological objections to the very concepts of assessment and evaluation are addressed. The first involves calling into question the status of knowledge itself; the second is based on arguments about the association of knowledge in general and of assessment in particular,

with the exercise of power. Before developing a defence of the aspiration to make assessment more precise and defined, the chapter takes issue with a pessimism which is not uncommon among advocates of liberal education. This pessimism is based on (1) a claim that what is most valuable in human learning is simply not amenable to assessment or examination and (2) a legitimate point, taken to extreme lengths, about defining the limits of what can be learned.

Assessment and human learning

Unfortunately the idea of assessment prompts in the minds of some people negative notions of external encroachment on what would be otherwise an enthusiastic, spontaneous and free activity of learning. Baudrillard, for example, appears to believe that assessment derives from a morally reprehensible but ‘powerful longing for the process of examination’ (Baudrillard 1990:69). Questions may well be raised about the manner of assessment in certain circumstances, but the nature of learning is such that the idea of assessment itself cannot be dispensed with. This is because if human beings want to learn anything, from learning to tie their shoe laces to learning to solve problems in nuclear physics, then it is inevitable that they will want to know how well they have been doing at what they have been learning. Often, too, their teachers will be keen to find out or evaluate how successful their instruction has been. Accordingly it can be said to be a matter of logic that notions of assessment and evaluation and degrees of success are associated with all learning. Assessment is not therefore an optional extra in learning but is rather a necessary, integral feature of every human effort to acquire mastery of a skill or body of knowledge. The reason for this is because human activities have criteria or standards of success built into them. These criteria or standards have nothing directly to do with the psychological dispositions of learners, although such qualities as diligence and perseverance are likely to contribute to success at learning. In determining the criteria of success at such activities as swimming or mathematics, willingness to try hard and other positive personal qualities, however admirable, are not relevant. Alas, it can happen that uninterested but able children can do better work than their more enthusiastic but challenged classmates (see Carr 1992:223). We must distinguish between the technical merit and the moral, human and psychological merit of performances. We might, for example, wish to applaud a student’s interest in the German language and willingness to do his or her best to learn it; but if the same student fails to understand or to make the simplest utterance in the language, then we have to say that the individual has been an unsuccessful student of German. But failure to meet the criteria of success in our performances at scholastic, sporting or other activities does not mean that we have failed as human beings. Inability to master the German

language, to learn to swim or to play a musical instrument does not diminish our value as persons. All it means is that we lack ability in a certain sphere of human activity.

The same point applies to norms. Because it can be important to establish how we are doing in relation to other learners, an element of comparison is a feature of most learning. Assessment is required in order to provide an idea of how our performance compares with that of other learners. This does not mean that we are intrinsically competitive and suffer from an unfortunate predilection for ‘ritualised competition’ (Baudrillard 1990:69) but rather that we require a sense of the norm of achievement within activities in order to get a perspective on the relative merit of our own performances. Someone learning to swim all on her own without any idea of what other swimmers can achieve may acquire an exaggerated notion of her ability merely because she is able to swim one width of the pool. There is, then, nothing inherently objectionable in the notion of norms and they have nothing to do with facilitating the hegemony of the powerful within society. Unfortunately our ambitions tend to exceed our abilities and assessment provides us with an indication of the relationship between these ambitions and our abilities and between our abilities and the abilities of others.

The foregoing is fairly unexceptionable, but my next claim may arouse the ire of some defenders of liberal education. There seems to me to be merit in seeking to be more specific and precise about the learning that we prescribe and about levels of achievement at this learning. This will involve defining what has to be learned as comprehensively as possible, specifying criteria of achievement at the learning in question and devising appropriate instruments to assess this achievement. Some educators will be uneasy with this aspiration, fearing a return to the regime of ‘payment by results’ of the nineteenth century—a regime that indeed appeared so congenial to the New Right of the last quarter of the twentieth century. But we must be aware of the danger of rejecting proposals simply because they have enjoyed political endorsement from objectionable sources or because they prompt reflex responses based on memories of the excesses of behaviourism.

But before addressing these particular objections, let us first consider more general objections to the very notion of assessment.

General epistemic pessimism

There is a paucity of material on assessment written from the perspective of the radical philosophical sceptic. This shortage is somewhat ironic because, if knowledge claims themselves are suspect, then the projects of those who design, prescribe, assess and evaluate curricula are deeply misguided and disabling. The notion and practice of assessment should provide a fertile area of critique for general relativistic scepticism regarding knowledge itself.

In fairness, the radical critics of the 1960s and 1970s such as Illich, Reimer, P. Goodman and Paulo Freire did focus on the role of assessment and the whole enterprise was indicted by such slogans as ‘grades degrade’. Philosophers of all people should be wary of arguments which have even a suggestion of *ad hominem* about them, but there is one obvious reason for the paucity of commentary from philosophical sceptics. Maintaining complete scepticism about the possibility of determining standards in appraising or assessing understanding is incompatible with normal functioning in the practical world of teaching and learning. When operating in this practical world even the most radical philosophical sceptics have to be epistemologically conservative as they tend also to be where their personal interests regarding publication are involved. After all, authorless texts do not feature on book-shelves and the narratives of the most thoroughgoing postmodernists assert fairly unambiguous claims to personal ownership. But let us look more closely at some misguided sceptical assumptions about assessment and evaluation.

It is a mistake to assume that conferring upon assessment a legitimate and important role in teaching and learning is to be committed to an ‘abstract Enlightenment idea of an ahistorical reason’ (Carr 1995:81) and to a conception of truth as absolute and having a universally compelling power across all the domains of knowledge for all time.¹ To be sure, human knowledge has a contextual aspect and a distinction must be made between areas of knowledge and the kind of truth claims that apply within them. The truth claims that are made in physics and chemistry differ from those that apply in literary criticism and history and both differ from the kind of claims to accuracy relevant in learning foreign languages. Natural languages provide a helpful illustration of the point here. To have mastered some idiom or construction in a foreign language is not to have mastered some ‘truth’ about the world which exists out there independently of speakers of that language. Yet it is true that the idiom in question is one used by native speakers of the language at the end of the twentieth century. Likewise with knowledge claims, what counts as an acceptable claim to knowledge may undergo change over time in the way, for example, that the criteria for satisfactory explanations in physics have changed enormously.

Commitment to the role of assessment in teaching and learning is also perfectly consistent with recognition of the significantly controvertible character of some of what is taught and examined in educational institutions. The teaching of history, for example, brings concerns about truth in school subjects dramatically to the surface. In Ireland, the treatment of the struggle for national independence is particularly sensitive. Since the 1970s charges of revisionism have been directed at policy makers for their attempts to temper the anti-British sentiment that traditionally characterized much teaching of history in the country. But just as consensus must be sought regarding selection of curriculum content and choice of examination

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questions, we must try to reach some pedagogic consensus regarding the acceptability of competing interpretations in history and in other school subjects. To be sure, there is little likelihood that we shall achieve a complete consensus on such contentious matters. Yet if curriculum and examination boards are sufficiently representative of those who can claim legitimate expertise—including teachers, inspectors, academics, researchers or others with scholarly, pedagogic or psychometric expertise—acceptable agreement can be arrived at.

Nor is there any reason to assume that knowledge which is amenable to assessment must be based on what Henry Giroux characterizes as ‘totalitarian and terroristic...’

[g]eneral abstractions that deny the specificity and particularity of everyday life, that generalize out of existence the particular and the local, that smother difference under the banner of universalizing categories.

(Giroux 1988:14, cited in Beyer and Liston 1992:374)

Obviously little enough assessment, like human learning in general, is directly concerned with the fine detail of individual human lives, yet there are significant areas where the local and the particular have a significant role—for example, in creative writing and in response to literature and other arts. Nor does affirming the value of assessment in learning assume an ‘Enlightenment distinction between the “knowing subject” and an “objective world” to be known’ (Carr 1995:80). It would be difficult to take seriously a claim that the ‘knowing subject’ with its life history could be eliminated from any effort to understand and make sense of the world. Another misconception of opponents of assessment is that the aspiration to assess learning commits test designers and examiners to notions of complete detachment and objectivity regarding the definition of what is to be learned and regarding judgements about the quality of this learning. Issues of precision and objectivity in assessment will be addressed at more length later in this chapter, but we should note here that specialists in the area (Gipps 1994; Harlen 1994) take particular pains to eschew impossible claims to objectivity and accuracy.

Assessment and domination

But if not ownerless, is it plausible to conceive of knowledge as an instrument of socio-political domination with assessment the cutting edge of this domination? According to this argument, which had currency among sociologists of knowledge in the 1970s, all knowledge is simply an instrument in the exercise of power in society, so that what we count as knowledge is not merely influenced, but actually determined, by what is in the economic

interests of the agencies of social and political control. The response to this standard relativistic argument is too well known to need detailed rehearsing. Put briefly, if all knowledge were simply a reflection of vested interests, then the claim to this effect would be similarly a reflection of these interests.² But this is not to deny the possible presence of vested interests in assessment. (Indeed it is possible that even participants in academic debates about assessment may be operating from personal agendas of their own.) There is some plausibility in the claim (although we should not exaggerate it) that assessment has played a significant role in facilitating the maintenance of power by dominant social classes (see, for example, Broadfoot 1984). This is due to the association of much conventional school assessment with high stakes selection for career opportunities either directly or by providing access to higher education. The use of school leaving examinations for the purpose of selection is at the heart of much of the dissatisfaction with conventional forms of assessment, but whether a system of publicly funded schooling can be uncoupled from this purpose is very questionable.³

There is, however, a point worth making about the relationship between assessment and the exercise of power within society. Research indicates that the status of examinations is related less to what they tell us about possession of knowledge or skills than to their credentializing effect: that is, to their role in telling us that students have successfully completed a particular stage of education. What examinations actually certify appears to be of only marginal importance. Opportunities to pursue further education or to secure employment appear to be related to the mere possession of qualifications rather than to the character of what has in fact been assessed (Dale and Pires 1984). This is borne out by the disconcertingly high correlation between the possession of educational qualifications and social class origins (see Williams 1989:227). Yet an important distinction must be noted in appraising this criticism of conventional high stakes assessment. This is the distinction between the probable but *contingent* association of assessment with providing access to the exercise of power and the *necessary* association of learning with criteria and norms. It is seriously misguided to attribute the relative lack of success of individuals at scholastic pursuits to a conspiracy on the part of a socio-economic elite to contrive criteria and norms that prevent the poor from achieving success at them. Economic factors play an important role in determining the distribution of many of the benefits of education but these factors define neither the criteria nor norms of achievement at educational activities.

Yet the notion of norms does have a problematic dimension in as far as many conventional forms of assessment depend on a norm-base (see Mortimer 1982). This means that every student is assessed in relation to the norms of achievement of others doing the same examination. As is clear from an examination of results in the Irish Leaving Certificate, roughly the same proportion gains particular grades each year. This means that a proportion of

students will inevitably fail.⁴ This is indeed a serious criticism, for it means that the notion of failure is written into conventional forms of assessment as it is into tests of ‘intelligence’. Part of the function of conventional assessment is to locate a student’s performance in terms of a curve of normal distribution of attainment. Concentration on the instrumental function of assessment through the use of examination performance as a selection criterion for access to third-level education and for high-status employment has arguably had negative consequences for education. It can be said to have led to an emphasis on relative ability and lack of concern with the detail of what pupils actually know or can do as a result of their schooling. One reason for the introduction of attempts to improve assessment is the desire to focus on the *actual* rather than the *relative* achievement of learners. Forms of assessment have been devised that aspire to enable learners more readily to identify their achievement at different levels. But important aspects of the aspiration to increase precision in assessment meet with criticism and to this criticism we now turn our attention.

Specific epistemic pessimism

One of the most trenchantly critical and philosophically sophisticated accounts of the aspiration to secure precision in assessment is to be found in the work of Andrew Davis (1995, 1996). As I propose to take issue with Davis’s claims and as they have been subject to perhaps somewhat over-robust criticism (see Winch and Gingell 1996), I shall use his own words as far as possible to represent his case. Davis argues that

reliability and validity can only be purchased in criterion-referenced assessment systems at the very heavy cost of distorting proper educational objectives for knowledge and understanding. The reasons for this distortion are analytic and conceptual....

[Accordingly] a criterion-referenced approach in which statements about pupil attainment aspire to public and national currency is fundamentally flawed....

[T]he meaning of statements about pupil knowledge and understanding within such systems will necessarily be distorted....

(Davis 1996:389–90)

He calls into question the possibility of reaching a

shared interpretation of the meanings of statements about pupil achievement in criterion-referenced systems where comparisons are going to be made between pupil and pupil, teacher and teacher, school and school.

(398)

on the grounds that the only way a consensus can be reached in interpreting such statements

is ultimately by cashing the statements into one or more carefully specified tasks. This necessarily 'reduces' what was supposed to be a judgement that pupils are achieving rich understanding into a judgement that they can carry out performances of certain kinds. The performances will necessarily be 'thinly' characterised, in the interests of consistency and reliability.

(ibid.)

It is worth exploring further what Davis means by the recurrent metaphor of 'richness' in relation to knowledge and understanding. 'Rich knowledge', he argues, requires the presence of 'rich beliefs' which are 'true and held with justification and understanding' (Davis 1995:6). An individual's 'belief set will be interconnected in a complex network' (ibid.) and the possessor of these beliefs must have an 'appreciation of these "connections"' (7). Davis then goes on to define 'rich knowledge' as

knowledge with a degree of understanding. It contrasts with knowledge merely memorised and not understood, or knowledge which I possess largely as a result of relying on the expertise of others...

[It is] knowledge which can be used and applied.

(8, 16)

The target of Davis's criticism is the criterion-referenced system of assessment used in conjunction with the National Curriculum in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Many educators will share Davis's reservations about any system of examination/assessment that makes exaggerated claims to objectivity, on which rigorous accountability can be exacted of teachers and schools. Whatever the claims of politicians and their acolyte policy makers in the above areas of the United Kingdom, leading scholars such as Caroline Gipps (1994) and Wynne Harlen (1994) who are most concerned with assessment are careful to eschew extravagant, positivistic claims to objectivity. Caroline Gipps, writes of the 'spurious' claim to represent assessment 'as a scientific, objective' (Gipps 1994:167) activity and of the need to abandon 'the notion of assessment as an...exact science' (175). 'Assessment in education', argues Wynne Harlen is 'inherently inexact and it should be treated as such' because human abilities cannot be measured with the kind of accuracy which applies to 'measurement in the physical world' (Harlen 1994:12). Davis's warning about any system of assessment that would make unwarranted claims to objectivity is acceptable, but underlying his critique is a scepticism shared by other defenders of liberal education, aspects of which I wish to take issue with.

Assessment and performances

The first point concerns the impossibility of assessing 'rich' knowledge or understanding, by virtue of the necessity of all forms of assessment to limit themselves to overt performances. Davis refers to a

risk that specific test behaviours might not be manifested, even if rich knowledge is present. And clearly the fact that a pupil writes or says an appropriate form of words taken alone provides little clue as to whether she properly understands the relevant subject matter.

(Davis 1995:10)

But does this amount to any more than a reasonable but unexceptionable point about the necessarily personal nature of states of understanding and the impossibility of gaining access to the quality of understanding in the minds of other people? Moreover, people's inner states are of less significance than the operations that they can perform in the public world. This is not to imply an identification between knowledge and 'public tests for knowledge' (Hyland 1993:61). There may be a difference between an individual's knowledge of any subject and the same individual's performance as assessed even on a whole range of different measures of this knowledge. A particularly acute tension arises with regard to assessment in the arts, where creation and response are so rooted in students' personal lives. Students whose responses to art are most deeply felt may not provide the most coherent or perceptive analyses of works of art, especially in written examinations where facility at abstract discourse is crucial. Yet, while perhaps not representing an exact specification of a person's understanding, examination performance normally gives some reasonable indication of it.

Lurking behind the arguments about the limits of overt performance are shades of the contemporary valuation of 'process' over the mere 'product' of learning. My suspicion is that part of the impulse to make much of the questionable distinction between 'process' and 'product' derives from the misguided tendency to associate intelligence with prior cognition ('process') rather than with operations in the public world ('product'). One lesson which Ryle (1949) has taught us is that the presence of prior reasoning is not relevant to our characterization of an action as an exercise of human intelligence. This is because it would be impossible ever to act intelligently if an exercise of intelligence had first to be prefaced by an intellectual operation. If a prior intellectual operation were necessary to make a performance an exercise of intelligence, we would still require an explanation of what made the intellectual operation itself intelligent. If we invoke a further prior mental act, then we find ourselves in an infinite regress. The identification of intelligence with reasoning would make it self-contradictory (which it is not)

to speak of 'stupid reasoning'. It is actions themselves rather than their putative antecedence ('processes') which express human intelligence. As the quality of a performance cannot be located in a prior intellectual operation, its intelligence has to be established by considering the performance itself together with the context in which it has its place.

The wish to promote 'rich' knowledge', or what Howard Gardner refers to as 'generative', 'deep' or 'genuine' understanding (Gardner 1993:16) is admirable but we must be clear about what we mean by understanding. Understanding is not a private psychological process or experience because as, Wittgenstein points out, a mere process could not have 'the consequence of meaning' (Wittgenstein 1953:218). Rather than a process which accompanies an overt action, understanding 'has more of the character of a *state*' (Carr 1992:221). When we refer to an achievement in understanding, we are referring to an achievement which has 'certain objectively ascertainable criteria of intelligibility' (222). What we are affirming is a degree of success at an activity rather than referring to an individual's concomitant psychological dispositions, processes or experiences. These latter conditions are 'conceptually and practically' (ibid.) separable from performances. To be sure, performances may be '*rote, ritualistic, or conventional*' (Gardner 1993:9) and may represent 'knowledge merely memorised and not understood, or knowledge...[possessed] largely as a result of relying on the expertise of others' (Davis 1995:8). Of course, knowledge must be 'used and applied' (16) but no serious educator is likely to consider that 'knowledge merely memorised and not understood' (such as the rote responses demanded from the children in the school in Dickens's *Hard Times*) reflects real understanding or 'rich knowledge'. Assessment does not have to be conducted in the mechanical fashion satirized by Dickens and it is the task of educators to ensure that the forms of assessment they employ are capable of probing the quality of understanding which informs the performances of learners.

The definition of knowledge and learning

Other aspects of Davis's scepticism are based on the defensible observation that knowledge exists in myriad, intricate and open-ended networks which it would be impossible to represent in a comprehensive set of propositions to a third party. In other words, as well as something which is peculiar to us, much of our knowledge contains something uncircumscribed and uncircumscribable. But Davis takes this point to extreme lengths. It is perfectly true that we cannot render in the form of propositions all that can be known about domains of human inquiry and represent this information in the form of statements of attainment. Defining even basic literacy has proved impossible (see Roberts 1995:428–9) as have attempts to define what is meant by the 'minimum education' which the Irish Constitution

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(Government of Ireland 1937/1990: Article 42.3.2) requires that every child receive. As human understanding goes beyond even the most carefully designed specification of its components, there are simply limits to what we can define and represent propositionally.

The same point applies to skills. No cumulative number of discrete actions or items of information make up a skill, and the need to be able to adapt one's competence to an indefinite variety of tasks means that there will always be a gap between the ability to perform a finite number of operations and the possession of a skill. The nature of skills is such that it requires us to be able to advance beyond instructions and previously performed tasks and adapt what we have learned to new situations. Because of the unspecifiable element of judgement required to exercise a skill, it is impossible to devise in advance a comprehensive set of strategies that can prescribe for every future performance. The practice of an activity always goes beyond even the most painstakingly and exhaustively devised taxonomy of its components and the 'slippery slope' (Winch 1980:55) of infinite regress awaits anyone who tries to convert the knowledge required actually to exercise a skill into propositions regarding how to exercise it.

Just as it is impossible to define exhaustively the nature of domains of knowledge or to specify a comprehensive set of tasks that make up a skill, it is also impossible to devise a set of tests which can be said to guarantee that individuals have mastered an area of knowledge or skill or even that they have mastered those elements prescribed in a syllabus. As it is impossible to design examinations that assess all and only those abilities which they purport to, absolute construct validity is unattainable (see Kleinig 1982:182, 186). Let us take, for example, a question in history on the Reformation which has been designed to assess understanding of the concerns animating the reformers and the ability to weigh evidence, to demonstrate independence of thought and to compose a coherent argument. Clearly, it would be very difficult to set a question that assesses precisely these abilities and even more difficult to agree on criteria for their presence or absence. Or consider the even greater difficulties that would be involved in defining and in assessing achievement in the study of literature.

Towards more precise assessment

But these difficulties should not deter us from endeavouring to define more precisely what we wish learners to understand or to be able to do, or from endeavouring to specify as closely as possible how our forms of assessment articulate with this learning. I find nothing reprehensible in expecting those who teach and examine to make explicit the understandings and skills they wish to promote and the relationship between these understandings and skills and the forms of assessment used. This applies to traditional courses in such areas as law, medicine, languages and literature as well as to more recent

developments such as European studies, equality studies, peace studies, gender studies or black studies. The tax-paying public as well as potential employers are entitled to be told what exactly is the domain of knowledge and expertise to which the graduate in, for instance, European studies can lay claim. I also find merit in focusing on the nature of the skills we expect from those who receive vocational qualifications, even where the occupations concerned (teaching and nursing, for example) have significant moral dimensions. Let us consider further the case of teaching. David Carr is correct to draw attention to the danger of neglecting the moral and psychological aspects of teaching (Carr 1993a, 1993b). But anyone involved in teacher education encounters student teachers who feel that earnest commitment can compensate for deficiencies in skills of classroom management. Principles, convictions and psychological qualities are not enough to make a teacher—technical competence is also required. Likewise the moral commitment that should inform the activity of the teacher must be given appropriate practical expression in the exercise of what might legitimately be called ‘moral competence’ (Bridges 1996:373). Commendable moral aspirations are not always converted into appropriate action. Students teachers may wish, for example, to interact with all the pupils in a classroom but can find their attention constantly monopolized by dominant males. Although it would be impossible to define exhaustively the technical and moral aspects of teaching competence and misguided to believe that it can be reduced to the observation of any number of rules, significant elements of this competence do nonetheless lend themselves to systematic specification.

Generally speaking, then, I am sympathetic to any move to be more precise and accurate in defining what has to be learned and also in specifying how it is to be assessed. Such is the rationale of graded assessment, with its progressive sequencing of levels of difficulty. Long a feature of assessment in typing and music, interest in adapting it more widely was probably prompted by the development of Graded Objectives in Modern Languages (GOML) in the later years of the 1970s (see Murphy and Pennycuik 1986). The main general difficulty with graded assessment is that of extending its use in closely defined areas such as typing or specified elements of musical competence to subjects such as geography or chemistry as these are to be found in most school curricula (see Goldstein and Nuttall 1986:55). Dividing school subjects into units that would do justice to their nature would be a formidable undertaking and it would be extraordinarily difficult to devise instruments capable of credibly assessing such large-scale domains ‘without resorting to complex and often contentious psychometric techniques’ (Black 1986:16). The problem is that if the criteria of attainment are defined too tightly, then the achievement they measure is less generalizable. For example, does the objective can ‘buy food and drink in a cafe’ (GOALS, Graded Objectives for Achievement in Language Skills, French Level 1) mean that the pupils can order what they want or just certain items (see Murphy and Pennycuik

1986:163–4)? This specification is very general but a more context-sensitive specification would be very extensive and ‘impossible to examine exhaustively’ (Goldstein and Nuttall 1986:62–3). Examples could be multiplied of the difficulty in achieving comparability in respect of the precise achievement which graded tests purport to assess.

Yet the difficulties of using graded assessment extensively in the context of contemporary school organization should not obscure its educational benefits. Arguably one of the reasons for the disaffection with school experienced by reluctant learners is a lack of clarity regarding what precisely we expect them to know and be able to do (see Williams 1995:100–2). This lack of clarity may to some extent, as I suggested earlier, be due to the concern of systems of assessment with relative rather than with actual ability. The design of curricula in terms which are amenable to graded assessment obliges curriculum designers and examiners to be much more specific about what they expect from students than has traditionally been necessary in the case of conventional examinations. Graded assessment also builds on the motivation that comes from success or achievement in learning—research has shown that its use has improved motivation among pupils, particularly those who find the prospect of a terminal examination too distant and remote to relate to (Broadfoot 1986:169). And whatever the character of current curriculum design and assessment in the UK, research has shown (cf. Gipps 1994:119) that increased attention to defining the detail of a curriculum and to the close monitoring of children’s performances has enhanced the quality of teaching and learning.

Absolute reliability or consistency is impossible to achieve with regard to the assessment of practical tasks or of conventional essay-type answers, and even standardized multiple-choice tests do not guarantee 100 per cent reliability (cf. Murchan 1993). Yet I would want to argue that the reliability which we can attain on standardized multiple-choice tests is worth attaining. Obviously multiple-choice tests cannot appraise the ability to write discursive essays, but these tests can be far more intellectually challenging than their opponents sometimes seem to appreciate and are arguably capable of assessing analytic and reasoning skills. And even where they aim simply to assess factual information, this achievement is by no means negligible or corrosive of the educational engagement. Although they do not consist merely in the knowledge of facts, many human activities (science, history, literary criticism) require a knowledge of facts. Apart from improving the reliability of marking, the use of multiple-choice tests also improves the content validity or ‘curriculum fidelity’ (Gipps 1994:172) of assessment. This is because many conventional examinations allow students and teachers to ignore large sections of the course, whereas multiple-choice tests can cover a much greater range of syllabus content (*ibid.*). For this reason this form of testing is widely used in medical schools.

Most human achievement does not lend itself to precise measurement

and we cannot achieve absolute validity and reliability in the assessment of learning. Although it may be impossible to reach the level of precision in the methods of defining and assessing human learning that we would wish for, our assessments can achieve a reasonable degree of accuracy. The achievement of validity and reliability in assessment is not an either—or matter; it is rather a matter of degree (Winch and Gingell 1996:380). An acceptable degree of validity and reliability is likely to be approached if we use a combination of forms of assessment—standardized, graded and more open-ended, practical/oral and essay-type. The business of assessment also needs to be conducted and moderated/monitored by experienced teachers/examiners. But however the assessment is conducted, human judgement (except in the case of machine-scorable, multiple-choice tests) will always be required in appraising mastery of any area of human endeavour. This judgement need not be subjective in an arbitrary manner but its presence means that there will always remain some element of chance in assessment. This is simply because it is an activity conducted by imperfect human beings on other imperfect human beings in an imperfect universe.

Notes

- 1 The quotations from Wilfred Carr (1995) capture very aptly the view under consideration. They do not reflect a position that he defends.
- 1 The recent work of Harvey Siegel (1997) provides a formidably cogent and detailed elaboration of the argument presented here.
- 2 In Williams (1992) I explore this possibility in some detail. A common argument against the use of examination results for selection purposes which exercises Irish philosophers such as Joe Dunne (1995) and Pádraig Hogan (1995) is that this practice compromises the character of learning for its own sake. I shall limit myself to the following observations on this argument. Human beings tend to act from multiple motives and there will be some tension inherent in a system that uses academic success for instrumental purposes—to determine suitability for further education or for employment. Yet it does not mean that the educational value of all learning conducted in the context of schooling is compromised by the intrusion of external motivation. There is no reason why schooling should not serve the purposes of education and therefore no reason why students studying for examinations which have instrumental consequences should not also derive pleasure and satisfaction from their studies.
- 3 See the *Statistical Reports* provided annually by the Department of Education. Mortimer (1982) provides an analysis of results in the A level examination which illustrates this point very clearly.

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POSTSCRIPT

It is not uncommon for editors of collections of the present kind to close with a final short chapter by way of summary or suggestions for further research in the relevant field of enquiry. On this occasion, however, since I believe that the contributors to this volume have spoken as well for themselves as could be wished, I shall not engage in the redundant and presumptuous exercise of trying to precis their arguments in my own poor words. On the other hand, it is because there is surely far too much to say about the enormous amount of conceptual work which remains to be done on all the issues raised in the body of this collection that I also believe it probably wisest to leave identification of future research directions to the discerning reader—and say no more here about this myself. However, it does seem worth making a couple of points—on which I shall endeavour to be brief—about the implications of the sort of enquiries engaged in by contributors to this volume for the professional development of teachers.

For it might reasonably be questioned whether the kinds of issues raised in this anthology are of any real relevance to the day-to-day practical activities of field professionals. One might, I suppose, put the difficulty in the form of dilemma. On the one hand, if the objectivist critics of postmodern epistemological scepticism are correct, then there are real *truths* about science, art or morality to be taught to children in schools. But since what these are is something to be determined by the specialist arguments of professional epistemologists or curriculum planners—the task of the teacher is simply to deliver what others have established as truths, and epistemological enquiry cannot as such have any real place in the professional deliberations of individual teachers. On the other hand, if the postmodern sceptics are right, then it is not ultimately possible to make sense of epistemological enquiry anyway—so again such enquiry can hardly have much place in the professional reflection of *anyone*. Either way, in short, rarified enquiry into knowledge and truth of the sort engaged in by the contributors to this volume can have no relevance to ‘chalk-face’ educational practitioners in real life classrooms.

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I believe that this dilemma is a false one and that any such verdict on the relevance of epistemology to educational practitioners from nursery and kindergarten upwards is profoundly mistaken—and a careful reading of the essays contained in this collection should greatly serve to show why this is so. Indeed, in an essay written around the same time the essays in this volume were being assembled, I have given arguments designed to undermine a line of thought closely related to the above dilemma.¹ I believe, for example, that recent postmodern scepticism has—with certain honourable exceptions (to be found among contributors to this volume)—led to a discernible loss of educational philosophical nerve about the very possibility of serious engagement with questions concerning knowledge, rationality and truth. I suspect it is widely thought that whereas foundationalist thinking about knowledge of a Hirstian kind provided a substantial role for epistemological enquiry in the theoretical and practical education of teachers—the postmodern critique of all forms of epistemological foundationalism effectively disposes of any real professional point or purpose to such enquiry. It seems to me, however, that the truth is almost exactly the other way around: that forms of knowledge foundationalism effectively *eliminated* any serious role for epistemological reflection on the part of practising teachers—beyond that of delivering a curriculum of someone else’s devising—and that the various modern and postmodern non-realist and anti-foundationalist challenges to realism and foundationalism demonstrate the absolute educational necessity of rank and file professional reflection on these issues.

For what the discussions and debates aired in this volume precisely show us is that epistemological enquiry is alive and well and that the last word on the nature of knowledge has not been spoken by any educational or other philosopher. To be sure, contributors to this volume have tried to show that there is much in postmodern scepticism about the possibility of objective truth in this or that area of human enquiry that is at best questionable and at worst simply confused; but no contributor has claimed to have a fixed and final answer to questions about the nature of human enquiry—which were live questions for Socrates and Plato and must continue to be living questions for any philosopher worth his or her salt. Hence, even those (like the editor) who are here inclined to defend something like a realist conception of knowledge and truth are quick to emphasize the inevitably *fallibilist* nature of any such conception—and to acknowledge, indeed, that any such conception must raise as many philosophical questions as it solves. But, for just this reason, it is crucial to see that reflection upon such questions cannot be suspended by educational professionals pending some final decision on the part of professional epistemologists—for there can be no *final* decision. And yet it must be clear that there can be no deeper or more important question for a teacher

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than that of what this or that form of enquiry *means*—for it is upon some response to this question that all the other urgent educational questions about how a given enquiry should be taught or even what sorts of enquiry should be taught, clearly depend; as indicated in the introduction it makes all the difference in the world to the teaching of a given subject matter—to how one sees it as meaningfully contributing to the enrichment of the lives and experience of those taught—whether one regards it as dealing in fact or interpretation, description or prescription, rational assent or subjective preference, and so on.

To the large extent that this is so, among the crucial questions at the heart of professional reflection will be such questions as: is mathematics a matter of invention or discovery?; is history the learning of fact or interpretation?; is morality the grasp of universal principles or the formation of personal commitments?; is physics a description of the universe or a convenient myth?; is dance emotional expression or the construction of formal movement patterns? These are, as already said, questions that can have no final and complete answer for any professional—but they are also questions that must render educationally moribund any professional life in which they remain unasked. And whilst these are also *philosophical* questions which the educational epistemologist cannot answer for practising teachers—it is nevertheless the proper task of the former to equip them with intellectual resources for Socratic reflection upon such questions. For if it is at the heart of education and the sacred mission of teachers to communicate the potential of this or that enquiry for the meaningful enrichment of other human lives—it is surely difficult to see how this might be accomplished in the absence of some capacity to ask searching epistemological questions about what an alleged form of human knowledge might have to offer by way of illumination of the experience of learners.

In short, for teachers to be true educators in the hallowed tradition of Socrates—more, that is, than mere purveyors of second-hand information or deliverers of someone else's curriculum—they need to be capable of asking the sort of questions about their area of expertise that philosophers of science, art, mathematics, religion and so forth have always asked about the nature and human significance of such disciplines. From this perspective, however, it is not just that educational philosophy needs to be brought back from the marginal position it has lately been assigned—with the recent decline of more academic approaches to teacher education—in the theoretical education of professional teachers; it is also that educational epistemology needs to be reclaimed from the peripheral philosophical position it has recently assumed (under postmodern attack)—to occupy its rightful position at the very centre of educational philosophical concerns. From this point of view, work of the kind brilliantly exemplified by the distinguished

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contributors to this volume should doubtless be considered indispensable reading for *all* teachers.

Notes

- 1 See Carr, D. (1999) 'Towards a Re-evaluation of the Role of Educational Epistemology in the Professional Education of Teachers', in S.Tozer (ed.) (1999) *Philosophy of Education 1998*, Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society.

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