Review: Recent Work in the Philosophy of Education

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Philosophical Issues in Education. by John Kleinig

Education, Society and Human Nature. by Anthony O'Hear

Children's Rights. by C. A. Wringe

Education and the Individual. by Brenda Cohen

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BOOK REVIEWS

RECENT WORK IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Philosophical Issues in Education. By JOHN KLEINIG. (Croom Helm, 1982. Pp. 301. Price £5.95.)

Education, Society and Human Nature. By ANTHONY O'HEAR (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981. Pp. 173. Price £7.95, £3.95 Pa.)

Children's Rights. By C. A. WRINGE. (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981. Pp. 180. Price £12.50.)

Education and the Individual. By BRENDA COHEN. (Allen & Unwin, 1981. Pp. 104.)

Recent Philosophy of Education rests not so much on a mistake as on a defunct paradigm. Defunct, not because it is useless but because its usefulness has been exhausted. What is now commonly understood as philosophy of education dates from the early 1960's when analytical philosophers got their teeth into what they thought of as the concepts of education, and with the rigour characteristic of the breed, began diligently to worry them to death. Concepts such as education, learning, teaching, knowledge, authority, punishment, indoctrination and discipline were duly analysed and clarified. However, the law of diminishing returns has long since begun to apply and the chances of further work of this kind achieving gains commensurate with the effort required for their production and digestion are vanishingly small.

Notwithstanding its death, recent philosophy of education will not lie down and the reasons for this have to do with the ways in which this branch of philosophy differs from other philosophical specialisms. There seem to be three main points of departure.

The first is that what is commonly understood as philosophy of education and certainly most of that which self-consciously calls itself "philosophy of education" is taught and studied by people not engaged in any other sort of philosophy. Neither will most of these people have studied any other branches of philosophy. This is partly because philosophy of education is most commonly taught by and to people involved in the training of teachers in colleges and departments of education and partly because of the second and third ways in which what is understood as philosophy of education differs from other branches of philosophy.

The other differences were self-consciously contrived by the 'pioneers' of modern philosophy of education in the early 1960's. As their leader R. S. Peters records in an unpublished paper, they "were determined that philosophy of education should have its feet firmly in schools and should be recognised by teachers as relevant to their work".

These three peculiarities of 'philosophy of education' have had most damaging effects on its development as a respectable and equally as an *interesting* branch of philosophy.

By planting its feet (and its head) firmly in schools, 'philosophy of education' has cripplingly confined its legitimate area of concern, it has largely neglected the wider context of education, it has ignored alternatives to schooling as the context of education for children and has overlooked important and more general philosophical work of vital significance for education. I shall try to make clearer the importance of these claims

before going on to consider the recent publications in philosophy of education and seeing whether or not they share the faults we are exploring.

First and most obviously, schools are not the only, or even the principle, context for education, nor indeed is education confined to children; and even if it were, teachers are as aware as the rest of us that schools are not necessarily the best places in which to educate children. Despite the obviousness of these points they have been largely ignored by the pioneers of recent philosophy of education and this ignorance has led to an artificial narrowness in their concerns and in those of their followers.

More damaging by far is the idea that has perhaps been the single most debilitating feature of recent philosophy of education, the requirement that it should be "recognised by teachers as relevant to their work". Here we must be careful to distinguish between what might be called the definition of the subject on the one hand and strategies for teaching it on the other. It is of course important to make the *teaching* of philosophy of education relevant to students. And if most of the students are themselves teachers or trainee teachers, then any good philosopher will make her classes relevant and accessible to the sorts of students she teaches. But it is one thing to expect the teaching of philosophy of education to be recognised by teacher-students to be relevant to their work and quite another to demand that *original work* in the subject should be constrained in the same way. If for example philosophers of science had self-consciously restricted themselves to work which the average lab-technician or research officer would recognise as relevant to their job, it is hard to believe that anything at all worthwhile would have been produced. Or if contemporary jurisprudence had confined itself to areas that a country solicitor would find useful in his daily practice it is difficult to imagine what Hart or Dworkin would have found to occupy their time.

This requirement of relevance to teaching has locked philosophy of education into a tight and vicious circle. The idea that the only way to distinguish philosophy of education from other branches of philosophy is by its relevance to teaching is made viciously circular by the parallel belief that the only philosophy relevant to teachers is "philosophy of education", thus narrowly conceived as concerned with problems relevant to what is called "the school situation".

One consequence of all this has been the highly artificial appropriation of problems that arise naturally in other branches of philosophy. The standard procedure is to kidnap a problem or an issue, dress it up in school uniform and present it in simplified form for the approval of teachers. This is usually achieved by the simple addition of one or all of the three magic words: "education", "curriculum" and "school"; thus we find topics like "equality, schooling and education", "knowledge and the curriculum" and so on. Again, this sort of emphasis may be fine as a teaching strategy when the students are mainly teachers or trainee teachers or would-be teachers, but as a constraint upon original work in philosophy of education it tends to keep things at a fairly mundane level.

One piece of evidence for this claim is that most of the books that have been produced as 'philosophy of education' have in fact been introductory texts of one sort or another. And these have tended to concentrate on applying simplifications of problems of general philosophical import to the daily concerns of teachers and of education understood as schooling.

This narrow and self-defeating conception of philosophy of education has been and remains quite unnecessarily restrictive, for issues like justice and equality for example *are* problems in the philosophy of education quite as much as they are problems in ethics

and political philosophy and the idea that they are somehow made more so by the addition of the magic words is just a sign of nervousness. Jurisprudence for example is not weakened or threatened by making Rawls' *Theory of Justice* a central text and neither would philosophy of education be weakened by the same manoeuvre. There are of course the strongest of grounds for regarding the whole of epistemology as a branch of philosophy of education since theories about the acquisition of knowledge and about the logical status and certainty of what is acquired are the fundamental problems of education. Similar and equally obvious points could be made about philosophy of mind.

Despite the transparency of these points recent philosophy of education has remained remarkably insular, clinging to the belief that problems in all these areas have to be modified and sanitised before they can be thought of as problems with an educational pay-off. Again, if these points seem controversial one has only to look at the names of those considered major figures in philosophy of education in recent years. The first two names that come to the minds of most people *in* philosophy of education would be those of R. S. Peters and Paul Hirst followed perhaps by Louis Arnaud Reid and Israel Scheffler. Yet any adequate list of major contributions to philosophy of education must surely include at the top the names of Wittgenstein, Rawls, Dworkin and Davidson.

My argument then is that recent philosophy of education has self-defeatingly confined itself to what might be termed "the chalk-face of education" and has acted as if the licence to practise the art was only granted to those who could convincingly attach the words "school", "curriculum" or "education" to their investigations. The reasons for this are various. In part they have to do, as we have seen, with the bad example set by those whom Peters regards as the recent 'pioneers'; but they are also in part political. Those recruited to teach philosophy in colleges and departments of education had somehow to justify their existence in those departments in terms acceptable to their colleagues and their employers. The problem was exacerbated by the fact that with the post-war expansion in teacher education many people were recruited to teach philosophy to teachers who were not trained in or very familiar with mainstream philosophy and were consequently reluctant to trespass into what they regarded as dangerous territory.

If philosophy of education is to survive and progress it must now lift its eyes from the classroom and face some of the wider philosophical issues that are vitally relevant to education. This can partly be achieved by *philosophers of education* committing suicide under that description and becoming born-again philosophers. They must involve themselves in those central questions of philosophy that are also the fundamental questions of education broadly conceived. To this extent philosophy of education will not be easily distinguished from ethics or social philosophy or philosophy of mind and so on, but these are often not easily distinguished from one another and are none the worse for occasional identity crises.

The other survival strategy for philosophy of education is to identify and work on those major problems in philosophy of education which have an importance which far transcends the schoolroom and teacher-education. This is not the place for a programme or manifesto but I ought to make clear the sorts of thing I have in mind and I will give just two examples.

The first major problem that is centrally a problem for philosophy of education is that of equality. We have no idea what an egalitarian theory of education would look like

because, despite some very important recent work on the subject, we are nowhere near a coherent let alone an acceptable theory of equality.

The second example is the related problem or set of problems which from one angle are problems of *liberation* and from another are problems about the relationship between education and social structure. "Women's liberation" has drawn attention to a number of related problems about liberation. Some of these involve the ways in which conventions about and institutions for child-rearing and the education of children set limits to the liberation of women and of men. A theory of liberation will need to examine the roles and the rights of men, women and children and will need to look at the institutions which determine and influence these and the role that education plays and ought to play in the formation and change of our attitudes and beliefs.

We must now turn to the very recent publications in philosophy of education. In 1980 R. S. Peters was bemoaning the "dearth of books" in philosophy of education. As if in answer to his complaint there have recently been a positive plethora of publications. These are very interesting because they illustrate the malaise of recent work in philosophy of education that we have been discussing but also because they show hopeful signs that we are moving away from the mundane insularity that has characterised much of the work of the last two decades.

John Kleinig's stimulating *Philosophical Issues in Education* is tantalisingly schizophrenic. It has the appearance of a run of the mill text covering the usual ground with the magic words "education", "curriculum" etc. in nearly every chapter heading. However the subtle shift in emphasis demonstrated in the title's announcing concern with philosophical issues *in* rather than *of* education is a welcome sign of born-again philosophy. The hopes raised by the title are however only partially fulfilled in the text. The stance is radical and tough-minded but the tour of much of the familiar territory, for example the chapters on 'children's rights' and on 'equality', is far too skimpy to advance the debate. Much better and much more original are the discussions of 'neutrality', 'examinations' and the work of Ivan Illich but by setting out to cover all the usual ground and more Kleinig has forced himself time and again to break off just when things were getting interesting. However this book is definitely a step in the right direction, if only a short one, and I would much rather my students followed Kleinig across the familiar ground than almost any other textbook in the field.

A very different sort of introduction to philosophy of education is Anthony O'Hear's *Education, Society and Human Nature*. This is an articulate defence of liberal education and the open society of which it is seen to be an integral part. The narrative develops organically and logically and it is a pleasure to read. My main reservations are a product of the argument I have been developing. By taking Hirst and Peters as the two rocks upon which any discussion of philosophy of education must break, O'Hear restricted himself to the comparatively limited task of seeing what can be salvaged from the wreckage. Since many scavengers have been there already it's no easy task, but he accomplishes it constructively and with some elegance of argument. The most stimulating part of the book and also the most controversial is his chapter on moral education. There is very little good work in this important area and here O'Hear has definitely furthered the debate. For me, he is rather too reliant on the power of empathy and the need for moral education to cultivate habits which promote empathy, and does not say enough about how moral argument is to proceed or about how and why our *feelings* generate the *principles* of a moral system. He might have come nearer to doing this if he had said more about the connexion between morality and art. However what

he does say about this neglected and fascinating area is very interesting and points the way to another area in which a central problem in philosophy – the relation of morality and art – is also a problem centrally within philosophy of education.

Another such area is the very large problem of what might be termed the moral and political status of children. Colin Wringle's study of *Children's Rights* falls centrally in this area and is the first book-length study of these issues from a philosophical point of view. Wringle sees the problem in a straightforward way. The book reads as if he had said to himself: "Children's rights are after all just a sub-class of rights, so sort out rights and you will have solved the problem of children's rights". The book is thus in two halves. The one half is a discussion of rights generally and the other of children's rights. The two halves are of very different quality. The first half, while providing a detailed and competent general introduction to the philosophical analysis of rights very generally conceived, does not say anything new. Nozick, it is true, is discussed briefly while Dworkin is referred to only in a note, but the discussion as a whole is of the sort that might well have appeared as a students' introduction to rights in about 1963. The other half of the book is more interesting. There is a delightfully nostalgic survey of the children's rights movement which will be a valuable source for those interested in the 'sixties'. The discussion of children's rights proceeds logically and almost every conceivable right which might be claimed by children or denied them by adults receives separate discussion. Wringle's conclusions are for the most part profoundly conservative. He accepts, like most writers on this topic, that children are incompetent without ever producing or considering any evidence that they are. He also largely ignores the extensive evidence for the incompetence of adults. The discussion is reminiscent of the writings of the nineteenth century physician William Acton who *knew* that masturbation was debilitating and so did not need to consider evidence. Despite the conservatism of the conclusions Wringle's book is a good place to start thinking about children's rights.

Brenda Cohen's *Education and the Individual* is a fierce defence of individualism and of individual choice in education. Cohen sees the salvation of these values as in large part lying in a diminution of state control of education and much greater parental choice. The book is a bold one and although I disagree with most of the conclusions this book is definitely on the right track in seeing philosophy of education as about the individual and the family and the relation of both of these to society. Schooling comes in not as the point of educational relevance but because schools are hugely influential on the ways families and societies develop.

Cohen spends a large part of the book distinguishing between religion and politics. She argues that while religious education and religious sectarian schools are O.K., political education in schools is not. The curious reason for this is that while an individual has a right to her own political viewpoint the individual does not have the right to her own religious viewpoint. Although the individual in each case is the child the viewpoint in each case is that of the parent. For Cohen religious freedom consists in parents having the right to indoctrinate their children in the religion of the parents' choice and political freedom consists in the parents' right to prevent their children receiving anything but their own political prejudices. This is why religion may be taught in schools but politics not. Arguments for the identification of individual choice with parental choice are weak but most of the book is stimulating and well argued even where the conclusions are as bizarre as those above.

The books we have been considering while a very varied bunch do give some cause

for optimism about the state of philosophy of education. If practitioners could finally give up the habit of chewing dead bones and remember that most education does not take place in schools the future would be a great deal brighter.

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JOHN HARRIS

Moral Thinking. By R. M. HARE. (Oxford: OUP, 1981. Pp 242 + viii. Price £11.)

Professor Hare's aim in *Moral Thinking* is to apply his conclusion about the logic of the moral concepts (reached in *The Language of Morals* and *Freedom and Reason*) to the practical question of how to solve our moral problems rationally. Moral judgements are, he claims, universally prescriptive, and this linguistic intuition can provide the basis for a rational moral decision procedure which results in a form of utilitarianism. Appeal to linguistic intuitions is legitimate, for they make no pretence of establishing matters of moral substance – they clarify the meaning of our questions rather than attempting to answer them. Appeal to *moral* intuitions, on the other hand, can play no part in building a rational moral system, because it provides no protection against conditioned prejudice, and no method for adjudicating between conflicting intuitions. Moral intuitions are relevant only in so far as they provide evidence about the true meanings of the moral words: if the moral judgements yielded by our theory coincide to a large extent with the accepted judgements of the community, then we have reason to believe that our linguistic intuitions about the moral concepts are correct.

Hare argues that moral thinking should be done at two levels, the intuitive and the critical. The intuitive level involves making moral decisions by invoking general principles, whilst critical level thinking is to be employed when these general principles conflict, or when we are deciding which to adopt. Since we are not archangels with superhuman powers, it is necessary for us to have such "intuitive" guidelines for our moral thought, both to enable us to make urgent decisions quickly, and also to counter the danger of rationalizing our desires in particular situations. Moral intuitions, if they are to perform these functions, must be learnable and easy to apply, and hence must be simple. If we are to have enough of them to guide our moral thought adequately, it is inevitable that they will conflict in unforeseen situations, and this reveals the necessity of critical thinking to adjudicate between them. Critical thinking can be avoided only at the cost of fanaticism, the irrational elevation of some favoured principles above all others.

Since moral judgements are prescriptive, it is coherent to maintain that they are also descriptive. They do, however, have a lot in common with descriptive judgements, for their logic is universal, and so requires that moral assessment be "supervenient" upon the descriptive properties of the situation concerned. This consistent application of the moral words makes it tempting to conclude that there exist objective moral properties to which they are consistently applied. Intuitionism and naturalism can thus be explained as natural errors, whose occurrence is predicted by, and therefore corroborates, the theory of universal prescriptivism.

Although moral judgements are not factual, this does not imply that there is no rational (critical) procedure for making them. Rational thinking must be done in the light of the facts, and so a rational moral decision is one which approximates as nearly as