

CONTRIBUTION TO SYMPOSIUM ON PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

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The post-war revolution in philosophy of education spearheaded by R.S. Peters in Britain and Israel Scheffler and others in the United States, sought mainly to bring educational philosophy in line with other recent philosophical developments in Anglo-American philosophy. It was thought by the pioneers of this revolution that the analytical methods which had apparently proved so effective in clarifying central problems in mainstream philosophy might be turned to equally good effect in sorting out the received discourses of educational theory and practice. It was a matter of deep concern to R.S. Peters, for example, that the educational philosophy which had up until his time been taught in contexts of professional preparation had been little more than an uncritical survey of the doctrines of great past educators (Plato, Rousseau, Arnold, Dewey) - and that professionals in both training and practice were ill-equipped with the analytical tools necessary for the critical appraisal of those modern educational theories and policy initiatives with which they were required to come to grips. The new breed of educational philosophers, then, very definitely envisaged a significant role for analytical philosophy - specifically conceptual analysis - in the pre-and in-service training of educational professionals destined to teach in primary and secondary schools.

But what precisely was this role? There can be little doubt that the new order took any reputable educational philosophy to be continuous with a particular tradition of Anglo-American logical or conceptual analysis - which was also held to be largely exclusive of other western 'continental' traditions of phenomenology, existentialism, semiotics, hermeneutics and deconstruction. They regarded such modern philosophers as Wittgenstein, Austin, Ryle, Russell, Moore and Quine as the true heirs to a western philosophical heritage reaching back to such founding fathers of western philosophy as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. At this point, I do not want to get into potentially idle philosophical family disputes about inheritance; it seems to me that one could not but be sympathetic to anyone who claimed that there is as much of a clear line of descent (at least in the history of ideas) from Socrates to Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer as there is from the Athenian to Russell, Wittgenstein and Quine. It does seem to me, however, that the tradition in which the new analytical philosophers sought to locate themselves is one which is more inclined than some of the other philosophical tra-

ditions we have mentioned - and much in the manner of Socrates and Plato - to distinguish a specific role for philosophical enquiry which is rather separate from other kinds of academic or theoretical enquiry. This deserves further elaboration.

Socrates is, indeed, the true father of philosophical enquiry as a distinct discipline. For Socrates, the main task of philosophy is the search for (or clarification of) meaning - which he also regarded as the pursuit of consistent definitions of such philosophically problematic terms as 'knowledge', 'truth' and 'justice'. To this end, then, the largely negative Socratic method of 'elenchus' focuses essentially upon the submission of proposed definitions to a process of *reductio ad absurdum*: if it can be demonstrated that a given definition 'p' has some implication or consequence 'q' which is either logically at odds with 'p' or consistent with 'not-p', then 'p' cannot be regarded as an adequate definition of 'knowledge', 'truth', 'justice' or whatever. (How, for example, can the claim of Protagoras that there is no such thing as objective knowledge be taken seriously given, as we shall see, its demonstrably paradoxical consequences.) Of course, no respectable modern analytical philosopher would regard philosophy (especially after Wittgenstein) as a search for definitions; but the project of analytical philosophy is still mainly that of the pursuit of certain intelligibility relations between concepts, with regard to which conceptual analysis and philosophical logic - the highlighting of salient distinctions and conceptual fine tuning in the interests of logical consistency - are key methodological tools.

This is undoubtedly a more *limited* conception of philosophy than some continental traditions of philosophy influenced by Husserl, Marx or Freud have entertained. Characteristically, although Marx maintained that the purpose of philosophy is to change the world, many analytical philosophers would doubtless agree with Wittgenstein that philosophy leaves everything - except our *understanding* - where it is (though most who hold this would also be liable to insist that clearer understanding is the key to improved action). Still, there can be no doubt that analytical philosophy has had something of a bad press in recent years (at home as well as abroad) for certain alleged vices of *reductivism* and *exclusivity*. To what extent is analytical philosophy guilty of these vices? The difficulty in answering this question for an analytical philosopher is that he or she would need to be clearer about *senses* of the terms in which these charges are being made - and it is clear that the enemies of analytical philosophy do often play fast and loose with rather different senses. Thus, if by 'reductive' someone simply intends to refer to the piecemeal method by which analytical philosophers are inclined to deal with large conceptual problems - the scrupulous distinction of different senses of a given bit of linguistic usage - it is probably fair to concede that this is the methodological approach which analytical philosophers regard as most philosophically cost-effective. On the other hand, however, if 'reductive' is intended in the sense of 'positivistic', this charge against analytical philosophy is demonstrably false. Doubtless, both Dr. McLaughlin and myself would readily accept the label 'analytical philosopher of education' - but we have both written extensively in defence of moral, religious and spiritual discourse as humanly

significant in ways which are quite irreducible to scientific categories of explanation (eg: Carr 1994, 1996a; McLaughlin 1996); indeed, it is clear enough that some of our non-analytical 'postmodern' colleagues are far more 'reductive' than we are in this respect.

Is analytical philosophy exclusive then? Again, we would have to ask in what sense. In 'political' terms, to be sure, there has been something of an educational philosophical tendency of late to associate traditional analytical epistemology with outright suppression of the 'alternative voices' of non-white, female, non-heterosexual or other socially marginalised groups. I think, however, that this charge against analytical philosophy is also certainly unjust - and, indeed, it has been persuasively argued by way of response (see Siegel 1995, 1996) that it is difficult to see how the claims to justice of traditionally 'excluded' groups might be upheld without the resources of traditional analytical epistemology. But in another sense, there can be no doubt that analytical philosophy has been *methodologically* exclusive of - if not exactly hostile to - other traditions of philosophy. This tendency, however, is precisely a function of the 'methodological purism' of analytical philosophy and of its concern to distinguish clearly between the different orders and levels of theoretical enquiry in which human beings are liable to engage. It is a matter of concern to analytical philosophers, for example, that neo-Marxian traditions have not always distinguished clearly between conceptual and sociological or historical questions, that phenomenologists and existentialists appear sometimes to have confused conceptual investigations with descriptive psychology and that psychoanalytically influenced post-structuralists and others do not always appear to have drawn a clear line between philosophical and therapeutic concerns. In short - and notwithstanding important intra-analytical philosophical disputes about the precise boundaries between conceptual and empirical or other intellectual enquiries (for a classic discussion of this, see Quine 1953) - it is arguably a defining feature of analytical philosophy to see some academic division of labour of this kind as indispensable to real theoretical progress.

Consequently, however, the role of educational philosophising is likely to be prescribed more tightly on an analytical model than it is on models deriving from other philosophical traditions. Whereas, for example, other non-analytical philosophical and intellectual traditions might be inclined to see philosophy of education as comprehending aspects of psychology, sociology, history and the general history of ideas, analytical philosophers of education would be most likely to distinguish their role from those of other educational academics. In that case what might the distinctive nature and principal tasks of the educational philosopher be said to be? This is a difficult question - and it is possible that any satisfactory answer to it requires some clarification of the relationship of educational philosophy to other parts of philosophy - as well as to general educational theory. How then, does philosophy of education relate to other parts of philosophy? As a 'philosophy of....', it might well be considered a 'branch' of philosophy - but this is not very helpful, since there can be branches of philosophy in quite different senses. It is certainly not a part of philosophy in the sense of philosophy of mind or even philosophical aesthetics, since - unlike these parts or branches - it does not seem to have its

own distinctive subject matter; it is arguable that there are no topics in educational philosophy that could not be raised within or subsumed under such other genuine branches as ethics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, social and political philosophy, and so on.

But there is another significant sense in which a 'philosophy of....' can be conceived as a branch of philosophy and that is as a form of 'applied philosophy' - as in, for example, the case of medical ethics. In fact, this seems to be by far the most appropriate way of thinking about educational philosophy - precisely insofar as, like medical ethics, it is not *primarily* concerned with the first level theoretical analysis of central philosophical concepts but with the application of philosophical insights developed elsewhere to particular problems of professional practice. This is not, of course, a hard and fast rule and there is no reason why a direct concern with problems of professional practice should preclude educational philosophers from making original contributions to the analysis of concepts of autonomy, moral development, professionalism, learning and so on - and some, indeed, have done so; but it is more usual for educational philosophers to draw on mainstream philosophical work in epistemology, ethics or philosophical psychology for various purposes related to the clarification of professional educational practice than to contribute to first level theoretical debates about the meaning of central philosophical concepts. Thus, while we have admitted notable exceptions (including Peters himself) most educational philosophers write for general journals of education or specialist journals of educational philosophy and theory and few contribute to mainstream analytical journals of philosophy as such (and, insofar as educational philosophers do thus contribute, it might be argued that they do so as 'pure' rather than 'applied' philosophers). This is not, of course, to criticise or denigrate educational philosophers for intellectual or academic inferiority; it is just the consequence of a natural and proper division of professional labour which recognises that mainstream philosophers have one set of theoretical concerns and educational philosophers a rather different practical set.

To the extent that this is so, however, educational philosophy has perhaps more commonly been regarded as a part or branch of *educational theory* than of 'pure' philosophy; like psychology, sociology or history of education it would be normally taken as concerned with exploring the relevance for effective professional practice of insights drawn from the parent theoretical discipline. That said, then, what might the main tasks of educational philosophy be said to be? Taking a broad and liberal rather than narrow vocational view of the role of educational philosophy - allowing, in short, that educational philosophers are legitimately employed for at least part of their time in the theoretical analysis of central philosophical concepts of educational relevance - it seems to me that there are at least *three* principal roles for philosophy of education as a branch of educational theory and/or an applied 'philosophy of....' These are: (i) the critical analysis of received educational theory and policy documentation; (ii) the conceptual analysis of philosophically central concepts of educational significance and relevance; (iii) the philosophical examination in the vein of

normative ethics of reasons and justifications for particular educational policies and practices. I shall now say something more about all of these enterprises.

First, then, insofar as it is proper to regard philosophy in general and educational philosophy in particular as a source of analytical skills apt for the critical examination of this or that received form of human discourse, the critical analysis of educational theory and policy documentation would appear to be a key role of educational philosophers - and it was certainly regarded as such by the founding father of post-war British analytical educational philosophy, R.S. Peters. Indeed, as we have already noted, Peters was highly critical of the philosophy of education which had featured in the professional education of teachers up until his time, precisely on the grounds that it consisted for the most part in uncritical rehearsal of 'doctrines of the great educators' - and Peters himself seems, so far as one can see, to have conceived the value of educational philosophy for professional practitioners much more on a model of the acquisition of a set of critical skills grounded in conceptual and logical analysis. Moreover, Peters own critical work on the familiar discourse of the aims of education of his day (Peters 1966), very well exemplifies this particular style of educational philosophising. To take a possible example (mine not Peters) of this *modus operandi*: it was and is still not uncommon for educationalists to talk of education as 'the development of the whole child'. But what could this mean? Taken in one way it is true - but also vacuous (uninformative) - to say that we aim as educationalists to develop whole children not parts of them. But it is likely that advocates of whole development mean something rather more substantial than this - something to the effect that education is a matter not just of mental or cognitive but spiritual, affective, emotional, social and physical development. Taken this way, however, the statement is at least debatable and probably false: I would argue, for example, that education (even 'physical education') is not especially, if at all, concerned with physical *development* - though schooling may be. Hence, to be sure that we are speaking substantially and *unambiguously* about the point and purpose of education, it is arguable that there is need here for much greater precision in our deployment of concepts in the light of more careful distinctions between different kinds of development, between education and schooling - and so on (on this see Carr, 1996b).

Arguably, then, much professional educational policy documentation - especially since it is more likely to be written by officials and bureaucrats than by educational philosophers - is likely to require some conceptual tightening at best and complete demolition on grounds of serious logical incoherence at worst. However, even much of the so-called educational theory which has been taught down the years to trainee teachers on the grounds of its professional relevance is by no means beyond logical and conceptual reproach - and, consequently, there has continued to be a brisk trade in analytical philosophy of education (and philosophy more widely) in the critique of those sociological, psychological and other theories which have often been uncritically assumed to have relevance for professional practice. Here again, R.S Peters seems to have been one of the first to lead the way in the

criticism of social scientific analyses of educational notions. Thus, although there can be no doubt that many influential educational thinkers of this century (including John Dewey and Bertrand Russell) have welcomed the experimental psychology of such so-called learning theorists as Pavlov, Watson and Thorndike as potentially useful to educational practitioners - Peters suggested in his *The Concept of Motivation* (1958) and elsewhere that such work was revisionary of our ordinary notions of learning and motivation in such a way as to raise serious doubts about its proper application to the circumstances of human education and enculturation. In his *Experience and the Growth of Understanding* (1978), moreover, the British philosopher David Hamlyn submitted the cognitive developmental work of Piaget and others to somewhat similar objections - and, over the years, numerous educational and other philosophers have continued to contribute to this general critique of much that passes in the colleges for professional theory.

The *second* of the major tasks I have identified for educational philosophers, is that of the further conceptual analysis - perhaps for more *practical* educational purposes - of central philosophical concepts of educational relevance. One very good example of such analysis is the fine work produced many years ago by the distinguished Australian philosopher John Passmore under the title *The Philosophy of Teaching* (1980) - which is still, I believe, probably the best full length philosophical treatment of this topic to have so far emerged. However, we are at this point bound to acknowledge charges which have recently been brought against conceptual analysis by leading contemporary educational philosophers of a more 'postmodern' persuasion. The points are not really very original and amount to the complaint that conceptual analysis as practised by many twentieth century British and American philosophers is seriously de-contextualised, and that to the extent it ignores the important socio-cultural provenance of ideas it is prone to mistake local prejudices for universal truths. There is no doubt a grain of truth in this complaint, but it needs handling with extreme caution - and, if taken too far, is merely philosophically self-destructive. The basic problem, indeed, is already identified in Plato's (1961) critique of Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*: if someone states that there is no truth - what are we to make of the truth of this claim?; only, surely, that if it is false it is not true and if it is true it is also thereby false (because it falsifies itself) - and that either way, from a contradiction, nothing of rational consequence (nothing, that is, worth believing) can follow.

There can be little doubt, however, that this new postmodern scepticism has been taken far too far in much of the work of the British postmodern educational philosopher Wilfred Carr - most recently in an article for the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (1997) entitled 'Professing education in a postmodern age'. In this paper Carr argues that in a postmodern climate all questions about education - especially any which might seek to uncover its 'essential' nature - must be forever open and unresolved in a way that renders regarding oneself as the professorial seat of any such knowledge quite compromisingly problematic. He holds that there cannot even be any postmodern agreement among educationalists concerning what

questions it is appropriate to ask about education - all is apparently in flux - and he offers as one of many examples of questions about which educationalists cannot reach any agreement that of whether education is to be conceived as a matter of liberal initiation or vocational training. But, in the first place - as we have already noted - this is simply a counsel of utter philosophical despair; if what Carr maintains is true then philosophy collapses into descriptive sociology and we are left with no resources at all for the rational evaluation of education or its practical improvement. But secondly, what Carr says about the impotence of conceptual analysis to resolve the above example of educational philosophical disagreement is clearly *false*, for - since early postwar disagreements over whether education is about liberal initiation or vocational training were based largely on confusions between education and schooling - we have here a case which *is* precisely resolvable via sound conceptual analysis. In short, once one recognises that education is only one function of schools as social institutions, the way is clear to regarding liberal education *and* vocational training as *both* legitimate functions of any coherent conception of schooling - as well as one in which any disagreement between educators and trainers is liable to have little to do with differences of social perspective (Carr 1996b).

In any case, any point about the potential social perspectival contagion of conceptual analysis is drastically overstated by Carr and others of his postmodern persuasion - and it need not be doubted that conceptual analysis is anyway quite methodologically robust enough to accommodate considerations of different evaluative perspective. Indeed, identification of different evaluative perspectives and examination of the practical reasons for holding this one rather than that is after all little more than business as usual for normative ethicists in the analytical tradition. Moreover, it is just this examination of the different sorts of reasons which someone might advance for this or that public policy or practice which I identify as the *third* main task for philosophers of education. Thus, just as mainstream moral philosophers have ever been interested in the rational appraisal of arguments for and against capital punishment, euthanasia or abortion, so educational philosophers are bound to be interested in evaluating the reasons which have brought forward for educational selection on the basis of intelligence differences, separate schooling for diverse cultural or religious constituencies, the use of corporal or other punishment in schools and so on. In this field, a defence of selective schooling of some years ago entitled *Illusions of Equality* by the British philosopher David Cooper serves very well, I think, as a good example of normative ethical work in the philosophy of education. But fine analytical work of this genre continues to be produced in good quantity in the journals of education and philosophy of education - and again it seems not inappropriate here to mention my colleague Dr. McLaughlin as someone who has contributed valuably to debates about the ethics of common versus separate schooling (McLaughlin 1995).

Are these the only legitimate tasks of educational philosophy? I have no wish to insist *dogmatically* that they are - and it may be that I have overlooked other defensible functions which do not fit quite squarely into any of my categories of discourse critique, conceptual

analysis and normative ethics. On the other hand, however, there should be no doubt that this basically 'analytical' conception of the role of philosophy of education is avowedly 'narrower' than some of those to be found in other traditions of philosophy. Indeed, it might well be pointed out - insofar as I have not assigned any role here to educational philosophers in the large-scale construction of theories of education - that the present view is very much narrower than those taken by such bygone philosophers as Plato, Rousseau and Dewey (and even, someone might argue, R.S Peters). But if educational philosophers may find legitimate employment in the evaluation of particular normative perspectives on education, why should they not also be employed in devising or formulating such perspectives? I confess that I am far from decided on this issue. On the one hand, one may point out that the educational theories of Plato, Rousseau and Dewey were not developed by *educational* philosophers primarily concerned to clarify aspects of professional practice, but as details of larger pictures of individual and civic flourishing by major social and political theoreticians. Moreover, although many contemporary analytical social and political philosophers have been concerned to clarify large conceptual issues concerning the ethical and other grounds of liberal democratic polity (eg: Rawls 1993) - many would reject the development or defence of substantive normative perspectives as any part of the social and political philosopher's role. On the other hand, however, perhaps not all contemporary social and political philosophers would reject any such project and we have already conceded that there may be some legitimate interface between the roles of professional philosopher of education and social and political theoretician - and, indeed, Peters himself does seem to have operated at this interface. One's present best guess, however, would be that educational theorising of a large scale socio-political kind would be beyond the *call of duty* for many if not most working educational philosophers - and that such theorising should hardly be counted a *necessary* part of their professional role.

All the same, it should be clear from what has just been said that analytical philosophers are strongly committed to the idea of a proper division of intellectual labour in the interests of some kind of strategic and systematic advance in our understanding of important theoretical and practical issues. From this point of view, analytical philosophy of education would regard it as crucial to distinguish clearly between the different kinds of theoretical questions that might be asked about the nature of the educational enterprise - or between the different kinds of intellectual reflection that might be held to illuminate educational engagement. Thus, it is more than likely that analytical educational philosophy may appear narrow to those familiar with continental traditions of philosophy. Just as, then, the analytical tradition is at pains to distinguish educational philosophy from the empirical enquiries of psychology and sociology of education, so it is inclined to see the central analytical tasks of educational philosophy as distinct from the descriptive psychologising of much phenomenology or any 'post-structural' genealogical enquiries into the socio-cultural roots of our institutional concepts.

This is not, to be sure, to deny a place to other kinds of enquiry in helping students to

understand the nature and/or experience of education; on the contrary, I believe that many *different* kinds of intellectual endeavour are relevant to the full development of professional understanding - and I have myself argued that one might well give a substantial place to a wealth of educationally relevant classical and modern literature (novels, poetry and so on) in any fully rounded professional curriculum for teachers (Carr 1997). At the same time, however, I do not think that literature is philosophy of education or that educational philosophy is literature; I therefore believe that we need to keep clear about the differences between literature - and other forms of intellectual enquiry - and philosophy of education if we are to reap the full benefits of their different professional contributions.

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