

Toward a Re-Evaluation of the Role of Educational Epistemology in the Professional Education of Teachers

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THE POST-WAR RISE OF EDUCATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY

The rise and fall of *epistemological theorizing* as a central concern of educational philosophy — and thereby as a key constituent of the theoretical education of professional educationalists — is a striking feature of postwar educational philosophy and theory. There are, I believe, several different, albeit related, reasons for the demonstrable falling from previous grace of educational epistemology: On the one hand, the decline of interest in formal reflection upon questions of knowledge and truth has generally mirrored the checkered fortunes of philosophical reflection as a significant component of the theoretical apparatus of professional educationalists. On the other hand, however, there cannot be much doubt that contemporary philosophy has itself been a principal source of some of the pressures which have contributed to the undermining of the educational-theoretical status of epistemology.

In the interests of reestablishing the educational significance of epistemological reflection, I want to argue here for two main claims. First, that while the contemporary arguments which have served to undermine latter day confidence in epistemological theorizing may well dispose of a certain *traditional* conception of inquiry into knowledge and truth, they certainly fail to show that we can get along, in the interests of making sense of inquiry or learning as such, without *any* such inquiry. Second, that while in disposing of a specific traditional conception of epistemological reflection, they also undermine a particular postwar conception of the role of such reflection in educational theory. They do not serve to diminish the significance of reflection about the nature of knowledge and truth in the professional lives of teachers — since such reflection cannot but be, when properly understood, a *sine qua non* of the theoretical lives of educational practitioners. Prefatory to this, however, I shall offer some brief observations on postwar developments in educational epistemology.

Nothing speaks more eloquently for the centrality of epistemological theorizing in postwar educational philosophy than the enormous literature on knowledge and the curriculum which mushroomed in the 1960s and 1970s — much of which followed in the wake of the high profile given to epistemological theorizing by the principal architects of the analytical revolution in philosophy of education. Of these, Israel Scheffler is justly renowned for his own significant epistemological contribution, and Richard Peters — though his own work focused mainly on the normative framework of educational reflection — certainly regarded epistemology as the key to understanding what he took to be the basic knowledge transmission role of education.¹ Moreover, it is now common knowledge that the main epistemological

burden of Peters's program was carried by his associate Paul Hirst, whose "forms of knowledge" epistemology was to have immense influence, not only on educational thinking about knowledge and understanding as such, but — in Britain and further afield — on official curriculum policy making.²

But what exactly was supposed to be the role of epistemological theorizing in these heady revolutionary days? Clearly, Peters and Hirst viewed educational reflection on the nature of knowledge as one aspect of educational *philosophy*, which they in turn considered to be part of educational *theory*; as such, however, philosophy and epistemology would appear to have been regarded — along with such other educational disciplines as psychology and sociology of education — as subservient to largely *technical* educational ends. Indeed, although Peters and Hirst were early pioneers of a faculty-based conception of theoretical professional education as a matter of systematic initiation into such disciplines as philosophy, psychology, sociology, as history, they inclined to a palpably *instrumental* conception of the role of theory in professional teacher preparation; Hirst, in particular, persistently construed the relationship of educational theory (and philosophy as one branch of that theory) to practice as an *applied* one, and patently (albeit formerly) allotted to epistemology a largely underlaboring role in the construction of something like a rationally systematic *technology* of pedagogy grounded in the specification of educational objectives.

Such instrumental perspectives on educational theory have never, of course, been especially uncommon — not least among educational theorists. A former psychologist colleague regularly instructed his students that while it was the task of psychologists to devise an educational *technology* apt for the achievement of educational aims, that of sociologists to identify appropriate *organizational strategies*, it fell to philosophers to discover what our educational *aims* and *objectives* ought to be. It requires little reflection, however, to see that any such idea of cozy collaboration between educational theorists must be hopelessly utopian, if not actually absurd. Indeed, the very same psychologist was wont to respond to philosophical criticisms of psychological theory by postmodernly advising students (without the least sign of cognitive dissonance) that psychology and philosophy are after all just different points of view between which one might freely choose according to taste.

However, in order to have serious doubts about any such conception of the relationship of educational theory generally — and philosophical reflection particularly — to actual educational practice, one only needs to observe that relatively *little* of what is taught under the heading of educational theory does have *technical* application in the classroom. Indeed, taking perhaps the most plausible case of ostensible technical application of educational theory, it seems nonetheless far-fetched to defend the teaching of empirical psychology to students of teaching on the grounds that it might be useful for classroom behavior shaping; moreover, recognition on the part of generations of intelligent students that experimental psychology could have no such principled or even *sane* educational use, has no doubt greatly fired the complaints of those who wish to deny that theory has *any* relevance to the

professional education and training of teachers. But if an applied theoretical interpretation of learning theory does not fare especially well, how could we seriously claim that an instrumental conception of educational philosophy in general, and of educational epistemology in particular, might fare better?

THE POSTMODERN DEMISE OF EDUCATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY

But might it not be claimed that early educational epistemology *did* precisely prove to be of great instrumental, even *technical*, value — not least in relation to official curriculum policymaking and practical curriculum construction? On the one hand, there can be little doubt that many architects of national curricula in the United Kingdom and further afield grounded their proposals precisely in Hirst's forms of knowledge epistemology; on the other, might one not more generally say that nothing could be more useful to educationalists than a theory of knowledge which clearly sets out to map the logical contours of distinct forms of human inquiry in relation to questions of curriculum design and construction?

First, however, the fact that epistemological reflection has been utilized in this way by curriculum policymakers would not necessarily serve to justify a place for such reflection in the education and training of *teachers*. Indeed, it is likely that many centralized national curriculum initiatives have inclined to a position of some Platonic paternalism with regard to the rank and file teaching workforce required to “deliver” the official curriculum; since the basic contours of curriculum design have been *settled* by professional educational theorists, the job of teachers is just to get on with teaching whatever is required of them. Second, the fact that curriculum policymakers have conceived educational epistemology in this foundationalist and technicist way does not mean that it is *appropriately* so construed. But third, it would only be correct to construe it in this way if it was clear that the preferred epistemological account upon which a given curriculum model had been based *was* settled beyond further question.

These points, moreover, are connected. On the one hand, we are justified in conceiving the professional educational role of theorizing about knowledge in a technicist or applied theory way only if basic epistemological questions *are* settled beyond dispute. In that case, however, it is not clear what place epistemological *reflection*, as such, might have in the education or training of rank and file teachers. On the other, if basic epistemological questions are *not* finally settled, we seem less justified in casting epistemological reflection in such a foundational role — or in suggesting to practicing teachers that there are fixed and final answers to crucial philosophical questions about the structure of knowledge and its educational significance.

In relation to the matter of whether or not epistemological questions are resolved, it must have come as a blow to the confidence of anyone who may have thought that forms of knowledge were the last word in educational epistemology to discover that the very author of this thesis — Paul Hirst — now appears to have utterly reneged on his earlier view of knowledge as rooted in diverse logical structures of propositions.³ Worse still, Hirst's apostasy seems to have occurred under the influence of certain distinctly antifoundational and social-constructivist

philosophical trends, some of which are notably inclined to speak — in an apparently relativistic way — of “rival traditions” of social practice essentially precluding the identification of universal and/or objective scientific, moral, or artistic truths of a forms of knowledge kind.⁴ But though such views have certainly played their part in shaking *recent* educational philosophical confidence in the value of early analytical educational epistemology, it is something of an irony that even while Hirst was forging his forms of knowledge, curriculum changes were overtaking British primary education, which reflected the influence of quite a different philosophical approach to thinking about knowledge and the curriculum.

Thus, irrespective of whether they understood them properly, there can be no doubt that the 1960s’ English and Scottish progressives were very much influenced in their restructuring of the primary curriculum by *pragmatist*, notably Deweyan, ideas about knowledge and its curricular implications, principally by *instrumentalist* conceptions of inquiry and notions of *curriculum integration*. There can also be little doubt that pragmatist ideas in general are potentially damaging to any epistemology which construes forms of inquiry in terms of discrete logical structures. Indeed, it could hardly be more striking that the denunciation by W.V.O Quine and others of the analytic-synthetic distinction — that very mainstay of British empiricism upon which Hirst leans so heavily for his distinction between scientific and logico-mathematical inquiry — is a radical high point of pragmatist thought.⁵ But, it would appear that many educational philosophers have taken the last nail in the coffin of educational epistemology to be driven by yet more radical developments of mainstream philosophy — marked especially perhaps by a particular encounter between pragmatism and “poststructuralism” — which have raised fundamental questions about the very viability of epistemology as a going concern in anything like the sense entertained by the great enlightenment theorists of knowledge.

EPISTEMOLOGY: DEAD OR ALIVE?

There can be little doubt that so-called “postmodern” currents of thought, hailing especially from pragmatist, “postanalytical” and poststructuralist sources, have led — under the influence of such philosophers as Richard Rorty, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Jean-François Lyotard — to widespread skepticism among educational philosophers about the value of traditional epistemology. Hence, it seems to have become almost *de rigueur* to be “incredulous about metanarratives” and to prefer the relativist — or at least pluralist — language of *rival traditions* or *narratives* to any absolutist talk of objective knowledge and truth; though it is open to question whether some popular interpretations of the main authors of such views faithfully reflect their true intent.⁶ MacIntyre, for example, explicitly repudiates relativism in the interests of what appears to be (as best one can tell) a Hegelian conception of truth as some sort of reconciliation of the theses and antitheses of rival traditions.⁷ Again, though Rorty stands squarely within a tradition of pragmatist opposition to realist notions of truth as conception-independent reality, his equally pragmatist coherentism considerably distances him from any promiscuous “anything goes” relativism. Despite that for Rorty, our theories are no mirror of nature, it is clear that there are on his account rational criteria — of logical consistency,

economy, and utility of explanation — for preferring round to flat earth theory, or Copernican to Ptolemaic astronomy.⁸

All the same, in pursuit of a line of inquiry recently opened up by John McDowell, it is arguable that most of the contemporary views which have influenced present day hostility towards enlightenment faith in any realist conception of objective truth are, albeit variously, misled by certain nineteenth century idealist misreadings of Kant.⁹ As McDowell shows, it is Kant who makes the most notable of modern attempts — via the insight that “intuitions without concepts are blind” — to heal the early modern, specifically Cartesian, separation of thought from world.¹⁰ However, Kant’s own attempt in the first *Critique* to show that the requirement for experience to be conceptualized even to *be* experience is not incompatible with the recognition that there is an external reality to which our experiential judgments nonetheless refer, is — in its retention of the *noumenon* — highly unstable. The irony is that in dispensing with the thing in itself as the last redoubt of that early scientific “bald naturalism” Kant was so keen to oppose, Kant’s idealist heirs — by endorsing a very un-Kantian divorce of our concepts from reality — served more to reinforce than undercut Cartesian dualism. It is therefore at least arguable that the currently fashionable fatuity (in educational philosophy and more widely) that there are *no* objective facts because all human observations are theory or value laden (in which case, one might ask, what would there be for our theories to *explain*) hinges upon fatal assimilation of the truth that we cannot have *unconceptualized* observations to the falsehood that knowledge hardly amounts to much more than a high degree of conceptual coherence; it is just this assimilation which leaves neo-Hegelian and pragmatist conceptual schemes and narratives “spinning frictionless” in McDowell’s void.¹¹

All this is controversial and beyond present scope. But what seems rather less so is that postmodern challenges to traditional epistemology, thus conceived, may actually do more to keep epistemological inquiry in business than close it down. First, let us recall the familiar Platonic argument against a sophisticated conception of knowledge in the *Theaetetus*.¹² If a postmodernist is indeed arguing that there is no such thing as objective truth upon which to base our knowledge claims, and that such claims are no more than so many rival narratives which do not admit of rational arbitration, then we may ask whether this is itself a serious truth claim. Should the answer be *no*, there is no *argument* to pursue further? If the answer is *yes*, the claim is clearly self-refuting. But we have already observed that it seems more reasonable to construe the likes of MacIntyre or Rorty as engaged in various modes or levels of critique of traditional epistemology than as denying that nothing could coherently count as a knowledge claim — or, at any rate — that there are no rational criteria for preferring one human perspective or narrative to another. At one level, there is the critique of a certain traditional foundationalist conception of epistemological inquiry — the so-called “enlightenment project” — which, in granting knowledge status only to what is beyond all doubt, arguably aspired to impossible standards of objectivity; however, this does not necessarily involve any anti-realist denial of objective facts — since much modern realism is of a *critical* and fallibilist kind which readily accommodates the idea that our knowledge claims are susceptible of

periodic overhaul. But, to be sure, much modern and postmodern philosophy *is* informed by *anti-realist* or *non-realist* — pragmatist, use-theoretical, coherentist and so on — currents of thought, which do raise perennial philosophical questions about traditional correspondence and/or “passive spectator” conceptions of the relations between knowledge, truth, experience, and reality.

THE REGRESS TO METHOD

What relevance has all of this to questions of teacher professionalism? It hardly needs emphasizing that political pressures to greater professional accountability have lately gained much ground in Britain and other developed countries. In the case of teacher preparation these pressures have mostly been expressed, somewhat ironically, in government and other official attacks on educational theory as a significant element of teacher professionalism, in the erosion of the theoretical components of professional training and in official endorsement of competence-based courses of teacher training focused largely upon the acquisition of practical skills and techniques of management and pedagogy — trends which, it also hardly needs saying, have not been greatly hospitable to the potential value of educational philosophy as a key professional tool. In view of this, however, it is striking that a certain foundationalist approach to curriculum thinking — very much in tune with this recent professional turn of events — would appear to have been the most enduring legacy of early analytical philosophy of education. It is clear enough that the very first of British national curricular initiatives drew liberally on forms of knowledge thinking — in places following the writings of Hirst almost to the letter.¹³

As already indicated, however, at the same time as proving highly congenial to official curriculum planners seeking plausible grounds for the central planning of national curricula, foundationalist curriculum approaches seem to have had a more dubious effect of removing epistemological inquiry entirely from the realm of rank and file professional concern; for, if inquiry about the nature of knowledge and curriculum planning is the second-level business of educational theorists and official policymakers, what need have individual teachers to trouble themselves with such questions, beyond following the directions of experts? Indeed, it is a common complaint of critics of national curricula in the United Kingdom and elsewhere that in shifting curriculum design and development from professional to political control, such initiatives have contributed to the de-professionalization of teachers who are now to be cast as mere “deliverers” of “teacher-proof” curricula. On the other hand, while the competence models of preparation by which teachers are to be trained to deliver such prepackaged curricula have been criticized by some as technicist and behaviorist, competence advocates have continued to insist that such models do offer much scope for theoretical reflection.

In these crucial debates about teacher training, however, I believe that less turns on *whether* skill-based models of good professional practice allow scope for reflection, than on *what sort* of reflection they encourage. For example, it is worth asking what the requirement of teachers to be able to *justify* the content of their teaching (included as an important professional attribute in a British competence model¹⁴) actually *means* — since, of course, if teachers are required to teach to a

prescribed curriculum based on an official rationale, there could hardly be much more to an individual teacher's justification of content than the internalization of that rationale. So what are we to make of the idea of justification here? In fact, I suspect that the idea is a survival of an early analytical epistemological misconception of what is involved in establishing the educational credentials of knowledge — which a personal experience may well serve to illustrate. It is well known that early forms of knowledge thinking engendered a veritable industry of curriculum justification concerned to persuade official curriculum planners that this or that subject had a logical place in any rational curriculum — especially in the case of those not obviously justifiable in Hirstian terms. Some years ago, at an end term review of a course expressly designed to explore the educational potential of just such a problematic subject, the students' representative observed that, while it had been appreciated, the tutor had not given them the "answer." As the principal tutor on the course, however, I replied that even if I had had an answer, I would not have given it.

It seemed to me that the question betrayed several connected professional confusions. First, that it was proper to expect *one* correct, fixed, and final answer. Second, that it was the point of a course devoted to examining the reasons for teaching a particular subject — of reflecting in some depth about how a given inquiry or activity might seriously contribute to the educational development of young people — to find any such final answer. What needed to be appreciated was that educational reasons for teaching *anything* are far from settled, that a living concern with such questions must lie at the heart of any vital teaching, and that a teacher who has never reflected upon them — or has ceased to reflect upon them — is in an important sense professionally *moribund*. On the one hand, such student confusion has its source in a line that many teacher trainees have formerly been sold about the educational uses of epistemology; on the other, it readily accounts for the dismal experience one often has in schools of supervising student teachers who have not evidently thought about such questions, and who are clearly engaged in the lifeless transmission of second-hand content for *no* apparent reason at all.

EPISTEMOLOGY IN PROFESSIONAL REFLECTION: TOWARD A VINDICATION

While I would not for a moment wish to be taken as saying that all recent emphases on educational methods are entirely misplaced, I believe that the growing tendency to construe professionally good, effective, or competent teaching largely in terms of the skilled delivery of a received content prepackaged in the form of centrally prescribed curricula — along with the general depreciation of philosophical reflection as an important analytical tool in the theoretical equipment of teachers — is at some serious risk of putting the educational cart before the horse. This is precisely where I think that postmodern critiques of traditional, especially foundationalist, epistemology — in showing that important questions about the nature and meaning of knowledge and truth are by no means finally settled — may assist us to a renewed appreciation of the respects in which epistemological theorizing is not just contributory but *central* to the deliberations of field professionals. To appreciate this more fully, however, it might help to take a brief look at a much *older* encounter between philosophy and education.

Few readers of Plato's dialogues could fail to recognize in his portrait of Socrates the image of a very great teacher — arguably one of the greatest who has ever lived. Moreover, this is surely an opportune moment to recall that epistemology itself long ago emerged from a rather wider context of Socratic moral inquiry into the nature of *education* and its particular contribution to human flourishing. Thus, in opposing the sophists' claims to teach matters of highest human consequence — on the grounds that they pandered more to subjective self-interest than the pursuit of virtue and truth — Socratic epistemology sought primarily to *make sense* of different kinds of human knowledge and inquiry for the express purpose of understanding their potential for wider human formation. But though we know from the *Meno* that he was far from dismissive of questions of pedagogy, the difference between Socrates' approach to education and that of modern technocrats of the "delivery" dispensation could hardly be more striking. For that which is largely assumed by modern educational researchers — namely, what knowledge and inquiry *mean* — is taken to be deeply problematic by Socrates; what, on the other hand, the empirical researcher regards as the problematic primary focus of inquiry seems regarded by Socrates as of *secondary* importance — precisely insofar as such issues must depend for their settlement upon more basic questions concerning the logical character or human value of this or that inquiry.

Socrates, then, seems to have been the first to appreciate that no serious engagement with the issue of the human significance of knowledge can evade certain basic *philosophical* questions about the purpose or *sense* of a given form of inquiry. Thus, 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 expression of emotion or the construction of formal movement patterns? Clearly issues about *how* we teach — about pedagogy, management, resources, and so on — must depend crucially upon our stance toward such questions. This is not, of course, to commit the old foundationalist error of believing that we need to have *settled* such questions before we can start to hone our techniques — for there is a clear sense in which they are not finally resolvable; the point is rather that one is unlikely to flourish as an agent of *education* unless genuine engagement with them crucially informs one's practice.

These are not, then, questions which the official authors of curriculum policy documents can answer for professionals — indeed, it may be regarded as a cause for concern that some recent "back to basics" curriculum initiatives of a centralized or top-down kind seem to have enshrined very crude and simplistic conceptions of knowledge and truth. Again, as they are philosophical questions which are not susceptible of cut and dried answers, neither can they be answered for professionals by epistemologists; they are questions which good professionals must learn to ask for themselves and continue to ask throughout anything worth calling active professional lives. But recognizing this does open up new possibilities for the rehabilitation of educational philosophy and philosophical expertise in the professional preparation of teachers — precisely, in assisting professionals to address such questions. Indeed, in more radical practical terms, I believe that it may offer a role

to philosophy of education in bridging that traditional institutional division between theoretical educational studies on the one hand, and subject or methods courses on the other, which has real potential for healing the fatal theory-practice dichotomy that has for so long dogged that divide — precisely by acknowledging the important work awaiting educational philosophy on *either* side of it.

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1. Israel Scheffler, *Conditions of Knowledge* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1965) and R.S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966).
 2. Paul H. Hirst, *Knowledge and the Curriculum* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).
 3. Paul H. Hirst, "Education, Knowledge and Practices," in *Beyond Liberal Education: Essays in Honor of Paul H. Hirst*, ed. Robin Barrow and P. White (London, Routledge, 1993).
 4. This expression and the associated idea are principally associated with the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. See especially, Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1981).
 5. See, for example, W.V.O. Quine, *From a Logical Point of View* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953).
 6. This much cited expression, of course, is associated with Jean-François Lyotard. See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).
 7. See, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Press, 1987) and Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Press, 1992).
 8. See for example, Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980) and Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
 9. John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).
 10. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan, 1968), 93.
 11. John McDowell, *Mind and World*.
 12. *Theaetetus*, in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).
 13. See, SED, *The Structure of the Curriculum in the Third and Fourth Years of the Secondary School* (The Munn Report), (Edinburgh: HMSO, 1977).
 14. See, SOED, *Guidelines for Teacher Training Courses* (Edinburgh: SOED, 1992).