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New Perspectives in Philosophy of Education

Ethics, Politics and Religion

Edited by David Lewin, Alexandre Guilherme and Morgan White
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The pathos of modern philosophy of education is its false humility. Philosophy of education should not see itself as handmaiden to the purer contemplation of philosophy proper. Nor do the applied fields of enquiry on which policy and practice are constructed stand without founding principles. Rather, philosophy of education lies between two poles of contemplation and application.

So, what is philosophy of education? One possible answer is given in a recent review of the relevance of philosophy to education studies. John Haldane noted that, in the early 1950s, H. M. Knox distinguished between educational philosophy and philosophy of education (Haldane, 2012, p. 4; Knox 1952). While the former tended to concern the ideas of ‘great educators’, the latter was about reflective, theoretical conceptual enquiry. Knox was keen to focus attention upon the development of educational theory. For Knox, philosophy of education was not so much about discussion of the relevance of what might be seen as the philosophical canon (Plato, Aristotle, Hegel and the like) for educational matters but about educational themes related to philosophical topics themselves: humanism, realism, naturalism, idealism and the assessment of aims and values. In a similar vein, Haldane suggests that philosophical work in the field of education ought to give up on the patronage of mainline philosophy (applying popularized versions of philosophical ideas of the last generation) and instead adopt the approach of case-based reasoning found in casuistry. Here analysis is combined with hermeneutic interpretation and ethical evaluation in, for example, addressing questions about the permissable boundaries of agents with particular responsibilities in particular circumstances, or about the ends, values and ideals that might govern a particular practice (Haldane, 2012, p. 14). Theoretical reflection upon cases is capable of generating new concepts and arguments because educational theory is contextual and practical. While Haldane is right to worry about the status of the philosophy of education in relation to philosophy departments in British universities, we should not forget that any social, political, epistemic, ethical or philosophical questions that take seriously issues about how society ought to be organized given fundamental
features of human nature must involve questions about education: what to teach, to whom and by what methods? Haldane here revisits the ancient dichotomy of the theoretical and the practical and finds his answer in the case-based approach.

Since the heyday of philosophy of education in the 1960s, when R. S. Peters published his seminal *Ethics and Education*, philosophers now find themselves with fewer opportunities to explore the fundamentals of education in academia. Speak to most philosophers of education in the United Kingdom today and you will get the unmistakable impression that philosophy of education is being increasingly marginalized in educational curricula. This is most obvious in the domain of Teacher Education, where the requirement to conform to a narrowly defined conception of education is now dominant. Historically, university departments of education in the United Kingdom were largely concerned with Teacher Education and so the existence of ‘education’ as a subject of inquiry was generally pursued within that context. But recent developments suggest this is undergoing significant change.

Over the last few years there has been a considerable growth in programmes of study that aim to widen the perspectives of educational discourse. These courses, generally titled ‘Education Studies’ or just ‘Education’, are typically separated from programmes in Teacher Education and often introduce students to educational theory through what in the 1960s were identified as the four disciplines of education: psychology, sociology, history and philosophy (Hirst, 1983) – later this led to the development of other disciplines, such as economics of education and anthropology of education. This surge of interest in the wider questions of education cannot be dismissed as only a reaction to the current constraints of teacher education in the United Kingdom, a ‘negation of the negation’; rather they represent a substantive opportunity to reimagine the field of ‘education’ (cf. Furlong, 2013). It is here, then, that we are likely to find new directions for philosophy of education being explored.

The present volume was first conceived in the context of just such efforts to reimagine the study of education, where in 2011 at Liverpool Hope University a new Education Studies programme was established. A conference to address the relevance of philosophy of education took place in June 2012 at Liverpool Hope, where many of the ideas for this book first came together. So while we must acknowledge that these are difficult times for subjects across the arts and humanities, including philosophy of education, given the social and political climate in which we live, we also believe there are exciting opportunities for philosophers of education and educationalists with an interest in the discipline.
Despite a certain optimism, one must wonder whether philosophers of education can be of help in finding solutions to some of the more acute and intractable problems of our current social and political context; or are they allowing themselves, unwittingly perhaps, to become part of the conventional machinery of socio-political compromise by understanding their role primarily as one of offering solutions? On the one hand, the need to engage in policy discussion and policy formation might involve an impulse to challenge existing structures or to propose radical alternatives in a bid to remain ‘policy relevant’. On the other hand, there are pressures to engage in reasonable and realistic debate, but one can wonder whether such reasonableness is too often encoded in something altogether too restrictive. As the prominent environmentalist David Brower once said of his own tendency to engage in environmental debate: ‘I was not always unreasonable, and I am sorry for that’ (Brower, 2000: 26). The desire to seem reasonable can be regarded by some as the inhibition of the political and social imagination.

In engaging with contemporary social and political discourse, then, we might ask whether philosophers of education are gadflies or sophists. This convenient dichotomy is some consolation to those who are content to remain disengaged from the institutions that constitute our socio-political world. Cynics can simply maintain that the gadflies are too marginal while the sophists are too mainstream, and therefore philosophers of education must indeed walk a fine line. In times when ‘education’ is a topic so politically charged, to the point of becoming a significant aspect of the election battleground (because ‘education’ is increasingly regarded as a panacea for our social, political and economic ills) and because research and inquiry, under the banner of the Research Excellence Framework, in Britain are expected to involve a narrowly construed ‘impact’ upon society (cf. Furlong, 2011), philosophers of education face the pressure to provide some political leverage that makes purely philosophical claims appear equivocal or dilute. However, this is surely an opportunity to do philosophy at the coalface, because it is this interdisciplinary space that will challenge efforts to separate the pure from the applied and the theoretical from the practical. Those directly involved with ‘education’ – the teachers and lecturers, as well as the students they teach – know only too well that the practitioner cannot simply comply uncritically, just as the critic cannot remain objectively disengaged.

This book seeks to be both specific in concern and wide in scope, at the same time that it develops the field of philosophy of education and engages with some headline issues currently faced by those interested in education. All convenient dichotomies must, then, be put to one side: the pure and the
applied, the formal and informal, directed and non-directed, constructivist and objectivist. All such dichotomies are the bread and butter of educational theory, but from the wider vistas that this book opens onto, they conceal as much as they reveal. The chapters contained in this book are not unified by one particular philosophical perspective, methodology or tradition, still less by a single vision of what the purposes of education ought to be. Indeed, the effort to specify schools and traditions within philosophy of education can serve to reinforce a parochialism that this volume hopes to undermine. Not that we should be blind to historical divisions such as continental, analytic and pragmatist philosophical schools, nor should we be unable to speak across such distinctions. It is our perception that too much theory is constrained by arbitrary thematizations, and so the contributors to this volume have been encouraged to speak within their own voice and tradition, while oriented towards shared concerns that are defined in the wide terms that structure the book.

The ethical, political and religious in education

The human being inhabits a world constituted by ethical, political and religious concerns. These themes provide the widest scope for consideration of what is most fundamental to human existence. They also provide properly philosophical contexts in which to explore problems in education. For these reasons we have organized our volume around these three categories. To be sure, these realms can never be entirely discrete: the ethical elides with the political which, in turn, can blur with the religious. This has led to discussion among the editors, for instance, about whether a particular chapter is best located in one section of the book rather than another, and our decisions still appear doubtful to us in some cases. But these considerations suggest a more significant unity operating across these three divisions.

1. As R. S. Peters argued, education is an ethical act (1966). The ethical character of education might be obscured by the role that the state plays in it. The notion that we can locate values in a private domain apart from a neutral public one has come and gone (McLaughlin, 2008). The secular polis (if such a term is at all meaningful) is not a value-free space, but it embodies commitments expressed not least within the ethos of education. The ethical character of education, how education is understood and taken up, requires urgent philosophical attention in an age in which the ‘performativ...
largely displaced the ‘deliberative’. Such focus upon the ‘performative’ nature of education (say, good education must be education that gets students high grades, to give an obvious example) places unhelpful limits upon the philosophical terrain and the perspectives it might offer.

2. As Paulo Freire demonstrated, education is a political act. The polis is formed to the extent that individuals can be brought into the social world through education. Clearly, the state has an important role to play in terms of defining policy and enabling practice. But perhaps what is seldom understood is the role for education in constituting the political realm. The political significance of education demands urgent philosophical attention in a time in which policy and practice lack a substantive ground.

3. For figures such as John Henry Newman, Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas, it would not have seemed controversial to regard education as a religious act. Today we might assume that although we cannot avoid the ethical and political dimensions of existence, surely the religious domain does not apply to all. But, rather like ethics, the religious speaks to the universal human need to express an ultimate concern. Such a concern is typically, though not necessarily, articulated in traditional forms of religious life. Here we have sought to articulate the religious as a human orientation to something that goes beyond the finite.

The decision to structure the book around three key themes should indicate that this work is not intended as a comprehensive account of contemporary philosophy of education. This would be a Herculean task, and the danger with such an approach is the false impression of unity and coherence that can result. It is rather too easy, sometimes, for students to get the impression that the knowledge they need can be gleaned from one volume, or even a set of volumes. Our liberal approach in this book asks the reader to seek the unknown, insecure and problematic and not to settle for seemingly ordered interpretations but to look at issues anew. The new perspectives of the title are not the exclusive preserve of the authors gathered here but are formed and reformed by the readers who themselves participate in the formation and interpretation of those perspectives.

The book begins with a Prelude by one of the foremost philosophers of education working in the United Kingdom today, Paul Standish. In his chapter, ‘What’s the Use of Philosophy of Education?’ Standish provides an examination of the relations and tensions between philosophy of education and contemporary educational theory with broader cultural and philosophical concerns, setting the scene for the more specific discussions that follow. Standish explores the
increasingly specialized and fractured intellectual milieu in which philosophers and educationalists are working, a milieu in which the imperative to justify one’s existence in utilitarian terms is shown to be not neutral but part of a pernicious technicization of the field.

Part One, ‘Ethics’, begins with David Lewin’s examination of the structure and scope of technological thinking. He argues that the separation of technical reason from ethical reason finds its ground in a wider metaphysical shift identified in Heidegger’s philosophy of technology. Lewin contends that the ethical character of education is hidden by unrestrained technological thinking. This is followed by Chapter 3, in which David Lundie explores the information-theoretic account of knowing and learning, a model of knowledge that finds itself reinforced by the prevalence of systems of information technology. Lundie argues that human identity requires a conception of education in which learning is more than just an event in a causal chain of information processes. In Chapter 4, Adrian Skilbeck suggests that the process of thematizing ethical issues within education seeks to erase personal commitments, regarding them as antithetical to the moral seriousness appropriate to ethics. But this negation of the first person distorts the nature of ethical thinking while giving the appearance of offering a rigorous and defensible educational programme. Section one ends with David Aldridge’s examination of the role of fables as moral exemplars. Aldridge draws attention to the hermeneutical complexity of Aesop’s story of the fox and the crow discussed by Rousseau. Whether moral exemplars can ever be deployed as forms of directive pedagogy is complex, though Aldridge argues that this complexity calls for a reassessment of the fruitful tension between heteronomous and autonomous education.

Part Two of the volume, on ‘Politics’, begins with Morgan White’s chapter on the instrumental nature of contemporary higher education. He argues that the present structure of our universities produces graduates and academics ill-equipped to engage as citizens in the polis. Jon Nixon, in Chapter 7, examines the university’s hermeneutic tradition. He argues that an ‘ethic of deliberation’ is fundamental to understanding the humanities and the ‘hermeneutical imagination’. In the context of all-too-familiar global, collective problems such as environmental degradation, energy crises and deteriorating labour standards, to name a few, it is a hermeneutical imagination combined appropriately with technical knowledge that is required to tackle such issues. Such problems require a radical reconceptualization of our universities, away from a scientized notion of culture, and towards institutions which enable human conversation. In Chapter 8, Richard Smith explores the monoculture of instrumental reason.
within neoliberal culture. He argues, rather than challenging such instrumental rationality, our universities are swept up in such thinking. In response the university must reassert its central value as an institution committed to the critical examination of thinking and the development of *phronesis*. In Chapter 9 Judith Suissa offers an anarchist understanding of the philosophy of education which seeks to problematize assumptions about the state and state education as the terrain upon which discussion about the philosophy of education takes place. Her argument draws attention to a latent conservatism in philosophy of education which takes for granted the contextual backdrop of the capitalist state. Suissa seeks to take seriously the possibility of a truly free and equal society and the role education might play in this, without descending into naïve blueprints and the problems usually associated with utopian revolutionary thought.

Part Three, Religion, begins with Chapter 10, in which Alexandre Guilherme provides the standard philosophical reading, as well as an alternative theological one based on the Hasidic roots of Martin Buber’s thought, of the *basic words* ‘I-Thou’ and ‘I-It’. This is followed by a discussion on the implications of Buber’s philosophy for education, leading to the conclusion that ‘education is *inclusive per se*’. In Chapter 11, Ruth Wills highlights a tension in spiritual education in the light of renewed government requirements that schools in England and Wales should promote a spiritual dimension to teaching and learning. This serves as the basis for Wills’ discussion on the ‘experiential paradigm’ and her defence of the claim that the ‘middle ground’ is not necessarily problematic and that it can provide space for critical reflection during the educational process. In the following chapter, John Sullivan suggests ways in which theology might enrich our understanding of key issues in education, such as *who* we are as teachers and learners, *what* might be taught and learned, *how* education might be delivered and *why* do we teach and learn. Finally, in the last chapter of this volume, David Torevell analyses Xavier Beauvois’ film *Of Gods and Men* (2010), a film about the lives and deaths of Cistercian monks in Algeria in 1996, and argues that it is a valuable resource for teachers working in Catholic schools, as well as elsewhere, for it bears a strong connection to Catholic theology and its relation to issues of identity and education.

Philosophers of education are caught on the horns of a false dilemma, a choice between the practical and theoretical. To remain aloof from practical considerations does not speak to the ethical, political and religious contexts in which we live. Yet to speak to and for the practical issues in education today can lead to the sublimation of the utopian imagination. There may not be a straightforward answer to the pragmatic question: ‘What is the ‘cash-value’ of
all this reflection?’ But the failure to answer certain questions may only be the failure to be unreasonably reasonable. The failure calls for new forms of reason that exceed Haldane’s affirmation of the situated and contextual.

One of the pressing concerns of the institutionalized activity of philosophy of education is based upon self-doubt about its status in relation to philosophy more generally. In a moment of supreme irony we are beginning to find that unwelcome changes in the political economy of academia mean that mainline philosophy will be increasingly encouraged to reflect more directly on matters of immediate human concern. This is the business of philosophy of education, the business of philosophy.

Notes

1 It is worth noting that the university initially offered disciplinary courses across both Education Studies and Teacher Education divisions of the Faculty of Education. However, the tight regulatory demands on Teacher Education made this shared endeavour unworkable.

References

Prelude
What’s the Use of Philosophy of Education?

Paul Standish

The curt directness of the question that is our starting point, its air of no-nonsense practicality, is in some ways welcome. What is the use? One can almost hear the gruff confidence, or perhaps the glum despair, with which the question might be asked. And it is, is it not, a rhetorical question, which might suggest that anyone who raises it is not really looking for an answer? But let us give this voice, just to see what it is that motivates the question and where it might lead.

In the 1990s Kenneth Clarke, an intelligent and in many ways thoughtful spokesperson for the Conservative party and its one-time Minister of Education, famously castigated teacher education courses as being full of ‘barmy theory’. Here at last, then, so it seemed to many, was a minister who was not afraid of exposing and denouncing the ideological interests and the self-indulgent fantasies of those employed to train teachers. What was the use of all that technicist psychology, posturing sociology and abstract philosophy? If Clarke had thought in such terms, he would have been partly out of date, for in fact these disciplines had by the 1990s been displaced in some degree by the new ‘sciences’ of education – of curriculum theory initially but then more powerfully of school effectiveness and school improvement – with sociology rethinking itself as social policy analysis, and other disciplinary migrations towards social justice research. Had Clarke been more au fait with these developments, it is unlikely that he would have been reassured.

Clarke’s ‘barmy theory’ was calculated to strike a chord with conservative Middle England, with its Daily Mail philistinism and fear of anything that smacked of the intellectual. But it would be wrong to suggest that such a suspicion of educational theory was isolated in this way. In the 1970s, student teachers themselves had reacted against aspects of their curriculum, especially where this introduced them to seemingly irrelevant sociological or psychological theory, or required them to attend to a apparently remote history of schooling,
and some articulated a special unease about philosophical abstractions that struck them as disconnected from the challenges of the classroom; and these were, no doubt, real challenges. It was partly that unease that played into the radical reforms that Margaret Thatcher was able to introduce. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, and in a very different educational jurisdiction, Ronald Reagan’s government was gleefully encouraging the same kinds of de-skilling, anti-intellectualizing changes.

There is no difficulty then in imaging those sceptical voices that would indeed ask what the use of philosophy of education might be. But a different kind of criticism regarding philosophy has been mounted from within educational research itself. Such research has for some time been dominated by an ideology of empiricism in which it is assumed that the only way in which education policy and practice can be understood is through empirical enquiry. The gathering of empirical data is the stuff of science, and in the absence of this no serious research can be undertaken. Hence, its question to philosophy is not so much ‘What is the use?’ as ‘What is the evidential basis for your claims?’ It works with the justified concern within academic enquiry to avoid unsupported assertion, but it then inflates this into a methodological principle that casts out all else. It fails entirely to understand the Wittgensteinian insights that justification must end at some point, that not all our background assumptions can simultaneously be called into question and that our enquiries must start from somewhere.

It is important that to criticize this ideological empiricism is in no way to disparage empirical research, which is most certainly needed in various ways. It is, however, to condemn the unsupported and clearly fallacious assumption that it is only through the gathering of data that educational research can take place. This is clearly fallacious, in that all enquiry derives from assessments about what it is worth enquiring into. Such assessments involve the exercise of criticism and judgement over questions of value. Of course it may be interesting to do a survey to find out what others happen to think about such questions, but this is not going to show that the judgements they make are justified. Nor will it suffice to retreat to formulaic expressions of ‘effectiveness’ or of ‘what works’, for these leave open the questions of ‘effectiveness in what respect’ or ‘what works in what respect’. To provide the missing justifications or to fill in the missing specifications of what works requires reasoned argument, and this is not an empirical matter.

But none of this quite takes the sting out of the expression ‘What’s the use?’ The idea of use is intertwined with notions of instrumentality and the taking of
What's the Use of Philosophy of Education?

a means to an end. Things need not be conceived exactly like this, of course, as Karl Marx’s differentiation of, on the one hand, use-value, related genuinely to human needs, and, on the other, exchange-value, characterized by a ‘congealing of labour-time’, clearly shows. And John Dewey’s pragmatism is a philosophy far more hospitable to a holistic conception of use. Let us not avoid the sting in the question, however, by shifting the metaphysical parameters in this way. What must be seen is that when we take the question on its own terms, things are less straightforward than they may seem, because the kinds of relationships that can exist between means and ends are diverse. Utilitarianism presents us with a whole philosophy geared towards a certain kind of instrumentalism, a calculus for evaluating consequences and determining efficient means to the maximization of good outcomes. It may be fashionable today to decry the effects of this way of thinking, but it is reasonable to acknowledge the way that this was an appropriate philosophy for its time: utilitarianism developed in England in the early nineteenth century, partly in response to the scale of the social problems brought about by industrial change, specifically the massive migration into the towns. It was a philosophy that sought to rise to the challenges of the large-scale planning that the situation demanded. No doubt it had its excessive forms then – forms that Charles Dickens would satirize in such novels as *Hard Times* – but its greater excesses became apparent in the twentieth century, when more ideological forms of industrial planning and social engineering came to the fore.

To take a means to an end, however, does not make one a utilitarian, and in fact it is impossible to imagine a human life of which this was not a part. The variety of relationships that is possible here, however, is certainly worthy of attention. An example from British secondary schools of the 1950s and 1960s illustrates this nicely. For many students in their teens, practical education was divided along gender lines: the boys would do woodwork or metalwork, and the girls shorthand and typing. All of these were useful activities, and they were assumed to provide skills appropriate to finding work. But there is a difference in kind between these activities, and this surely worked to the benefit of the boys: while woodwork and metalwork might be regarded as involving intrinsic satisfaction, this is far less obviously the case with the subjects the girls pursued. There can be satisfaction in typing well, but it would be odd for someone to do this without some extrinsic end (the typing of a document for a particular purpose). In other words, this is not the kind of practice that can be seen as a craft, with the inherent richness that that implies: it is purely a means to an end, and if another means were available, it might indeed be
preferable. One has only to think of what has actually happened in respect of these activities for this to be seen to be true: the advent of word processors has altered the role of keyboard skills, and their eventual obsolescence with the growing refinement of voice recognition seems highly likely. Typing skills will then be useless. While industrial production continues to change ways in which, say, furniture is made, it seems unlikely that the appeal of carpentry will simply die out.

If one turns to other aspects of the curriculum, further differentiations within means–ends relationship come to light. What, we might ask, is the point of football? Candidate answers would include (i) the enhancement of physical fitness and health, (ii) the development of such virtues as team spirit and competitiveness, (iii) the enjoyment of the game itself and (iv) vocational purposes involving careers in sport. While the first two of these aims might be realized by many other means or perhaps by-passed by the taking of health-producing drugs, this specific sport is internally related to the third and possibly to the fourth too. In reality, for the physical education teacher, these four aims are likely to be unproblematically woven together. In the same way, one can question the use of teaching literature, and here answers proffer themselves, ranging from (i) the development of writing skills and (ii) the expansion of the learner’s vocabulary to (iii) moral education and (iv) aesthetic appreciation. While the first three of these seem largely to instrumentalize the activity, the last restores a sense of its intrinsic worth. And again, in reality, these aims would very likely not be clearly articulated: they would sit reasonably happily together, although drawing attention to one or the other might have a telling effect on the texts chosen for study and on the manner of teaching and learning. It would surely, however, be a weak justification for the subject that concentrated only on (i) and (ii); by contrast, a robust justification would give pride of place to aesthetic appreciation, though with plenty of room still available for giving substance to the forms this should take.

These examples indicate the complex differentiations in means–ends relationships that can easily be made in terms of questions of curriculum, and they suggest the inappropriateness of a casual employment of these terms in life as a whole. What does need to be added, however, is that it is still worth identifying and guarding against a kind of ideology of instrumentalism that has infected thinking across the social sphere, including, of course, education. A lexicon of ‘aims’, ‘objectives’, ‘learning outcomes’ and ‘mission statements’ has come to provide the dominant architecture of educational discourse. The quasi-mechanistic assumptions behind this and its reduction of people to
‘end-users’, ‘stake-holders’, ‘customers’ and of course ‘human resources’ reinstall this continually in our institutional policies and practices. The familiarity of the suave and now thoroughly naturalized institutional ‘HR’, which has replaced ‘personnel’, hides the oddness of thinking of people in this way. That sense of oddness is partly retrieved, however, if we reappropriate the ‘use’ question and ask, rather pointedly, ‘What is the use of people?’ ‘What’s the use’ and ‘what’s the point’ are questions that can trip off the tongue too easily.

We shall at a later stage return to these matters, but for now let us take up again the question that was our starting point: What is the use of philosophy of education? When this question is posed, it is quite commonly accompanied by a background unsteadiness about what philosophy (and, therefore, philosophy of education) actually is. Let us take that as an entry point to these problems of definition and use.

Genealogy and the state of the art

It is not uncommon for people to react to the idea of philosophy of education as if it were a very strange kind of animal. What on earth can it be like, they seem to say? But I find myself perplexed at their perplexity. Jurisprudence asks philosophical questions about the nature of the law and legal practice. Philosophy of education asks comparable philosophical questions about the nature of education and educational practice. What then is the problem? Yet this is unlikely to settle the minds of those who are unclear about philosophy itself, and certainly the subject can be difficult to define or explain. So what can be said?

Understanding here is not helped, on the whole, by the summary accounts, the classifications of methods, the typologies that are found in textbooks of research methods and that then proliferate in courses inducting students into educational research. Here it is not uncommon to find tabulated lists and matrices, where, say, ontology is separated from feminism, and phenomenology is contrasted with objectivism. In such contexts, students commonly have impressed upon them the need quickly to establish their ‘theoretical perspective’, as if this were a precondition for the empirical or other study upon which they are to embark. This reinforces the idea of research as technical and of philosophy as dry and abstract, a matter of ‘-ologies’ and ‘-isms’: it profoundly distorts philosophy’s nature and what is at stake when such terms are appropriately employed.
For present purposes I propose instead a more genealogical approach, and here I shall, as it were, take a step sideways and embark on the discussion in a different way. I want to pursue these matters with reference to a historic pictorial representation of the state of the art – that is, the art of philosophy: Raphael’s fresco *The School of Athens*. The painting, which was completed between 1509 and 1511, is a fresco that Raphael was commissioned to paint by Pope Julius II. Pope Julius, nicknamed ‘the fearsome pope’ or ‘the warrior pope’, was one of the most powerful rulers of the age. It was his ambition to restore Rome to its classical greatness, with grand-scale architectural reconstruction, masterminded by Bramante. Raphael’s extraordinary contribution to this project reaches its high point in *The School of Athens*. One of four main frescoes in the Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican, each of which treats of a different theme, the painting answers to the imperative ‘Seek knowledge of causes’. Its subject, as we have seen, is philosophy.

Let us picture Raphael’s great work and consider what it reveals. The perspective Raphael grants the viewer is from within the grand, palatial room that is depicted. We are, as it were, at the foot of the large marble steps that lead up to the figures depicted. Through the entrance of the room, at the centre of the painting, two men approach from the light outside. Each makes a simple gesture of the hand, elegant but contrasting gestures. The older man, Plato, rises onto his toes as if drawn upwards, flame-like in the ethereal colours of his cloak: his raised hand and finger point towards the sky. Aristotle, younger, more virile and earthly, his feet planted flat on the ground, reaches out towards us: his fingers are splayed horizontally and his palm turned down. These two gestures, vertical and horizontal, articulate the coordinates of the painting, affirming those properties that ally painting with the rational art of the geometer, taking the measure of heaven and earth.

Each man holds a book, a book he has authored himself: Plato, the *Timaeus*, a cosmological discussion of the divine source of things, the higher towards which thought is led, away from the changeability of the world; Aristotle, the *Ethics*, an enquiry into the good in the practical affairs of human beings, which treats of the flux of experience and sensory engagement with things. But the two men are united pictorially by the arch through which they are walking towards us, and this is amplified by the series of arches that structure the painting as a whole – arches readable simultaneously, and in contrary movements, as entry into the matrix of human becoming and ascension out of the Cave, the cave that Plato depicts in *The Republic* as an allegory of education. Either way, the arches lead the eye towards these two men, making them the focal point of the painting;
moreover, they are at the same time highlighted, even beatified, by the fact that, among the host of characters represented, they are the only ones who are seen against the sky. It is from this that the story unfolds.

The two men converse together, but from them there derive two lineages of thought: Raphael displays these graphically and they are more or less divided in the lower quarters of the picture. Where do these lines of thought lead? From Plato to Pythagoras, from Aristotle to Euclid, Zoroaster and Ptolemy, and from the higher level of pure philosophy down to the realm of the senses, where there is awareness of mass and quantity, the fresco depicts some sixty figures, compressing many centuries, and bringing this range of thinkers within the formal structure of a tableau. The formal properties of the work articulate a dialectical structure, with the two lines of thought unfolding towards us: we follow the figures outwards and down the steps to the lowest level, where they are divided; but then when seen within the overall structure, we find that they are spanned by the receding series of arches and, hence, in this contrary movement, formally united. For all these symmetries and formal satisfactions, however – these and many more, beyond the scope of the present discussion – the painting is far from static. The scene is animated with conversation and movement, and the dynamism of this is accentuated – by the diagonals of raised arms, elbows at angles and legs outstretched, as well as of bodies bending forward in rapt attention.

Two factors in the painting disrupt this ordered scene. The first is the more striking, for here in the open space, on the white steps that descend between the two clusters of thinkers, there sprawls the biggest and perhaps the most ungainly figure, identifiable as Heraclitus. Silent and brooding, the figure is out of place in this animated scene; out of place also in that the sprawling body breaks with the formal properties of the picture. In fact, it is not just the man’s body but the stone block on which he leans, which is oddly and inexplicably at an angle to the steps, as if the building were somehow still in progress. Perhaps in philosophy it always is. This may symbolize, then, Heraclitus’ pre-Socratic insistence on flux and the mutability of things. But the force of the intrusion lies elsewhere. Raphael had been painting this masterpiece at a time when another work was underway in a large adjacent room, a room that was kept under lock and key. That room was the Sistine Chapel. The story is that one night Raphael bribed his way into this room and saw the work of his rival Michelangelo. The figure we are considering has been described as Michelangeloesque, even as representing Michelangelo himself, as well as resembling Saint Jeremiah, depicted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. In contrast to the philosophers and mathematicians
that populate the larger part of *The School of Athens*, the figure on the steps has the body and clothes of a workman, even anachronistically a workman's boots, and for these reasons, and in spite of its brooding qualities, it can seem mildly comic, even slightly absurd. Michelangelo was, by all accounts, awkward in his social and business dealings, in contrast to the assured and genial demeanour of Raphael, the younger man. So here, it seems, Raphael is having fun at the expense of the artist of the room next door.

Yet this is a double gesture, for at the same time the placing of this figure at the centre foreground of this, Raphael's greatest work – that is, the toleration of this intrusion into the work's symmetry – must function as a kind of homage. The placing of the figure in a direct vertical line under Plato's upstretched finger amounts to an acknowledgement of Michelangelo's genius – a genius governed less by the rational laws of symmetry and proportion that have so much contributed to Raphael's masterwork than by divine inspiration.

The force of this homage is increased by the relative self-effacement of Raphael himself. We need to notice his signature appearance on the extreme right of the scene, an appearance that can otherwise seem almost insignificant. His expression is equivocal, perhaps readable initially as a mischievous pleasure at this mockery of his rival, here amidst the comprehensive grandeur of this scene, but any such self-satisfaction is quickly counter-balanced by, even ceded to, this humble, perhaps aching, acknowledgement of the greatness of Michelangelo's achievement. Of course, it may seem ironic that the expression of humility achieved through this disruption contributes immeasurably to the scope of *The School of Athens*: it is its self-effacing masterstroke. We might read this as a fitting complication of philosophy too.

This directness of Raphael's gaze out of the painting, which is tantamount to a breaking of convention, akin to that of the television interviewee's 'mistake' of looking directly at the camera (a right reserved for newsreaders and reporters, anchor-persons, and presenters of the weather), constitutes the second disruption of the scene. It is emulated by two further figures, the more significant of which is the white-clad figure on the steps, two places to the left of the sprawling Heraclitus. And this exceptionally is a woman, the fourth-century Egyptian philosopher and mathematician Hypatia. What, then, is to be made of the fact that Raphael licenses this direct communication with the viewer both to himself and to this woman, aligning himself with her, though from these different points in the scene?

But this question is overshadowed by a further astonishing fact about the painting. The cartoons for the work reveal that Raphael had earlier intended to
fill the blank space of the steps at the front of the scene with an image of Hypatia herself. As it happened, however, he was advised by a Vatican official against foregrounding a woman in this way, for reasons it is not difficult to imagine, whereupon, at a late stage, this section of the fresco was replastered and the imposing image of Heraclitus inserted. It may be that we are then tempted to say that Hypatia and Raphael himself are ‘in the know’ in some way about what has happened, even catching us out as voyeurs of this scene. But this, itself a too-knowing reading, obscures the suggestion here of a feminized intuition and understatement.

The upshot of these thoughts is that these disruptions can be read as partial subversions of the grand plan of the painting. As intimated above, they also invite a reappraisal of the architectonic aspects of the account of philosophy it provides. Moreover, this occurs within a work that is commissioned in part as a kind of self-representation or marketing exercise for Pope Julius himself: such are the political stakes of the representation of the field. It is then to the way that philosophy understands itself, especially in relation to its purchase on education, that I wish now to turn.

What is the philosophy of education?

When philosophy emerged in ancient Greece, the painting tells us, it offered a new means of theorizing, not only about the nature of the world, but about the nature of our knowledge of the world. Knowledge, it turned out, was of different kinds, and the emphasis given to this or that would lay the way for developments of thought that shaped the ensuing development of civilization, in the West and, increasingly, in the East too. When philosophy of education emerged – and, on one account, this was in London in 1962 – it offered a new means of theorizing about educational policy and practice. It was in that year that Richard Stanley Peters was appointed to the Chair in Philosophy of Education at the Institute of Education. He had already made something of a mark in his role as Reader in Philosophy at Birkbeck College, University of London, and significantly he had broadcast talks on education on the BBC’s Third Programme. It was not that philosophy had not been considered before in relation to education, but his advent heralded a new methodological rigour in enquiry, inspired by the conceptual analysis that was dominant in mainstream departments of philosophy. In some ways this sanctioned a modest conception of the subject, casting it in the role of Locke’s under-labourer to other research in education;
but its confidence in its methodology, and its watchwords of rigour and clarity, caused others to perceive it as speaking with a certain hauteur. It is not to be regretted that the substance of the work that then developed went well beyond this methodological prescription, for in fact some of the most interesting work that was produced extended into a vision of education, a restatement of liberal education, in which the influence of various philosophers was acknowledged. The celebrated forms of knowledge thesis of Paul Hirst consciously gestured towards Plato's forms, though with the acknowledgement that these were human products, the heritage of centuries of human endeavour, not somehow carved in stone. The emphasis on rational autonomy as an aim of education drew not only on Kant but also on John Stuart Mill for its inspiration. And from Michael Oakeshott there derived the notion of education as the 'conversation of mankind'.

Yet, for all the value of the endeavour of Peters and his colleagues, such an account of philosophy of education's genesis seems woefully inadequate. Its self-representation seems blind to philosophy's involvement with education throughout its history. And how else could it be? The central disciplines of philosophy concern not only what it is to know but how it is we come to know (epistemology), and not only the nature of the good but how we learn to live good lives (ethics). Plato, writing dialogues that depict an older man leading a younger towards knowledge, surely understood the intimacy of this relation. And to be more specific, one would need to acknowledge other traditions – say, the extraordinary prominence of education within American pragmatism, as the work of John Dewey makes abundantly clear, and the flowering of the idea of Bildung in German thought in the nineteenth century. Philosophy of education, on this expanded view, can be seen to be as old as philosophy itself. In fact, from the point of view of practice, none of this should surprise us. When practical problems in education are confronted, when they are pursued to where the questions lead, they take us to the most central matters in philosophy itself – the nature of knowledge and the nature of the good life. None of this is to disparage the contribution of Peters and his colleagues. It is rather to set their achievement within a broader and more diverse history, in which not only the Western authors identified above but also other cultural traditions will figure, including, for example, the extraordinary legacies of Buddhist and Confucian thought.

As the sociology of knowledge helps to show, however, the history of a discipline is never simply the product of its rationale and logical coherence: it also depends upon the vicissitudes of circumstance. The growth of the philosophy of
education, when Peters and his colleagues were in their heyday, was enabled in part by changes in policy regarding teacher education. While this is a UK story, it resonates with experience in many countries. The commitment in the United Kingdom to making teaching a graduate profession led to the establishment of a Bachelor of Education degree in which intellectual substance and weight were provided by the foundation disciplines – that is, by those disciplines through which educational policy and practice could most clearly be studied: history, philosophy, psychology and sociology. This led to a demand in the colleges of education for people trained in these subjects, and the universities rose to the challenge of providing them, with the Institute of Education taking a key role. All this reflected a climate conditioned not only by demographic change and economic prosperity but by a greater faith in education.

As we saw at the start, however, the approaches adopted were not without their problems. Dissatisfaction came not only from frustrated and sometimes intellectually challenged students but from more reactionary sources, including the so-called Black Papers in education. At the end of the 1970s Margaret Thatcher came to power partly through a populist exploitation of negative images of teachers and criticism of the way that they were trained: this laid the way for what was in effect a progressive de-skilling in the decades that followed. As a result, the place of the disciplines in teacher education was challenged, and the numbers of posts in universities in the foundation disciplines declined. Philosophy of education was under threat.

All this is very much to be regretted, but happily the story does not end there. Over the last two decades or so the field has seen a revival, with a spectacular growth in publication and with a new vitality in conference and other research activity. The *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, which Peters established in the 1960s, began by publishing some 90 pages a year. By the first decade of the new millennium it had expanded to more than 700 pages, and recent volumes are realizing over 120,000 downloads of articles per year. The journal is now one of several in the field. Hence, it seems that there is much in philosophy of education that is in a healthy state.

Let me return briefly, however, to say a little more about philosophy of education’s relation to its ‘parent’ discipline – a metaphor of dubious legitimacy, as my remarks above have perhaps shown. It is not uncommon for those in philosophy departments to view philosophy of education with a degree of suspicion and as somewhat amateur. But this needs to be seen very much in the context of a research climate in which academics are under pressure to specialize in less and less. In the face of such an imperative the kinds of questions that
philosophy of education raises can seem intractably messy. Addressing them requires an approach in which different aspects of the mainstream are brought together. To the narrow specialist, this can indeed seem amateur. Conversely, where mainstream philosophers attempt to address such matters, the result can be erudite but detached from the demands of practice. Yet this latter connection is vital if philosophy of education is to realize its potential in terms of practical usefulness. It is understandable then if philosophers of education sometimes find themselves poised unsteadily between the demands of the philosophical problems as they are pursued in the mainstream literature and the need to connect meaningfully with the experience of educational practitioners. Let us consider this by way of a further turn to the question of use.

Self-representation and the paradox of use

There is no doubt that the contemporary self-representation of educational research constitutes a technicization of the field, in which the articulation of usefulness is of paramount importance. This is accentuated by the manner in which it is funded and by the way it is positioned by the expectations of politicians. One manifestation of this is found in its emulation of physical science. Supposedly following the model of medical research, randomized control trials come to be taken as the exemplar of useful research in education. At the same time, the now obligatory political emphasis on evidence-based policy translates as the provision of quantitative data. But is this really what is needed in the training of teachers? Is this what the emphasis on the teacher as researcher is about? Does this provide meaningful continuing professional development?

Against the tide of policy initiatives and interventions, philosophy can make explicit the role of practical reason in the professional practice of a teacher. It can also do something else. It can address what we might think of as the existential challenge that is typically felt by anyone when they begin teaching and indeed later, recurrently, in their career. As a teacher, you are exposed, in a way you have not anticipated. The experience of teaching can get to you, in that you are emotionally caught up with what you are doing – in relation to the class, to individual learners, to the subject itself. Hollywood cinema has plainly appreciated this, though its images tend to glamorize the experience at the expense of realistic evocation of the challenges of the work. By contrast, DH Lawrence’s recounting of Ursula’s experience in *The Rainbow*, for example, captures something of the daily drudgery and desperate despondency that can
beset the teacher alongside a sense of the calling to something higher, which
together might be more suggestive of the vocation: Lawrence’s phrase for this
is ‘the holy ground’. Much of this is surely drawn from his own real and in
many respects successful experience in the classroom.

There is no simple recipe for how this enhancement of practice is to be
achieved, but students on courses in philosophy of education often speak with
moving conviction of the ways that their reading and discussion of philosophy
has helped them in their practical lives as teachers. This may be in part because
the subject answers to their more general sense of uncertainty about their lives
as a whole – an uncertainty that is typically felt by human beings generally,
for all the strategies we have of covering this over or keeping it at bay, and
an uncertainty that is characteristically exposed by the challenges of being a
teacher. It is in part this that shows the very special importance of teaching
and learning in a human life. Rising to these challenges does not depend only
on the acquisition of a battery of techniques: it requires what I have called
above the acknowledgement of a more existential engagement. Philosophy
provides this not through some narcissistic self-examination but through the
kind of enquiry into why we think what we do and into the grounds for holding
the beliefs we have that, unlike purely technical matters, can only be pursued
meaningfully if one is authentically involved in what one is doing. It is through
this that the realities of one’s professional role and one’s life as a whole can more
appropriately be confronted and addressed.

Let me finish with a kind of parable. Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarian conception
of the Chrestomathic University, the one conducive to learning and ideally
efficient, had a bearing on the establishment of London University in 1825
(see Young, 1992). It is not difficult to trace the fluctuating influence of this
idea through the development of higher education since then, and in recent
decades it has its obvious resonances in the notion of lifelong learning and
in a general marketization of education, both keynotes of educational policy
internationally. But should higher education be useful or useless – that is,
devoted to pursuits that are justified in their own right rather than to those
that have utility? Consideration of sections of Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of
Nations* concerned with education is surprisingly instructive here. For Smith,
educational institutions are to be justified in terms of how far they are of use.
He recognizes that a division of labour is necessary for economic progress and
the creation of a civilized society. Yet a consequence of this is that the minds
of workers will be dulled by the repetitiveness and narrow range of their tasks,
dulled in a way that does not occur in more primitive societies: this, he states,
is a basis of moral and intellectual decay. So the virtues of a civilized society are undermined by the development of those very measures that have been set up to bring it about. As a palliative to the alienated condition of the majority of the population in such a society, Smith turns again to education, and now the training in geometry and mechanics, thought a proper preparation for future employment, is supplemented by an introduction to those ‘sublime’ pursuits that are not useful. Because of the way degeneration is, as it were, built into the system of utility, we have the paradox that the useful becomes useless for the society it was designed to create; conversely, the pursuit of useless sublime knowledge becomes useful in ameliorating those worst effects of utility, and hence in sustaining the society. The opposition between usefulness and uselessness, which has characterized and continues to characterize so much of the debate about higher education, and which here prompts the question of the usefulness of philosophy of education, begins to fall apart.

Is it fanciful to find in the lives of contemporary teachers a dulling of experience, brought about not so much by the repetitiveness of their tasks but by their subordination to the efficient delivery of the curriculum and their being enlisted in relentless competition over standards, dulled in a way that did not occur so much in less technicized regimes of teaching and learning? Is it fanciful to imagine that such contemporary practice, for all its good intentions, for all its commitment to efficiency and effectiveness, might harbour a basis of moral and intellectual decay? Unlike in Smith’s reflection, however, the benefits to the teacher or policymaker of studying philosophy of education would not be merely palliative in kind, for here it is not just a matter of compensating for the mind-numbing repetition of factory production: their philosophical experience would contribute directly to their professional roles and to the substance of that practice. Call this ‘sublime’ if you like, but it would have a use-value that no one should doubt.

Notes

1 For a variety of images of the fresco, see http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=school+of+athens&qpvt=school+of+athens&FORM=IGRE. There are useful discussions of the painting at http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00j7txt and http://www.newbanner.com/AboutPic/SOA.html. The Vatican's website gives the following: http://mv.vatican.va/4_ES/pages/z-Patrons/MV_Patrons_04_01.html [accessed 3 March 2014].
First published in 1776, *The Wealth of Nations* (Smith, 1982) was, of course, seminal in the thinking of the New Right, especially of Thatcherism.

**References**


Part One

Ethics
Technological Thinking in Education

David Lewin

Where does homo technicus dwell? Through digital networks I am everywhere anywhere; I am being-with everyone. Does that inevitably lead to the opportunism and narcissism of social networks? Does this access to all erode any possible encounter with the other? Is this projection of freedom in terms of that which subjectivity can represent to itself really nothing more than the essence of nihilism, as Heidegger saw in Nietzsche’s completion of Platonic metaphysics (Heidegger, 1998; Irwin, 2002)? Heidegger’s radical account of the destiny of Western metaphysics, expressed today in modern technology, is finding extraordinary fulfilment in educational thinking and practice. I will begin with the observation that our present educational problems are not simply pedagogical, any more than the problems of the technological age are just technological (Heidegger, 1977, p. 4).

Educational theorists often lament the crisis of educational culture in the present age. Recent work by authorities in the field, such as Roger Brown and Ron Barnett, does little more than draw attention to the failings of educational theory to address the deeper issues behind the crisis (Barnett, 2010; Brown, 2013). Both Brown and Barnett worry about the marketization of higher education but seem unwilling to address the metaphysical issues at stake. I argue that those metaphysical foundations are related to technological thinking. Educational theory struggles to keep pace with technological change at a practical level, so it is hardly surprising that the deeper currents behind technological change are often ignored. If educational theorists have struggled to reflect upon the impact of technological change, philosophers have been even slower to respond to the trajectory of technological society. This is partly a result of technology’s neutral facade.

Along with philosophers such as Heidegger, Marcuse and a host of others, I will consider the flattened interpretation of the world characteristic of technological society. This one-dimensionality structures and limits the scope
of education today. After sketching the influence of technological thinking, I examine the putative separation of neutral technological means from humanly determined ends. The separation of the supposed value-free technical means from more substantial ends is analysed in terms of a concealment of the subtle ethical demands and commitments characteristic of educational practice. Philosophers of education have discussed this separation but generally have not located its roots in the logic of technological thinking, which I will attempt to do. More recently, thinkers such as Iain Thompson (2005), Kevin Flint and Nick Peim (2012) have related Heidegger’s critique of technology with a notion of ontological education, offering an important development of Heidegger’s understanding of technological enframing. I hope to contribute to this interest in the Heideggerian critique of technological thinking.

Digital divides

Those of us old enough to remember a world without mobile phones are often struck by the profound changes the world has witnessed since the birth of the commercial cell phone in 1978. Those of us young enough to have lived always surrounded by mobile technology might be largely inured to what has been called the ‘Future Shock’ (Toffler, 1970), or the ‘innovation overload’, often experienced by older generations. Social theorists have grown accustomed to dividing inhabitants of modern industrialized societies into two camps: the digital natives, born into the digital age, and digital immigrants, an older generation who find themselves having to adapt former attitudes and ways of life to a brave new world (Bennett et al., 2008; Prensky, 2001).

Some have shown that there are problems with these categories (Dixon and Sanders, 2011). It is by no means clear that the younger generation experience technology with the familiarity suggested by the term ‘native’; nor does the colonialist terminology seem appropriate. Nevertheless, the categories have struck a chord. And for those less at home with modern technology, for the digital immigrants, the present age is often accompanied by an inarticulate ambivalence – an existential anxiety – about many aspects of technological progress.

Ambivalence to technology is generally muted or diverted by the idea that any problems we have are not with technology per se but with particular technologies that need careful control, to avoid specific social or environmental consequences. There is a tendency to translate fairly amorphous and widespread
technological anxieties into the language of risk. The technologies of risk management ensure risks are contained within managed cost–benefit analyses. But technological anxiety goes deeper than this, expressing an unease that goes beyond either risks we avoid or account for or specific dangers relating to particular devices. Of course, we need to be concerned about the damaging effects of particular technologies. But what of uncanny technological anxiety? Technological anxiety is existential, being, as Heidegger would say, ‘nothing and nowhere’ (Heidegger, 1962, p. 231) but still all around.¹ Insofar as technology is ubiquitous in forming the structures of our being-in-the-world, it renders anxiety almost invisible, and therefore nearly powerless to resist technological thinking. In the guise of benign neutrality, many technological devices present no clear and present danger to existence and therefore no meaningful risks to be managed. Mobile communications and the pervasive information networks, for example, extend the means by which human beings may connect, but the ends to which those means are put must be up to people to decide. Despite the fact that a number of prominent philosophers of technology have tried to complicate or even wholly reject this sort of technological neutrality, this view is culturally dominant (see Borgmann, 1984; Heidegger, 1977; Lewin, 2011; Marcuse, 1964).

But surely it is up to us whether, for example, we use computers in classrooms or whether we develop sophisticated online learning environments. The idea that technological devices are neutral certainly appeals to common sense. It would seem peculiar or quaint to imagine that devices could have subjectivity, desires or could determine their own ends. We naturally assume that devices are subject to our will.² Yet social scientists and philosophers are disposed to question the binary logic of structural versus individual agency in shaping human action (see Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1984). From the perspective of much social theory, the notion that we should ignore the imperative of social and economic forces in structuring individual choices might seem naïve, and so structuration theory places limitations on free subjectivity without fully conceding human agency to technological determinism. Similarly, the category of the digital native suggests a generation of people who no longer wonder at the presence of digital technologies and do not make autonomous decisions to take them up. The digital native no more chooses to use technical devices any more than they choose to get out of bed in the morning (we might choose not to, but for the most part we do not choose to). Technologies have become integrated, embedded and transparent.³

The digital immigrant is an endangered species, and with the digital native in the ascendant, the neutrality of technology withdraws into its transparency. Is
the native relinquishing her agency to the thoughtless consensus of technological advance? If technological devices have an impact on the way we understand the world, then we might be alarmed by their increasing transparency, a transparency made possible by a shroud of benign neutrality. To explore this idea a little further, I want to consider how the technical interface structures and limits our being-in-the-world.

Separating means from ends: The technical interface

The technological epoch boils down to this: providing users with access to unhindered functionality. What might seem like a fairly innocuous phrase bears some elaboration. In brief, we are turned into users and the world exists insofar as it provides some useful function for us as users. One obvious way in which we can see this taking place is through the ubiquity of the technical interface. In essence the interface places the user and the device in a narrowly defined relation that foregrounds use and conceals all else: a form of what Heidegger calls 'technological enframing'. The evolution of mobile phones demonstrates well this general tendency for devices to present functionality through interfaces. Modern tablets like Apple's IPad take this further by being virtually all (virtual) interface. User functionality is foregrounded by the touchscreen that constitutes an ever-expanding portion of the visible device, and the complex operations that facilitate device functionality are placed out of sight within the technical operation of the device. As far as possible 'dead space' on such a device is eliminated as the screen offers extraordinary functionality via the near-infinite configurations of apps. This device is an example of a general tendency to separate interface design and development from operational or functional design. In fact, design engineers (particularly software engineers) have developed a design pattern for this approach to product design called model-view controller.

Model-view controller defines a common approach in larger-scale software and hardware systems development, where one team of engineers is responsible for developing the operation or function of a device (what the device can actually do), another team develops the interface or view (the way the user interacts with the device) and a third team manages the interaction between these two key aspects of the device (what is called the controller). Within this pattern, the interface design is uncoupled from the core operational design so that interface engineers can think purely about the 'user-experience' without their imagination being impeded by operational limitations that might otherwise compromise the user interface. In other words, the interface designers are encouraged to look at
the product from the point of view of the user. This design pattern illustrates well the tendency to separate the ends of a device from its means since the user is thought to be concerned only with ends.

Beyond product design, this pattern is evident throughout the social institutions of modern life. Consider one example from educational theory: the efforts that university managers are currently making to ensure that the view or interface of the university is optimal. Teams of staff examine strategies for how to improve scores on student surveys and university league tables in a way that considers institutional appearances entirely separately from ‘realities’. Student experience is managed as though it were a distinct category within the operation of the institution, as though the experience of the students could be uncoupled from the deeper structural issues that form the culture of an institution. Standish eloquently indicted the ‘aesthetic appeal’ of the allure of presentation which ‘fosters a kind of simulacrum of learning’ (Standish, 1997, p. 453). Indeed, there seems no need to refer to the university that lies behind the idea of the university. It is the idea that is constructed, marketed, attended, graduated from and finally stands for the graduate seeking to place themselves within the standing reserve of human resource (Heidegger, 1977, p. 18).

This example provides one illustration of the way in which means are separated from ends: that as long as the institution provides quality assurance through rational consensus, what takes place on the ground is irrelevant. Consequently, university brand management has become an industry in itself. The model-view controller reflects and radicalizes the broad tendency to separate ends from means. This separation allows for the maximization of efficiency while offering optimal user experience. In their book Rethinking the Education Improvement Agenda, Kevin Flint and Nick Peim focus in particular on the manner in which this separation of means and ends expresses itself in the technology of assessment, in ‘the privileging of examination results as the officially recognized, so-called objective measures that mark the ideological telos of the system’. This ideological telos ‘tends to reduce the play of difference in the dominant official language of education’ (Flint and Peim, 2012, p. 50). Heidegger is one philosopher for whom the play of language in education is itself the play of being.\(^5\)

The significance of Heidegger’s later reflections on the ‘technological understanding of being’ or ‘technological thinking’ is increasingly recognized with educational theory (Flint and Peim, 2012; Standish, 2002; Thompson, 2005; Waddington, 2005). Even within philosophy of technology, Heidegger’s influence begins and ends with ontology (which might explain why Heidegger’s influence
has diminished within philosophy of technology since the so-called empirical turn; see Achterhuis, 2001). In essence, Heidegger's concern is the manner in which being is disclosed in the present age. For Heidegger, technological disclosure 'puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such' (Heidegger, 1977, p. 14). Insofar as we regard the world in terms of human will, we relate to an interface of sorts, which for Heidegger can only lead to nihilism. The inevitable outcome of Nietzsche's fulfilment of Western metaphysics, argues Heidegger, is that in constructing itself humanity realizes its own essential negation (Heidegger, 1977, pp. 53–113). This wilful extraction of truth is not the only way in which being might be disclosed; it can also be disclosed by a combination of the extraordinary success with the veil of neutrality that has all but eliminated alternatives. In the wake of Heidegger, thinkers such as Paul Tillich (1988), Herbert Marcuse (1964) and Albert Borgmann (1984) have developed similar concerns that technical reason has a pathological tendency to separate ends and means. The influence of Heidegger on these figures is significant, providing a thread for what has come to be called (rather unhelpfully in my view) technological essentialism (Feenberg, 1999; Thompson, 2005). This tradition of philosophy of technology regards technological devices as the outward expression of a way of seeing and being-in-the-world: a way of being that seeks to foreground usefulness and conceals whatever has no particular use. This way of seeing has effects still more worrying than the environmental threats often associated with technological progress. The dangers to our existential being are that much more pernicious because they are harder to detect, being shrouded by a cloak of technological neutrality.

Before turning more explicitly to the implications of technological thinking for education, there is one more strand that I wish to introduce to this thread, namely philosophical hermeneutics. Human existence is essentially temporal and historical and so our being-in-the-world is at least partially contingent upon the historical moment in which we find ourselves. Philosophical hermeneutics does not seek to escape historicality and the inevitability of what Gadamer calls 'historically-effected consciousness' (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 336–341), but it seeks to explore what arises from it and within it. Thus in the technological epoch, the understanding of being is structured by technological thinking which I have expressed in terms of the separation of means and ends.

If we conceive of this technological understanding of being within the purview of phenomenological hermeneutics, we arrive at what I call the *technological hermeneutic*. It is a hermeneutic that sees beings only in
terms of what shows up for us. Exemplifying this, the interface reduces the complex and infinite nature of disclosure, to the controllable, predictable and user-friendly. The whole point of the interface is to stabilize what discloses itself. The interface fixes and closes and thereby opposes dis-closure. By its attempt to conceal complex (that is, fragile or insecure) interaction and deliberation, the interface denigrates and excludes the depth of things. Unlike the tree, the river or the mountain, the interface is designed to be, as far as possible, purely operational and therefore functional in the context of total control. Of course, it is an illusion that the interface achieves complete control. The interface discloses a world in an interpretive-historical context like any other hermeneutic disclosure. What for Heidegger distinguishes the totalizing technological hermeneutic is its extraordinary capacity to close off all other possible disclosures, effectively universalizing a particular mediation.

This brings us back to Heidegger’s concern with the technological epoch. The problem for Heidegger is not that the world is disclosed in terms of what might be of functional use to us; after all, even the ancient Greeks do this, but that the technological disclosure of being exerts such a force that it excludes all other possible disclosures. We earlier saw an example of this reduction where technological anxiety becomes reduced to something else: risk management of particular technologies. Even the idea that other forms of disclosure are possible is negated. That there might be a life for the trees beyond the plans of human beings becomes unthinkable; that there might be an intelligible logos inherent in things themselves becomes absurd; as Paul Ricoeur puts it, in the present age ‘the cosmos is mute’ (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 61). As a consequence, beings are exclusively for us. That is to say, beings show themselves only in terms of their utility to us; what functional use we can make of them. A further expression of this manner of being is that things become reduced to what can be accessed through the interface. Should no interface exist, then the being of the thing (for all practical purposes) withdraws. The being of things is positioned and actualized by way of the interface. Here we find some support for Heidegger’s radical claim that the metaphysical foundations of modern technology are to be found in Platonic idealism. Indeed, through the modern technical interface we are directed to interact with the formal identity of beings (as elaborated by technical architects) and regard the actual as an inconvenient impediment to the formal. This provocative thesis has not been discussed here due to the limitation of space. Flint and Peim have related this Heideggerian reduction of being as enframing to an equivalent reduction in education where they describe the ‘principle of assessment’ (Flint and Peim, 2012). Here ‘what is’ becomes what
is assessable: not only do those elements of education that are not assessed fall outside the frame of assessment, but they are also in danger of being entirely buried.

I argue elsewhere that a consequence of this positioning of beings in one-dimensional terms conceals the hermeneutical nature of existence from us (Lewin, 2012). Insofar as we are aware of the hermeneutics of existence, we are required to make judgements about which interpretation seems right to us. An awareness (perhaps pre-philosophic) of hermeneutics is awareness that the technological mode of being-in-the-world, where things exist for us, is but one among many possible interpretations (others being, for example, aesthetic, ethical or spiritual). But the concealment of the hermeneutic process takes place alongside the erosion of the human faculty of practical reason, named by Aristotle as ‘phronesis’. It is the manifest complexity of the world that calls Aristotle to inscribe human nature with a virtue that is neither simply contemplative (sophia) nor purely practical (techne) (Aristotle, 2002, Book VI). This partly synthetic partly pragmatic mode of phronesis seems to correspond with an appreciation of the hermeneutic structure of being. Simply put, the presentation of pure function (mediated by the interface) is a concealment of the need for phronesis. I now want to explore how technological thinking results in the erosion of the human faculty of practical reason in education.

The erosion of phronesis in education

The emergent culture of performance management, of evidence-based practice, and of improvement in standards, exhibits the climate of control in which education currently exists, as reflected in the behavioural objectives model. As a consequence, the fragile process and purpose of human formation (if ‘human formation’ was ever the real purpose of education, but then it would be naïve to speak of a singular educational purpose) are in danger of becoming a lost art. The act of decision-making in a climate like this is being reduced to a technocratic process, and the judgement of educators seems increasingly unlikely to flourish where vocational integrity is replaced by professional ethics. Such a shift in educational thinking reflects a broader cultural drift towards instrumental rationality and technological thinking.

In Back to the Rough Ground, Joseph Dunne develops a philosophical challenge to the behavioural objectives model, a model in which each lesson has specific outcomes intended to contribute to a planned curriculum (Dunne,
For Dunne, the primary task of the behavioural objectives model is to specify learning outcomes from which instructional methods and techniques can be derived. This appears to be the road to efficiency in teaching and is therefore considered good in itself.

In a way that reflects what I have argued about the tendency of technical interfaces, the process of defining clear objectives and outcomes involves the separation of ends and means – ‘ends alone were allowed to be intrinsically valuable…this model enjoins teachers to specify their goals as discrete, observable behaviours’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 6). This foregrounding of ends, results or outcomes, reinforces what Clarke and Newman have called ‘the logic of managerialism’ in which ‘managers are accountable for what they deliver, but not for how they deliver it. It is results, not methods that count’ (Clarke and Newman, 1997, p. 64). In other words, this management of outcomes involves the separation of the ends of education from the means by which those ends are achieved. If we are to manage those ends effectively, then we must define with absolute clarity the nature of the ends sought. This process of delineating clear, established objectives and outcomes for a planned curriculum leads to the erosion of the hermeneutical dimension of teaching. More specifically, it is the technological hermeneutic that has eroded this professional responsibility. Philosophical hermeneutics recognizes that what is ‘true’ cannot be contained within a clear ‘method’, and so is always open to reinterpretation. Dunne shows how the tendency within objectives writing has been to gloss over or pragmatically elide complex and conflicting interpretations: ‘remember the iron-clad rule of objective writing: if there is a disagreement about the meaning, don’t argue about it, fix it’ (Mager, 1984, p. 68).

The presentation of clear objectives is an expression of the technological hermeneutic which foregrounds ends and conceals means by regarding them as merely the neutral activity to achieve substantive ends. In this case means are void of any values or commitments and could be replaced by more efficient means. Indeed, efficiency is the supreme, even the singular value that is attached to means in the technological age, a point made forcefully by the French philosopher of technology Jacques Ellul. For Ellul, the technological society is rule by technique, defined as ‘the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency…in every field of human activity’ (Ellul, 1964, p. v).

The separation of technical reason from what can be called moral (or ethical) reason is of crucial significance, especially given the widespread assumption that the remit of educators extends only as far as the development of technical
reason, but cannot include the development of ethical understanding. As Robert Bellah puts it:

There is a profound gap in our culture between technical reason, the knowledge with which we design computers and analyse the structure of DNA, and the practical or moral reason, the ways we understand how we should live. We often hear that only technical reason can really be taught, and our educational commitments from primary school to university seem to embody that belief. But technical reason alone is insufficient to manage our social difficulties or make sense of our lives. (Bellah et al., 1992, p. 44)

It is not that only technical reason can be taught but rather that only technical reason is appropriate to a current conception of education structured by linear curricula, focused schemes of work, objectives and lesson outcomes. These aspects of technical reason are the means by which a certain vision of education is instantiated, a vision informed by the technological hermeneutic. However, that vision is very often inherited, or taken for granted: we assume that we need to produce certain skills and attributes in our students and should be able to determine the right objectives and outcomes that will feed into the skills and attributes taken to be appropriate to this kind of education. The failure to give substantial consideration to the vision of education that informs technical reason is concealed by the fastidious elaboration of clear outcomes undertaken by educators. Perhaps on some level there exists a sense that we are not fully in control of education and this makes us all the more concerned to elaborate the expectations of our students, as if that is equivalent to genuine reflection upon the depth of education. As Heidegger puts it, ‘the will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control’ (Heidegger, 1977, p. 5). And so there is an expectation that outcomes should drive the process of curriculum development as a whole. In short, we project a narrow conception of the goal of education in order that the means to achieve the goal can be developed relatively easily. The more concretely we are able to operationalize our terms, the more effectively we are able to achieve successful outcomes. But does not the price paid for the clarity render such a victory pyrrhic? This reification is the preliminary task of technological thinking, for means can only be effective if they are directed to clearly identified goals, ends that are far more circumscribed than the formation of transformation of students.

Furthermore, this separation of means and ends encourages us to separate the practical from the ethical. It is assumed that theoretical reason is there to consider ethical matters and develop the vision or end towards which education
is orientated, while technical reason exists as the neutral process (the means),
is shorn of any deeper reflection on ends, does not require practical wisdom
(Aristotle *phronesis*) and is a purely technical operation. Aristotle sought to
avoid this radical separation of means and ends, of technical and theoretical
reason. The Aristotelian conception of *phronesis* seeks not just the right goal
but the appropriate application of principles to practices to bring about right
action.¹⁰

In the work of Dunne, Richard Smith and others, we find philosophers of
education seeking to resist the erosion of the human faculty of judgement.
Smith is concerned to resist the worst excesses of technical reason. He says, ‘The
ascendancy of technicism, of technical or instrumental rationality, is sufficiently
marked in education, in the English-speaking world at least, to need little
illustration’ (Smith, 1999, p. 327). Instrumental reason may be all but ubiquitous,
but I argue that we do not have a clear grasp of its scope and effects. Smith
cites the audit culture and the proliferation of performance indicators that beset
modern educational institutions about which we all know too much. But drawing
attention to the structures of technocratic society has not protected us from their
dehumanizing effects. On the contrary, the improvement agenda shows little
sign of slowing, within the present ‘aegis of quantification’ (Flint and Peim, 2012,
p. 2). Just as technological society appears to improve living standards on almost
every measure, so educational standards, as we are often told, have shown a
consistent improvement. Therefore, the critics of performance management
and the audit culture have no rational ground from which to speak and so go
unheeded (this reflects the broader sense that critics of technological culture are
marginal because their critique can gain no traction on the apparently neutral
technological means – a point forcefully developed by Herbert Marcuse in *One-
Dimensional Man*). Our anxieties about the educational improvement agenda
have no more discursive legitimacy than anxieties about the age of technology. It
is at this point that we must recognize that philosophy of education has not had
traction – it has failed to resist or overcome the managerial culture within the
vast majority of state-controlled educational institutions. And like the juggernaut
of progress in general, this failed vision seems inexorably to proliferate within
our educational culture.

One reason for this failure is that we fail to take seriously the amorphous
anxieties that accompany technological or educational progress. Even where
technology is not simply identified with devices and so can be seen as a process,
it is regarded as a neutral one which governments can take or leave. But the
progressive rhetoric conceals a profound unease which has not yet found
full expression. (A more generous and probably more empirically accurate interpretation of the relative failures of philosophers of education would say that philosophy is effective only at the margins as gadfly to the state.)

Paradoxically, the more we focus on defining quantifiable ends, the more pathological our relation to ends becomes. The end that can be circumscribed is only ever a provisional reference point – it is hermeneutically incomplete. Paul Tillich captured this very well when he pointed out that in the technological age we find ‘an end that is the endless pursuit of means without an end’ (Tillich, 1988, p. 80). So in fact the endeavour to circumscribe clear ends or outcomes postpones or conceals the contemplation of true ends, which cannot be made finite or simply circumscribed. Thus Tillich said that technological culture could only offer ‘a telos that negates a telos’ (Tillich, 1988, p. 80).

Where educators speak of the formation or transformation of students, what do they mean? Is there any answer to this question that does not diminish the play of language? It is no bad thing that the reference point of this ultimate concern of education remains infinite, always there to be contemplated even though it cannot be fully defined or circumscribed. This dialectical relationship between the provisional concerns for the vision of education to be realized must not be collapsed, avoided or obscured.

Conclusion

There is something of a paradox in the foregoing discussion: on the one hand, I suggested that the paradigm of the technical interface presents us with pure ends unencumbered by means. This view was developed in educational terms as the focus on fixing outcomes and objectives and driving curricula by these defined outcomes. On the other hand, there is a view – only briefly developed here – that technologies are great at developing means but seem to conceal from us ultimate goals, or ends, and that we are so enchanted by technical means that we forget about the ends for which those means are developed. The resolution to this apparent paradox has already been suggested.

The foregrounding of pure ends in education is the concealment of reflection on real ends. Real ends (what Tillich called our ultimate concern) are infinite and uncircumscribed and cannot be simply presented or captured in outcomes. Indeed, outcomes provide useful, important provisional ends, but only insofar as they are dialectically disclosing the ultimate concern for education: the transformation of humanity. But what does this mean? The anxieties that tell
us we do not know might also suggest that ‘it is the nothing that we are seeking’ (Heidegger, 1994, p. 98).

The inescapably ethical character of education is hidden by technological thinking which conceals means and presents ends. The technological age has successfully separated fact from value, process from ethics, and in this way has been able to professionalize educational institutions and relations. The task of the philosophy of education must be to question the structures of thought and perception that determine education. Is this to question or reject technological nihilism? Perhaps, but at least we might consider the compulsion to conform to the busyness of educational attainment that itself amounts to very little, but not quite nothing: ‘That in the malaise of anxiety we often try to shatter the vacant stillness with compulsive talk only proves the presence of the nothing’ (Heidegger, 1994, p. 101).

Notes

1 Of course, Kierkegaard too understands anxiety as constituting an essential feature of the human condition: ‘If a human being were a beast or an angel, he could not be in anxiety. Because he is a synthesis, he can be in anxiety; and the more profoundly he is in anxiety, the greater is the man’ (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 155). What clearer manifestation of the nature of humanity could there be for the secular age than the rise of homo-technicus?

2 The question of technological determinism has been discussed at some length by philosophers of technology keen to either claim Heidegger a determinist or to defend him against this charge (see Feenberg, 1999; Lewin, 2011; Thompson 2005).

3 Orlikowski (1992) has argued that either side of the duality between technology as structuring, and technology as a neutral tool for autonomous agents, is incomplete and requires the other.

4 The ubiquity of the interface makes the most obvious recovery of craft seem increasingly unlikely. Standish suggests a typical view: ‘The first and most obvious possibility is that there may be a limited recovery of a kind of craft. This is to reclaim the role of the practical, that answerability to materials which the craftsman’s work embodies, and which the college of technical and further education should be well placed to celebrate’ (Standish, 1997, p. 455).

5 Heidegger reverses the oft-quoted idea that we play with language: ‘it is not we who play with words, but the nature of language plays with us’ (Heidegger, 1976, p. 118).

6 I have avoided the temptation for an excursus here into Heidegger’s distinction between the primordial conception of truth as dis-closure (or unhiddenness in the Greek notion of aletheia) and the truth of ‘correctness’ or correspondence between
an object and its representation. Clearly, though, these two conceptions of truth relate to the argument that the interface depends upon the representational truth as correspondence between the concept (or icon in the interface) and its reference. Heidegger goes into the problems with the latter view in many places, but notably for educators in ‘Plato’s Doctrine of Truth’ (Heidegger, 1998).

This point encapsulates much of Heidegger’s concern about technology. Heidegger is no Luddite but is concerned about the totalizing nature of the technological understanding of being.

Aristotle presents *phronesis* in two apparently distinct ways: as the capacity to deliberate about human ends, as ‘what is good and advantageous for oneself’, and also as the faculty that considers the means by which ends are achieved. This indicates that the distinction between means and ends does not fully hold in the Greek cosmos (Wall, 2005). Dunne prioritizes the phronesis as the deliberation about appropriate ends (to distinguish substantive ends from merely utilitarian ends). But Wall argues that what is needed is also a recognition of the moral character or means (Wall, 2005, p. 65). Wall also presents Alasdair MacIntyre’s understanding of phronesis as significant in providing the faculty by which the ‘truths’ we inherit from our moral tradition are reinterpreted and applied in the particular context of the historical present.

In a similar sense, Biblical hermeneutics has often required a mode of fragile and insecure deliberation in order for the complex nature of the Biblical text to show itself. Where that hermeneutic complexity is reduced to literal reading, then, I suggest, a kind of interface has been constructed behind which the interpretive complexity is concealed and the reader is made a user. The text becomes one-dimensional. Whether the historical development of Biblical hermeneutics can be convincingly correlated with technological rationality is beyond my primary concern, which is simply to propose Ricoeur’s relevance to understanding technology in terms of his broader philosophical hermeneutics.

As Aristotle puts it: ‘Whereas young people become accomplished in geometry and mathematics, and wise within these limits, prudent young people do not seem to be found. The reason is that prudence is concerned with particulars as well as universals, and particulars become known from experience, but a young person lacks experience, since some length of time is needed to produce it’ (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1142 a).

References


This chapter highlights and critically examines a fundamental shift which has subtly penetrated the pedagogical practices of schooling, aided by global measures of efficacy. These changes can be traced back to epistemic trends in the philosophy of computing and information but have recently come to redefine core notions such as learning and knowledge. This shift, I argue, requires of educational philosophers a new articulation of the teleological foundations of education as a human practice.

The proliferation of technological interfaces to augment, supplement, enhance and above all to monitor pedagogical engagement in recent years has brought both utopian and dystopian predictions from educational theorists. On the one hand, the potential for the global information age to bridge divides between local knowledge systems and traditional repositories of high status knowledge, while still in its infancy, promises hitherto unimaginered pluralist pedagogical encounters. On the other, the threat that the exponential efficiencies promised by increasing technical prowess in the management of the learning encounter may further marginalize those moments of spontaneous, thoughtful or unexpected learning, the simple, joyful and human aspects of education. In what ways may the philosophy of education, in particular perspectives from European personalism, make a contribution to the design of systems that enable pluralist pedagogies while minimizing the threats posed by too rigid a model of technocratic education?

From the beginning of computer systems, philosophers of information have engaged with questions of epistemology and ontology (Shannon and Weaver, 1949; Turing, 1950). Initially, these questions underpinned the authentication of truth values in the communication and manipulation of data by machines: how could one information processor be sure of having
received the message correctly from another and of the identity of the sender? Such questions kept the philosophy of information clearly within the realm of the philosophy of mathematics. Until recently, information ethics was largely understood as a function of efficiency – when designing a system to transmit air traffic control signals, an error could result in a crash, so an ethical system is an efficient system, with effective fail-safes. Under such a description, an ethical information system is an efficient one, and the social effects of the system in use can be seen as ‘inherently value neutral’ (Alder, 1998). Recently, however, concerns have increasingly been raised about the ethical issues which reside in the design process itself (Knobel and Bowker, 2011; Wicker and Schrader, 2010), recognizing that a system may pose ethical problems by being too efficient (Cohen, 2000) and by changing social interactions between human agents in ways unforeseen in their conceptualization (Friedman and Nissenbaum, 1996).

From the estimated 68,000 CCTV cameras in English secondary schools (Big Brother Watch, 2012) to the 155,000 students who registered for MIT’s first massively open online course (of whom just 4.6% completed) (Hardetsy, 2012), the sheer scale of change offered by educational technology is momentous. It is not only the scale of the numbers, however, but the nature of the human–computer interaction itself which has the potential to redefine education in the information age. There is a dawning recognition that technology has the potential not only to increase the efficiency of the classroom but to change the nature and meaning of education in ways that have rarely been exposed to scrutiny and debate.

In his Postscript on the Societies of Control, Gilles Deleuze (1992) suggests that the information society operates by a new locus of control, decentring the enclosures of earlier disciplinary societies: factories, schools, archetypally prisons. Whether or not this prediction presages the end of schooling as we know it in the post-industrial West, it is clear that teachers face a more porous, less ‘enclosed’ professional environment, both through the availability of networked resources and the less welcome intrusion of networked camera and recording devices (Parry, 2005). While many of the most vocal critics of the digital society have pointed to a ‘digital panopticon’ (Barbrook, 2013), evoking Bentham’s disciplinary prison par excellence, Deleuze argues that the information society no longer needs such enclosed structures to control its subjects. Instead, Deleuze posits the effect of dividuation, the dividing of the individual among the ceaseless entailments which make a claim on their person. Unlike the factory whistle or the school bell, which summons the subject to the place of enclosure, dividual
identities are ‘always on’: the work e-mail at 6 a.m; the lecture podcast to listen to at the gym. Deleuze observes:

\[\text{Just as the corporation replaces the factory, perpetual training tends to replace the school, and continuous control to replace the examination. Which is the surest way of delivering the school over to the corporation. (1992, p. 5)}\]

Departing from Deleuze’s concern with the corporate and neoliberal agenda served by this new locus of control, this chapter draws attention to a more existentially troubling informational ontology. This ontology offers to corporate interests an illusory sociology of total control, but in the process reduces the definitions of knowledge to information and wisdom to processing. The origins of this ontology and its consequences for education, humanity and society have thus far been largely absent from public discourse, in either the political or academic arenas.

Technology is an elusive concept, both seductive and suspicious; it can be defined very broadly to encompass all forms of techné, craft or equipment of use to the endeavour of learning and has been the subject of suspicion ever since Socrates’ concerns about the written word supplanting the art of dialogue (Plato, Phaedrus 276e–277a). In the interests of clarity, such suspicions and speculations are here laid aside in addressing the specific technologies of learning analytics systems. Nonetheless, the connection which exists between knowledge, being and techné is of central importance: in The Origin of the Work of Art, Heidegger considers techné to denote a form of knowledge or experience of being. The artist, craftsman or technician causes beings to come forth, to be revealed and become present to the technician as knower (Heidegger, 1978, p. 184). In this becoming present, something is known – all technology and all means of mediation have informational content. As with Socrates’ concern for writing, analytic technologies mediate informational content in new ways; the mediation itself has informational content. Specifically, learning analytics systems are digital, interactive and data-acquisitive. This informational content may be termed operational data; these are data relating to the operation, use and performance of the data system itself (Floridi, 2004, p. 43). While a focus on understanding the workings of this operational data may be beneficial for education about technology, as well as media education more broadly, it also has important implications for education through technology, which are yet to be fully explored.

The technologies addressed in this chapter have the additional properties of being digital, interactive and data-acquisitive. Digital technologies process data by assigning it numerical (specifically binary) variables. Digital data consists
of the answers to a series of yes/no binaries – some theorists have regarded
this form of information as not only foundational to all knowledge (true/false
binaries) but to the ontology of the physical world (is/is not binaries) (Wheeler,
1990). Regardless of whether digital data has such an ontological foundation, an
information-theoretic epistemology, an account of knowledge which we will go
on to define, raises important philosophical and pedagogical problems. Further,
these technologies are interactive; they are intended to facilitate communication
between two or more intelligent agents, the success of which presupposes
effective interaction between each agent and the mediating technologies (Ess,
2009). Finally, in being data-acquisitive, data acquisition serves as a supporting
and in some cases hidden architectural component of the functioning of the
system (Wicker and Schrader, 2010). In order to perform the functions for
which they were designed effectively, the system must acquire and distribute
information about the user. For example, kinaesthetic game controllers for
games consoles collect extensive and fine-grained data on individual gamers’
gait and range of motion – while these may be used to improve the gameplay
experience, they also enable the system to recognize and identify individuals in
ways that would not otherwise be possible.

Education is not immune from the growing interest in ‘Big Data’, the practice
of systematically acquiring and mining fine-grained demographic data with a
view to improving business performance through such measures as targeted
advertising or the development and refinement of predictive models of corporate
behaviour. Privacy and information security in this environment evoke a
complex tangle of technological, socio-legal, economic and moral questions
(Tse et al., forthcoming), which academics from a range of disciplines have
attempted to address. Learning analytics has come to refer to the application of
these techniques in the pedagogical domain. Drawing upon the techniques and
theories of digital data mining, learning analytics systems attempt to harness
granular data on measurable learning interactions with a view to enhancing
effectiveness. Such a definition of ‘effective’ learning, however, is not value-
neutral and relies on pedagogical and epistemic assumptions which are drawn
from the information-theoretic account of knowledge and which are problematic
for a philosophy of the education of the human person.

The information-theoretic account of knowledge, as formulated by Dretske
(1981), may be defined as:

\[ K \text{ knows that } s \text{ is } F = K's \text{ belief that } s \text{ is } F \text{ is caused (or causally sustained) by the } \]
\[ \text{information that } s \text{ is } F. \] (Adams, 2004)
My neighbour calls to say that he has bought a new car, and this information causes me to believe that he has indeed bought a new car. This approach seeks to solve the problem of justification which undermines positivist epistemology (Gettier, 1963) by positing only causal, and not justificatory, links. Whereas the positivist account of knowledge as justified true belief encounters a problem in the relationship between justification and truth, the information-theoretic account specifies that all justifications are simply further information about information, or ‘metadata’. The information that my neighbour is trustworthy and not given to boasting or lying may be part of the causal account of my believing that he has bought a new car, but this is ‘metadata’, information about information. Such an account is highly satisfactory when designing systems for information authentication and transmission and consequently occupies a prominent place in the philosophy of computing and information. To define human knowledge, and human educational interactions, in these terms however is potentially penurious.

This attempt to reduce all knowledge to a chain of causes is not new. At the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, as today, new technologies led some to hope that traditional uncertainties and unprovables could be dispensed with. In 1749, La Mettrie posited an early behaviourist account of the brain, attributing to secondary causes the entire explanation of human action, without recourse to values or ends. Challenging Descartes’ immaterial ego-soul, which La Mettrie considered ‘tantamount to being reduced to the intervention of the Holy Ghost’ (1996, p. 29), La Mettrie also posits an information transmission account of knowledge: ‘sounds or words, which are transmitted from one person’s mouth, through another’s ear and into his brain’ (1996, p. 13). Such an account reduces all education to transmission; my hearing that my neighbour has a new car, on this account, is substantially the same as if I had heard the sound of its engine – all justification, whether experiential, interpersonal, mediated or reflective, is information. So comprehensive is La Mettrie’s causal account that he could be credited with having implied a model of artificial intelligence which later came to dominate the field of information technology. Turing’s (1949) natural language use test – that a machine can be considered intelligent if it is capable of using human language indistinguishably from a native speaker of the language – is presupposed by La Mettrie when he predicts (quite presciently) that apes could be taught sign-language, and from this surmises no exceptionalism about human minds. Such a statement only holds true if one holds an information-theoretic account of intelligence – the
ape, or the computer, is intelligent if and only if it plays the same role in the causal chain of information processing and transmission as a human subject.

Two subtle yet significant problems with the information-theoretic account of knowledge itself have been well addressed in the literature. A third is worth consideration in an education context, as it is problematic for the interaction between information systems and the phenomenology of consciousness. Briefly touching on the first two, an information-theoretic conception of knowledge appears to solve the justification problem, but arguably this is merely shifted to the level of information. Attempts to resolve this by defining information carefully as well-formed meaningful data (Floridi, 2005) only result in a further regress to the level of data, and this regress is not contingent but inherent in the pyrrhonist ontology of causes in purely second-order terms, which underpins the information-theoretic account. Secondly, attempts to elide out this regress by positing a truth-condition-dependent definition of information, such that x is information that p iff p (Dretske, 1982) may appear effective in theory, but are problematic in practice, in that the information flow of any real system will include both true and false information, data and ‘noise’. One attempt to address this problem rests on a mathematical theory of communication (Shannon and Weaver, 1949), which posits the justificatory power of information as an inverse function of probability. The less likely a state of affairs, the greater the quantity of information needed to reduce its probability to 1. To answer the question of whether I have left my door unlocked requires only one piece of information, but to answer which of the 40 people on my street have left their door unlocked takes much more.

As with La Mettrie’s transmission account of learning, the information-theoretic account posited above only requires a causal channel, not an act of learning. It is this third and more fundamental problem, I will argue, that is problematic with regard to human subjects. Firstly, a causal channel is necessary for the information-theoretic account, but with regard to first-person consciousness, no such channel can exist. Secondly, a causal channel is sufficient for the information-theoretic account, but for information to be known to a first-person subject, it is insufficient for it simply to be caused. The meaningfulness of information as conceptualized above rests on its usefulness in calculating probability, not in its value to the knower.

If, as Wittgenstein observes, there is no private language (1953), then the general definition of information in which all information is well-formed meaningful data will not suffice for knowledge in a human subject. Meaning presupposes some ‘criteria of meaningfulness’ which must be found within
a given language or discourse (Phillips, 1993, p. 8), which suggests a representational theory of mind. While this may suffice for certain forms of propositional knowledge, it cannot account for knowledge of what may be termed ‘ipseity’, the normally tacit or unnoticed “myness” of the experience’ (Zahavi and Parnas, 1998, p. 700), knowledge of a self as the subject of our reflections. The self does not represent its own ‘myness’ as an item of metadata about some sensation, however, but rather that myness is fundamental to the experience of any first-person state. This is true not only when I am reflectively identifying that it is I who sits in front of the computer screen but also on a much more basic level, pre-reflectively aware of my feeling of boredom or interest (Zahavi and Parnas, 1998, p. 689). It is not that ‘mine’ is an item of metadata to be added to the experience of interest in the abstract. It is possible to say that this ipseity, ‘myness’, is fundamental to the experience of any first-person state. My perception is an experience which requires no causal channel to make manifest its myness (Zahavi, 2005). Consequently, the value of information as a calculation of probability and the value of experience to the conscious subject are incommensurable.

The implications of adopting a purely transmission-based account of learning, such as is commensurate with the information-theoretic account in the education of human subjects, are of deep concern. The reduction of learning to transmission and transmission to cause is penurious to the education of the conscious subject as a person. While the educational model which accompanied the Industrial Revolution may arguably be criticized as instrumentalist (Bowles, 1976), it would be a misrepresentation to suggest that it was ever solely the education of homo faber or of ‘machine man’. The industrial human agent, while alienated from production, must remain engaged in order to be an efficient producer (Spencer, 1996, p. 64), whereas in the societies of control, transmission and production are coterminous, quality control and production are one and the same process. For the programmable information agent, nothing is gained by work which was not already inherent in its programmed nature; cause is no longer separable from effect. This is true not only of traditionally automatable manual tasks but increasingly of the symbolic analysis which characterizes many higher-level professional occupations (Reich, 1992). Because information technology ‘operates at the traditionally human level of control in enabling the achievement of any and all objectives, we cannot expect to discover or design new requirements for control that only people can fulfill’ (Spencer, 1996, p. 73). The formerly human domain of controlling productive processes, now alienated, human education as an
education for control of means of production, control of second-order causal processes of efficiency, is no longer solely the preserve of the human.

Such a conclusion may either be accepted, as Floridi (2013) does, for example, accepting that human subjects can no longer claim any ontological distinction from any other form of information processor, or resisted. In the remainder of this chapter, I attempt to plot a course for the education of the person as conscious subject, as distinct from the forms of ‘knowledge’ synonymous with digital information systems.

Given the criticisms made above of a valueless, pragmatist model of knowledge as a chain of information, it is tempting to resort to a Cartesian dualism. Such an attempt is, however, equally problematic. It is not insignificant that La Mettrie draws an analogy with the intervention of the Holy Ghost, for in a world of increasingly fine-grained analysis of second-order causes, the Cartesian ego-soul becomes increasingly a ‘man of the gaps’. As positivist science advances in understanding of the mechanics of the universe, causal accounts of the role of God are reduced to a ‘god of the gaps’, postulated at the end of the causal chain as far as currently known. ‘Either God is in the whole of Nature, with no gaps, or He’s not there at all’ (Coulson, 1958, p. 35). Likewise, the ego-soul finds itself relegated to the end of the chain in a purely transmissionist account of knowledge – that which cannot (yet) be explained by information, a man of the gaps, a ghost-within-a-computer-within-a-machine. The consequence of proposing a retreat to the cultivation of the ego-soul is the education of an irrelevance for inconsequential ends. The ever-decreasing distance between cause and effect, learning and evaluation, information and knowledge, and the increasing ability to determine outcome through information require another form of response. Either the human subject exists on a level of primary cause and value, exercising justifications incommensurable with information, or the human subject does not exist. A man of the gaps will not do.

Some commentators have responded to this threat by positing the need for a right to underdetermined environment, a space free from analytic micro-management, in which human subjects can develop a sense of their own ‘autonomy [which does not] … degenerate into the simple stimulus-response behaviour sought by direct marketers’ (Cohen, 2000, p. 1400). Such attempts, while well meaning, remain fated to failure, firstly because they rely on regulation which is systemically incapable of keeping pace with technology (Tse et. al., Under review), but more constitutively because they implicitly accept the information-theoretic account of knowledge. Such an approach attempts to preserve by enclosure a space for the man of the gaps to continue
to preserve himself from facing the inevitable consequences that follow from his true status as an information processor like any other. Not only is such a solution insufficient; it is even unnecessary to the cultivation of the human subject, which is either present in the whole acting person or dissolves into the information network.

The information age has given rise to a new epistemic problem-set, with implications for educators, managers and the organization of human capital. The problem, which David Weinberger categorizes as ‘too big to know’ (2012) may be illustrated by the following example: A team of researchers in physics and engineering from two research-intensive universities in the United Kingdom collaborated on the design of the cooling and vacuum system for the Vertex Locator of CERN’s Large Hadron Collider. The complexity of such a system, in which the design of one sub-component exceeds the expertise of any one human agent or single research lab, typifies the problem-set. Our intuitive definitions of knowledge are challenged when faced with a technology, clearly brought forth by human agency, yet about which no one individual can claim to comprehensively ‘know’ how it works, in phenomenological terms, to have an experience of its being. Problems of this kind illustrate the challenges of ‘network learning’: Who does the learning in a network? Is the network itself both learner and teacher? In such a situation, learning and evaluation, communication and production, collapse into one another and the critical space in which an individual may be said to be an agent or subject of his own learning, wittingly and willingly, begins to be elided.

Is this elision problematic? The danger of such an agentless learning is that it confronts us with an anti-humanist pluralism. Luciano Floridi suggests that he has pointed us towards a further member of this problem-set, a decentring of human intelligent agency, which is yet compatible with a range of great philosophical traditions, and which subsumes these as levels of abstraction within the information-theoretic account (Ess, 2009). Are the values of all humans, like the minds of those many CERN scientists, best realized by their transference into the information network? At first glance, such a project may suggest itself as a form of positive pluralism (Harrison, 2012); however, its claim to make the experiential and the informational commensurable, to have found a common denominator between ‘myness’ and informationality, volitionality and efficiency, remains ultimately reductive and penurious to the education of the human person.

Returning to the earlier thesis, a personalistic philosophy of mind, borne out by empirical investigations into personal information (Schrader and Lundie,
2012), offers a refutation of such a project. Human agents are distinguished from robots, zombies and Turing machines not by their response to any given problem-set (Floridi, 2005) but because they value their own information incommensurably with the value of information simpliciter. My mother’s maiden name is not only of informational value as a password to my bank account but also of a personal value as a link to memory, heritage and family. The former of these values is quantifiable and communicable; the second is of interest only to me. It is an intentional value; its ‘myness’ is not an attribute to be added to the information but is intrinsic to it. If the ‘myness’ of learning as a fundamental human activity is incommensurable with the ‘data’ of an information-theoretic kind of knowledge, then the human subjective perspective is not a level of abstraction of data, because it does not rest on causal chains for its meaning, nor is it an interpretation laid upon data, but rather is made manifest without secondary cause. There is an irreducibility to the first-person perspective which preserves the autonomy of the human, but this must be cultivated, and cannot be so in an overdetermined environment.

The challenges posed by information technology in the societies of control require of us a pedagogy of the human reducible neither to control the means of production (as in the disciplinary societies) nor the cultivation of an abstract ego-self. Technologies of learning which amount to technologies of control, ‘analytics’ as a function of simultaneous transmission–production–assessment, while they may be in both senses an ‘efficient cause’ – serving as second-order means and as an increasingly effective link in a chain of information transmission – are ultimately insufficient to develop human education. This requires the intentional reality of personal value. By recognizing that learning technologies are not value-neutral, by initiating a conversation between the normative resources a personalist philosophy of education can bring to the design of systems and the nature of the data gathered and analysed by such systems, it may yet be possible to create an authentic technology of learning. In such an environment, the human subject is not diminished by informational ontology (such that they need to be defended against over-determined technological environment), but rather the system is designed from human values upwards (Knobel and Bowker, 2011). In such an environment, a human ontology is augmented by information and communication technologies, not subsumed within it.

Educators, like many other professionals, find themselves working in collaboration with experts across many fields, bringing with them myriad perspectives and competing systems of what constitutes knowledge, and how it ought to be valued. Such approaches bring with them threats, in particular the
threat that unmanageable complexity will lend itself to 'Big Data' taking control of the business of curriculum development. Already, educational technology is one of the largest areas of investment for traditional media companies such as NewsCorp, and the symbiotic relationship between corporate examination providers and publishing companies has been explored elsewhere (Conroy et al., 2013). As content and process are increasingly co-terminous in the societies of control, curriculum materials become inseparable from the learning environment. Without action, corporate interests may well wrest control of the development of materials for the network age out of the hands of an under-prepared and under-resourced teaching profession. Nonetheless, the potential for ground-up pluralistic and humanistic approaches to connecting learning communities, such as the visible fictions project (2013) developed for Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, promises dynamic resource environments which could enable teachers, students and texts to enter into relational learning encounters across the world. Through ConservationBridge (2013), a participatory web-based method of curriculum delivery, students learning about environmental change in rural China can interface directly with students living in the region and with ecologists studying the region. Instead of learning aims being limited by the printing costs of a textbook, or the order cost to a Local Education Authority, opportunities exist to expand a study in one area to encompass learning across a range of fields and disciplines, making connections not according to an informational framework but as the connections present themselves to the phenomenal consciousness of the learning subject. This is a human education, an education of the person in encounter with the world, however mediated. At present, however, such ground-up approaches to creating networked learning encounters are both variable in quality and often not explicit in their underlying informational or pedagogical values, requiring an entirely new skill set of practical wisdom from teachers and curriculum adopters. How educators and their public paymasters respond to the potential of these new opportunities and threats will be the litmus test for the contribution of learning analytics to a more positively engaged, pluralist, connected and authentically human society.

References


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In comments subsequent to giving his 1929 Lecture on Ethics, Wittgenstein told Friedrich Waismann that it was essential to ‘speak for oneself’ on ethical matters. ‘Ethics’, he had said in the concluding paragraph of the lecture, so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolutely valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. (Wittgenstein, 1965, p. 12)

However, Wittgenstein ambiguously finished by saying that ethics is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it. (Wittgenstein, L. 1965, p. 12)

Commenting on this to Waismann, he remarked,

At the end of my lecture on ethics, I spoke in the first person. I believe that is quite essential. Here nothing more can be established. I can only appear as a person speaking for myself. (Waismann, 1965, p. 16)

I want to highlight two features from within and without the lecture. Firstly, the ethical, however it is characterized, is something Wittgenstein respects. Secondly, it is essentially expressed in the first person and not the third person. This is a perspective that is at odds with one prevailing strand of moral education, although at first glance that might not appear to be the case when it would seem students often are encouraged to voice their own opinions.

It is taken as an unremarkable commonplace that moral issues are necessarily serious in addition to being complex and difficult and one’s thinking should duly reflect that. In order to come to a clear understanding of particular issues and to assess the views expressed, thinking should be rational, coherent and free from
emotional distortion or personal bias. The teaching of ethics in the English school curriculum, usually but not always as part of Religious Studies, encourages just such an attitude. Appropriately serious issues are included in syllabus material – for younger students topics like the environment, global warming and human rights and for older students social issues with a substantial moral character, such as euthanasia and abortion. Students debate the issues, weigh up the arguments and arrive at conclusions. They engage with ethical theory and contemporary analysis and commentary. In this way they learn to think critically, construct arguments, weigh up evidence and provide their teachers with material by which they can be assessed in their capacity to do just those things. Placing this in the wider picture, the development of such skills in rational/critical thinking can be seen as an important contribution to preparing children to lead active autonomous adult lives by equipping them with the kind of transferrable critical thinking skills that will empower them, as citizens in the adult world, to make informed decisions about complex issues and to detect falsehood and bias in the arguments of others. Therefore, if one aims in one's teaching to encourage students to think independently and freely for themselves, on this account one will be teaching them the formal skills of rational argument, how to construct and support arguments, how to provide counter-examples, how to make a case, how to derive one’s conclusion from one’s premises and how to analyse the work of others. Our taking seriously such requirements for our thought is therefore demonstrated in an approach which is rigorous, disciplined and essentially impersonal even when students are encouraged to express their own views.

What could be wrong? I will argue it gives a distorted picture of the nature of ethical thinking while appearing to be educationally sound. Why might this be so and what is the nature of the misrepresentation? It is distorted because it locates the seriousness of moral thought solely within the subject matter that Rush Rhees referred to as ‘issues of life and death’ and in an impersonal, anonymizing characterization of reasoning on such issues which is capable of exhibiting appropriate rigour and analytical clarity and assessable as such. In so doing, it reflects an impoverished concept of the way in which the personal nature of such thought is conceived, which leads to the exclusion of the first-person presence of the individual in their own thought, in effect silencing the personal voice as intrinsic to the assessment of the individual's moral thought in both spoken and written form. I will argue for a richer notion of the personal which makes clear why both reason and emotion are internal to the idea of ethical seriousness and the idea of having a voice, notwithstanding some of the difficulties in giving
an ethically conditioned account of personal presence. However, I will consider whether the demand for such a presence in ethical ‘debate’ is necessarily a good thing for reasons to do with the nature of institutional learning and the age and experience of students. Whether or not it is ultimately a good thing, the underlying point is that this conception of ethical thinking is not visible in moral education because the teaching of ethics is modelled on an academic tradition that has rejected this approach to talking about ethics, the place of the personal within moral deliberation and the different forms it can take. If it were present, I believe it would open up possibilities with respect to our conceptions of moral seriousness and how it is represented, which would free moral thought from its obsession with theory, without diminishing consideration of what is most serious in our lives.

My general concern is captured in the following quote from the Australian philosopher Raimond Gaita, who has written extensively on the theme of the personal in ethics. Of the conception of ethical thought I question, Gaita says that it

treats the difficulty of seeing what (morally) to do as a difficulty for thought which is no different in kind for the person whose problem it is than for a class of moral philosophy students rehearsing an exercise in ‘practical ethics.’ And this is because of a general conception of what thinking is and of the way in which it is impersonal: thinking has to do with propositions, their truth-value and their logical bearing upon one another, and these can be assessed by anyone with the requisite capacities of mind, none of which make necessary reference to the individual who has them. Hence it is felt that, if we are to understand the way in which morality is personal, then we must locate its personal character somewhere other than in thought. (Gaita, 1989, pp. 130–131)

The idea of a class of moral philosophy students rehearsing an exercise in practical ethics is what I take to be the model employed in the teaching of ethics to sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds in the English education system, as part of either Religious Studies or Philosophy courses. Similar practices typically epitomize what is widely understood as dealing with ethical ‘issues’, and they are commonly found in the ethics components in vocational courses, most obviously in medical ethics and dealing with hard case dilemmas.

There is little reference to the idea of a first-person concept of ethics in the language of course descriptions and the academic features that students are required to demonstrate in their work. The following quotes are taken from one of the syllabus course descriptions Students will
‘recall, select and deploy specified knowledge’ ‘identify, investigate and analyse questions and issues arising from the course of study’, ‘interpret and evaluate … concepts, issues and ideas, the relevance of arguments and the views of scholars’, ‘communicate, using reasoned arguments substantiated by evidence’. (OCR, 2008, GCE Religious Studies v2)

The aim is to provide a good grounding in the skills of moral reasoning and to prescribe objective standards in such reasoning by which students can be examined. The emphasis is on reasoning and, more generally, the cognitive skills of critical thinking. Students study the canonical theories of utilitarianism, Kantian deontology and Aristotelian virtue ethics and apply their knowledge of the theories to specific moral problems which come with their own associated moral challenges in order to draw out strengths and weaknesses of the general ethical theory being applied. The following are typical of the kind of questions students are required to answer:

Kant’s theory of ethics is not a useful approach to abortion. Discuss.

A relativist approach to the issues raised by abortion leads to wrong moral choices. Discuss.

If we take the first question, about the usefulness of Kantian ethics, it looks as if it might at least acknowledge some of the more nuanced personal complexities of the issue. In one of the main textbooks for this syllabus, Jill Oliphant discusses how one might begin to reflect on the question. She writes:

Abortion would be hard to universalise, as there are so many different situations and motivations for obtaining an abortion – all consideration of emotions is to be disregarded and yet abortion is an emotional decision, especially in situations where the mother has been raped, is very young or is carrying a severely disabled foetus. (Oliphant, 2007, p. 100)

This might seem to be a very quick rejoinder to the earlier point, in that students are being encouraged to reflect on a more personal conception of an ethical problem that makes it more than a mere exercise. The criticism of the formal rational nature of Kantian morality and the function of universalization presents an opportunity for the student to consider the place of emotions in moral deliberation and enter into a discussion of the personal perspective through their moral imagination – their capacity to imagine what it would be like to be faced with the complexity of someone else’s position and the way in which the moral picks up on the determining factors of particular circumstances.

This is not the case. The examples – rape, teenage sex and disability – are three typical, well-trodden examples from the literature, taken from specific
arguments they are intended to exemplify – the sanctity of life, the rights of the mother and the quality of life. They should be serious but removed from their function as examples within argument they appear exposed as lurid, sensational and over-dramatic, designed either to unsettle or support the serious work, that of rational argument and counter-argument, but not serious in themselves or worthy of being taken seriously as indicative of something that substantially enters into the academic nature of the problem, which is one of how to give an appropriately reasoned account of the problems. As Gaita suggests, the way in which such examples are intended to function, and I would add in the classroom as well as in their original context, does little more than ‘add a dramatic psychological dimension’ to a ‘deliberative difficulty’ where ‘their application in moral deliberation leaves their “cognitive” grammar unaffected’ (Gaita, 1989, p. 127). It can do so because of the essentially impersonal way in which such deliberation is philosophically conceived, which is then replicated in the kind of reasoning that students are expected to exhibit in their study of ethics. This is not to underplay the potency of such examples in the rhetoric of public ethics, but it is unclear how such features will enter into a serious account of moral deliberation in personal consideration about what to do.

That sounds as if I am arguing for a notion of the personal in which emotions are taken seriously in a manner that is reflected in the tone of debate as well as its content, that rather than engaging in an ethical shouting match, students should respond as if they are dealing with someone in the grip of a ‘real-life’ dilemma, handling discussion with an appropriate sensitivity to the tone and expression of their comments in the language they use. In one respect I am. If the personal character of emotions is important in an account of what it is to engage in serious reflection on ethical matters, any serious account of the personal in ethics must assign a role to the place of both the emotions and the language of emotion in moral deliberation in order to redress the balance of the impersonal. However, I do not want to suggest that the personal voice is predominantly emotional or that the inclusion of such language is what marks the ethically serious nature of the personal. One still needs to be clear about what is ethically significant in our understanding of the reality of ‘real-life’ that claims serious response from those concerned and how moral theory distorts the ethical in failing to adequately reflect the way in which reality is itself ethically conditioned, as opposed to its presenting us with purely pragmatic or scientific problems, for example. I do not want to confuse a call for moral seriousness in the concept of the personal with a requirement that we should engage sympathetically or empathetically with each other in the classroom. They are distinct forms of engagement that may at times
be co-existent, and their independent presence in the classroom is something I will address later. Gaita’s comments on the place of emotions in ethical thought are instructive. He writes that:

> in matters of value we often learn by being moved, and our being moved is not merely the dramatic occasion of or introduction to a proposition which can be assessed according to critical categories, whose grammar excludes our being moved as extraneous to the cognitive content of the proposition. None of which means that we must surrender critical judgement. (Gaita, 1989, pp. 136–137)

These are still matters of value and as such, regardless of whatever emotions are experienced by someone faced with a moral problem, such emotions are still subject to critical reflection as to what a person has reason to do or believe. I do not want to argue that all examples within the discourse are of this nature. What troubles me is that the way students are encouraged to discuss moral issues does not adequately reflect how such problems are serious to the individual. Of course it is desirable for us to be clear in our thinking, but conceptual clarification is usually conceived as a philosophical concern rather than a lived concern: the problem is the way in which the personal is eliminated as an integral aspect of the moral nature of a decision and the assumption that conceptual complexity and the need for conceptual clarity are alone what make such questions difficult.

How then might we offer a substantial notion of speaking in the first person that locates the seriousness of such speech in personal presence and not ‘elsewhere’? Recent work by Matthew Pianalto in this area attempts an account of how this might be done (Pianalto, 2011). Pianalto’s paper is a response to Wittgenstein’s lecture. He begins by distinguishing speaking for oneself from other forms of speech, which include, but are not exhausted by, such things as ‘speaking as an expert (or authority), speaking on behalf of another person or group . . ., and speaking hypothetically (as in the case of many philosophical arguments and in debate’ (Pianalto, 2011, p. 255). These formal and contextual variations, of which speaking personally is one, are also broadly characterized by the possibility of their being sincere forms of speaking and therefore invite contrast with descriptions of insincere speech that differ in intention and tone, if not necessarily content. However, Pianalto’s more important contrast for the idea of speaking personally is with ‘other sincere ways of speaking’, modes of speech which reflect our serious concern, demand our respect and serious attention but which can best be characterized without necessary reference to the speaker. As such they are distinct from speaking where some kind of personal perspective is internal to the authoritative nature of the speech, both in intention and reception.
For example, to speak as an expert or on behalf of others is to speak out of one's cognitive capacities, including one's knowledge and experience and mastery in a profession. Sincerity in such instances is not a relevant consideration. If I go to see my doctor I hope he or she will have a good ‘bedside manner’, but I also want an accurate diagnosis or appropriate advice. If my car needs repairing I want the problem identified and fixed. I hope I will be dealt with honestly and decently. While there are basic human qualities we expect as part of the interaction, what ultimately matters is that the person has the requisite knowledge and can be trusted accordingly.

However, the way in which we talk of speaking for oneself on ethical matters seems to demand more than just speaking accurately from a body of knowledge or even just speaking from experience. Sincerity might be thought to be a relevant factor here, that is, we mean what we say. But while one might be sincere in holding certain views, they may still be poorly reasoned, sentimental or simply not have the meaning which we thought they possessed. Being sincere does not guarantee that our views will or should be taken seriously or that we will not end up looking foolish. But neither is it clear how knowledge as the expression of facts about the world helps either. The problem in cases like abortion is not scientific facts per se but what those facts mean to us and how moral considerations enter into our understanding of them. While some features of our life seem to unproblematically admit a quite clear factual description and characterization, Pianalto suggests that for other features fact and value appear entangled and our choice of language and the concepts we use to identify facts as relevant considerations communicates the way in which we evaluate these considerations.

A clear example of this latter kind of difference is the varying ways people will refer to a fetus – whether as a baby, a person, a human being, none of the above, etc – depending upon their views on the permissibility of abortion. (Pianalto, 2011, p. 260)

This alerts us to the way in which speaking for oneself is much more than just sincerity. But what is it? Pianalto suggests we consider how, in offering our views to others, we are bearing witness ‘for a particular ethical orientation toward the world’ (Pianalto, 2011, p. 259). In speaking ethically ‘we do more than simply describe our attitudes, experiences and values, but also recommend them to others’ (Pianalto, 2011, p. 259). Thus speaking for oneself is more than just the expression of feelings, insofar as they are just expressions. We are trying to justify our views, ‘make them intelligible to others or likewise trying to understand or
critique the position of others’ (Pianalto, 2011, p. 260). We do so through the language we use as well as how we structure it, not simply to persuade but to best represent our perspective.

What then are the features of an individual’s perspective such that speaking out of that perspective is to speak for oneself and demands we take such speech seriously? From where in our language, tone and presence does the morally authoritative nature of our speech emerge? I raise this point because it is difficult to see how tying the notion of speaking for oneself can be ethically conditioned by the idea that it expresses a perspective on the world unless we understand such a perspective as itself ethically conditioned. Otherwise it is no more than opinion and it could be any kind of subjective perspective, just as the notion of bearing witness needs to be ethically conditioned or it is equally empty as an expression of an ethical perspective. What is it that thought and speech must reflect if they are to have an ethical character and is there a metaphysical emptiness in the way the idea of a personal perspective is expressed? This is a charge that has been levelled at the notion of speaking personally that Raimond Gaita has articulated and which has in turn influenced Pianalto’s thinking on the personal voice in ethics. Christopher Hamilton for one (Hamilton, 2008) has argued that Gaita’s claim that one can only speak from a personal perspective about the ethical character of events in one’s life is open to considerable doubt.

Hamilton’s criticism is focused on a passage in Gaita’s A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice. During a discussion of goodness and virtue, Gaita describes his experience of seeing a nun talking to patients in a psychiatric unit where he worked as a volunteer. It was not only that her compassion for those afflicted was visible in ‘the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body’ (Gaita, 2002, p. 18) but that her demeanour revealed a love which made their humanity visible in a way that would not invite the thought, as Gaita suggests might otherwise have been the case, that it would have been better for these patients if they had not been born. Striving years later to make philosophical sense of this, Gaita finds moral theory inadequate to the task of offering him ‘proof’ he can point to in order to explain why he characterized the nun’s behaviour as he did in what it revealed about the patients. There are no metaphysical or empirical properties one can ascribe to the patients to justify the nun’s compassion as he experienced it. He could not indicate facts about the patients which revealed them to be our human equals and therefore ‘rightly the objects of our non-condescending treatment’ (Gaita, 2002, p. 21). What was revealed to him was ‘the quality of her love’. Gaita recognizes the difficulty this might present, because he continues:
But if someone were now to ask me what informs my sense that they were rightly the objects of such treatment, I can appeal only to the purity of her love. For me, the purity of her love proved the reality of what it revealed. I have to say ‘for me’, because one must speak personally about such matters. That after all is the nature of witness. (Gaita, 2002, pp. 21–22)

Hamilton is troubled by the claim that all one can do is ‘speak personally’. He characterizes this as ‘a vision of the moral world whose tone is one of absolute conviction’ (Hamilton, 2008, p. 193), but that very little is being said with such claims. This thought recalls the quotes from Wittgenstein which opened the essay and that in reflecting the ‘tendency of the human mind’ that Wittgenstein was so much in sympathy with, little can be said about how things are in the world when, as Gaita himself admits, ‘from the point of view of the speculative intelligence … I am going around in ever darkening circles, because I allow for no independent justification of her attitude’ (Hamilton, 2008, p. 22).

Hamilton’s criticism draws attention to several potential problems in Gaita’s concept of speaking personally. Gaita, Hamilton argues, is not entitled to any substantial claim about how things are by using such rhetoric as he does. There is a sleight of hand at work; in saying I can do nothing other than speak for myself, I am in fact making absolute claims about what I am describing and the perspective from which I am speaking. Secondly, Hamilton believes there is an implicit claim to the plural ‘we’ in Gaita’s use of the singular ‘I’ that he is not entitled to make in so far as his invocation of the way in which he speaks personally reflects an absolute claim on behalf of others. Hamilton argues rather that ‘one’s temperament will colour deeply how one interprets the example and what its lessons are supposed to be’ (Hamilton, 2008, p. 193). The implicit ‘we’ should be replaced by something like ‘I, given the kind of person I am, cannot help thinking that I and the rest of you ought to be judged in the light of the absolutely pure’ (Hamilton, 2008, p. 193). I cannot therefore be speaking for anyone but only of someone – me. If one does not take that step, it is unclear who the ‘I’ is in the first-person perspective and what we are seriously claimed by. Hamilton jokingly speculates that it could be ‘the man with laundry bills’ or the authorial voice of the book or even just this section of the book, a distinct authorial voice from other books by the same author. What is it that gives the claim to be speaking personally its morally serious presence? ‘To say that one speaks personally is not yet, as such, to settle anything about who is speaking’ (Hamilton, 2008, p. 193). Hamilton suggests that ‘what Gaita means, at least in part, is that he is speaking out of his deepest sense of things, out of his all-things-considered, best judgments, and that others may not share this way of looking at
things’ (Hamilton, 2008, p. 193). Hamilton’s concern is that such ways of talking about moral perception simply invite doubt ‘rather than confidence in one’s own judgment’ (Hamilton, 2008, p. 194) and there is an emptiness and lack of clarity at the heart of such speech – ‘a kind of vertiginous free-fall in which nothing is really made clear save the fact that nothing is made clear’ (Hamilton, 2008, p. 193). This links to the third problem, which underlies the first two – that invoking the personal in itself says very little about the ethical conditioning of such speech and presence. But if so, what does?

The first way to make clear what is unclear is to assert that the first-person perspective must itself be a morally conditioned perspective and cannot merely be a sufficient condition for calling such speech moral. The difficulty in establishing how one can ever be sure of this is the problem of ‘the man with laundry bills’ – that one’s speech and action might be shaped by reasons that have nothing to do with moral concerns. Furthermore, on the basis that one feature of our taking moral thought seriously is that notions of partiality and impartiality are themselves moral considerations, ‘the man with laundry bills’ represents an irreducible partiality that skews any claims to views being objective in as much as they are understood as personal, and there is nothing in the first-person concept of authoritative speech by which to assess this or deny it as a valid expression of how someone views the world. I do not think for one moment that Hamilton is asking us to take ‘the man with laundry bills’ seriously as expressing a moral perspective. His point is that we cannot know how the immediate circumstances of someone’s life motivate someone to speak and act as they do if all we have is their word, taken on trust. It is not that metaphysical claims about the moral character of personal presence cannot be taken as trumping compelling psychological reasons for acting as we do; there are no meaningful metaphysical properties to underpin these claims in the first place. The metaphysical emptiness at the heart of such claims invalidates the idea of a moral perspective in such speech as somehow distinct from individual moral psychology. It is merely subjective.

It is a strong attack, but it is mistaken. The personal is never merely personal nor is it reducible to individual psychology. As such it can apply to ‘the man with the laundry bills’ (who could be a professor of moral philosophy), just as easily as it might to a student in an ethics class who is having boyfriend troubles or problems with her parents. However, it is one thing to assert this, another to demonstrate it. We need to know what the features of this conditioning consist of. It would be a mistake to completely dismiss the idea of ‘the man with laundry bills’ as an irrelevance in assessing what can and cannot count as justifiable reasons
in moral deliberation. If such features of our lives are contingent, they are not de facto irrelevant. However, the extent to which the events and circumstances of our lives do enter into our ethical reflection is conditioned by our understanding of what kind of things can have moral depth and seriousness and the way in which our arriving at an answer reflects this. The way in which reasons for action are understood to be valid moral reasons is itself morally conditioned by their being reasons that have depth and seriousness. This is something we have to discover through our reflection and is open to both questioning by oneself and others and subsequent modification in the light of reflection. The extent to which aspects of our lives are perceived as trivial or significant, relevant or irrelevant in moral deliberation is part of the process of such reflection, and our understanding of them as such is located in the epistemic vocabulary through which we express this understanding.

Hamilton would not, I think, be satisfied. That the authoritative nature of the personal voice can be caricatured in this way presents a problem of absurdity as well as scepticism. There is nothing to say that a person’s perspective might not be pragmatic, instrumental, relative or just plain ridiculous and laughable. If I say to someone ‘That’s wrong!’ and they say, with a look of surprise, ‘Wrong? What, morally wrong?’ that surprise may be personal but can also come from a perspective that sees decisions about action in pragmatic terms. Political decisions are a good example of this. But in moral matters we are expressing something more than a pragmatic sense of right and wrong. We are inviting someone to perceive something differently. We are offering them a picture of what counts as serious in our own lives, what considerations place limits on what we can and cannot conceive of doing. How is this achieved? Pianalto gives us some idea of what this might be when he suggests that it might consist of ‘what he or she (the speaker) takes to be the basis for this way of judging’ (Pianalto, 2011, p. 263). He rightly suggests ‘a single discrete judgment’ would not appear to do justice to this, although it might of course depend on the circumstances. But presumably our speaking in our own voice, taken as authoritatively speaking, is something more than the number of judgements that are made. We need to look at how we assess an individual’s account of their judgement and the language we use to do so. If we cannot judge in this way and the vocabulary of critical thinking is inadequate/irrelevant, how do we judge, how do we speak authoritatively and how is it ethically conditioned? Pianalto offers some possibilities. We can, for example, identify those perspectives ‘that are characterized by sensitivity, coherence, consistency and conscientiousness’ and distinguish them from those ‘that are superficial and steeped in sentimentality, dogmatism and
incoherence’ (Pianalto, 2011, p. 263). Pianalto argues that while we might not be able to establish a perspective as ‘absolutely true or correct’, these characteristics ‘licence us in treating it as a perspective that deserves to be taken seriously (and respected) as a worthy way of looking at and responding to the world’ (Pianalto, 2011, p. 263). Furthermore, being known as a person for whom truth matters will enter into our taking the moral claims of such a person seriously. This will not, I fear, satisfy Hamilton, for whom the sceptical problem remains.

Discussing comments on moral deliberation made by Rush Rhees, Gaita describes the confusion that Rhees engendered by arguing that moral judgements could be both personal, absolute and still substantially open to disagreement and the possibility of being wrong. Gaita quotes Rhees as follows:

They thought that I was saying that any condemnation of a man’s action (‘That was a foul thing to do’) is just an explanation of ‘how I see it’; and that, of course, others may see it in a different way ‘which is just as good’. As though I had said there are no real disagreements on moral questions. Or: as though I do not deny what another man says when (e.g.) he praises the action which I condemn. It is always hard to see how people can mistake your meaning so completely. (Rhees, 1969, pp. 95–96 in Gaita, 1989, p. 124)

Gaita comments that one will be confused by what Rhees said, firstly, if one thinks that objectivity is essentially impersonal; secondly, if one thinks that morality is not serious unless it is objective; and, thirdly, in response to the first two, if one thinks that morality is personal only because each one of us must choose our morality and that morality acquires its seriousness from such a view. What is here being subverted are the considerations that are normally opposed to each other as conflicting accounts. What is being argued for is a concept of moral seriousness in which the impersonal is internal to the concept of the personal and in turn both ethically conditions and is ethically conditioned by an understanding of how we are individually claimed by what is serious in moral reflection. Hamilton’s account does not do justice to the disciplined nature of Gaita’s understanding of personal speech because in characterizing the first-person ethical perspective as a psychological one, the perspective becomes both partial and open to doubt as an expression of a specifically moral motivation and intention. To be sure, the context in which Gaita used such language invites such scepticism, but we have fuller, more robust accounts of the personal elsewhere in Gaita’s writings on which to draw.

If we are working from within an ethical perspective, the terms on which we assess the worth of a perspective cannot acquire their status merely from
any propositional status they possess in the propositional realm. This has the implication that the diverse aspects of authoritatively speaking for oneself, for example certain emotional responses and certain fundamental notions that are internal to the idea of truth such as objectivity and impartiality, are themselves ethically conditioned. Thus, it becomes an ethical requirement that in speaking from a personal perspective one is not only sensitive to the emotional content of one's thought but also that one's views are carefully considered and in both spoken and written form a concern for the truth can be detected as internal to what is being said. It matters to oneself that one is lucid and intellectually disciplined in the articulation of one's thought and not deluded about how things are in reality. The intended parody of Hamilton's invocation of 'the man with laundry bills' when applied to the seemingly absolute nature of Gaita's concept of the personal is effective because it depends on an idea of speech as the undisciplined expression of an inner motivation which is not accessible to scrutiny, or if it is, it is only in the context of an absence of a metaphysic of moral presence that renders the personal as no more than an expression of self-centred, highly partial wants and needs, best understood through psychology. But the demand that in order to assess the veracity of what he experienced when witnessing the nun, others should be able to report on a similarly transformative experience, misses the point because it fails to recognize the way in which it is internal to Gaita's concept of the personal that the content of the claim and its truthfulness are available to others because of the kind of speech that is enacted in speaking personally. We are never the sole arbiters of what is morally serious. In what follows I will discuss how Gaita's work responds to such challenges and I will place it within the context of the teaching of ethics. In so doing I hope to offer a portrait of the ethically serious individual rather than a caricature and how such a person is ethically present in the language and tone of their speech.

At the start of this chapter I raised a doubt about whether the problems I see associated with the established way of approaching ethical thinking were necessarily a bad thing in the context of 'the classroom'. This in turn implies a doubt regarding the place of the personal in moral education with which I have opposed the traditional account, even though I suggest this should be taken far more seriously than it has been to date. As a metonym for a whole range of interpersonal encounters, 'the classroom' is itself conditioned by an understanding of the limits of the personal and the impersonal and what is accordingly acceptable or unacceptable. My worry is that the concept of the personal that I have taken from the work of Gaita and others cuts across this traditional understanding and is therefore a potential source of confusion
and misunderstanding. As previously indicated, a call for moral seriousness should not be confused with a requirement that we engage with each other in a sympathetic and empathetic manner. The danger is that in doing the latter one thinks one is doing the former and that such engagement is what it means to take another person seriously. Bringing these two aspects of engagement together points to the difficulty of conceptualizing the personal so as not to give undue weight to emotional expression because that leads to detaching such expression from the critical context in which issues are discussed, that is, that when someone is speaking personally the level of exposure taking place renders serious critical engagement inappropriately insensitive and requires a sympathetic/empathetic response instead – one might engage in a form of (philosophical) counselling but that is not the same as serious philosophical discussion, which in turn is not the same as debate, where the possibility of vigorous, impassioned speech is a patina for essentially impersonal engagement.

My question is whether young people at this age have the experience or capacity to both speak for themselves and equally importantly can listen to someone who is speaking personally, understood as more than merely offering an opinion in an exam class within an institution. How will it be ‘heard’ in the right way? There is a strong possibility of students experiencing exposure in circumstances where there would not be appropriate support or understanding of this conception of the ethical voice. But why should I be so concerned about ‘exposure’ in what is no more than the normal, everyday nature of classroom discussion, debate, agreement and disagreement? To understand this I will return to Gaita and to the idea that to speak personally is to speak out of what he calls ‘an historically achieved individuality’ (Gaita, 1989, p. 135), in which ‘one cannot acquire moral knowledge in any sense that would make one morally knowledgeable. It is more natural to speak of a depth of moral understanding, or of wisdom’ (Gaita, 1989, p. 134). It is perfectly possible to become more knowledgeable in the study of ethics as it is currently conceived and examined. One can do so in a fairly short space of time and be academically successful. But in Gaita’s account, the deepening of our moral understanding takes time and it does so in the life of an individual. The idea of ‘experience’, therefore, is ethically conditioned by what it means for our understanding to deepen, which requires the kind of attention and reflection on the events of our lives that Hamilton’s example of the ‘man with laundry bills’ does not touch, even as Hamilton accuses Gaita of failing to offer a sufficiently objective and verifiable account of ethical realities. The problem is not whether students have limited experience in terms of the kind of things that have happened to them, which
may be a lot, but whether they have the conceptual understanding and maturity that will enable them to reflect seriously on features of their own lives and those of others in such a way as to both express a depth of understanding in their own moral perspective and ‘hear’ when someone else is speaking from such a perspective. My argument is that if this happens through the kind of teaching of ethics that is currently in place, it will do so only accidentally, because our lives are only accidentally relevant to the kind of problems that students are presented with for engagement with the theory they are required to analyse and apply.

However, if one is unsure if personally held views can be appropriately respected or adequately expressed at this stage, then perhaps the discussion and debating of such issues through a theoretical framework is more appropriate. On such a view we have the rough and tumble of essentially impersonal debate contrasted with the more therapeutic approach. Taken individually as phenomenon of impersonal and personal engagement, they represent a distortion of what is serious in the personal conception of moral thought that I have articulated and how it might be developed. Taken together and suitably conditioned, both may exist within the concept of the personal I have been arguing for, along the lines Rhees suggested.

While it is important that one needs to be able to trust those one is with, it is also essential that one can question and challenge without feeling one is treading on egg-shells when presented with other members of a class speaking for themselves. However, that is why it is important to understand the way in which speaking for oneself is disciplined. It has to be understood that speaking for oneself is not a form of confession or therapy or merely an expression of emotion. When one is saying ‘This is what I think/believe’ and taking responsibility for that thought, what matters is that a critical vocabulary is in place that is broad enough to assess both the coherence of the structure of argumentation but also other ways in which the perspective might be expressed, for example the choice of language used, the nature of description and the characterization of the issue. It is in this way that we are present in our thought in the first person. This is not the case when one looks at the criteria by which students are currently assessed. Gaita argues:

To have something to say is to be present in what one says and to those to whom one is speaking, and that means that what one says has, at the crux, to be taken on trust. It has to be taken on trust not because, contingently, there are no means of checking it, but because what is said is not extractable from the manner of its disclosure. (Gaita, 1989, p. 136)
I am not sure it is even a matter of trust but a matter of paying very close attention to both what is said and how it is said, the form of argument and the expression of the personal concern. However, when one looks at the vocabulary of cognitive engagement that I outlined at the start of the chapter, there are limits to the language of rationality, which we have seen addressed by Pianalto.

Someone might argue that much of what I have said is beside the point, that what matters is to achieve conceptual clarity on issues that are emotionally, morally and intellectually challenging, and if we are to have disciplined discussion on emotive issues that generate heated, potentially frank exchanges, we must avoid the emotional in favour of clear-headed, calm, rational debate that is conducted in a spirit of intellectual rigour and care for logic and coherence. The best way to achieve that cool, critical distance in form, tone and content is through an impersonal, theoretical approach. On this account students are being initiated into a tradition or discourse, a field of knowledge with its own intellectual requirements. This is a stage where students acquire philosophical concepts and analytical skills and it is a period they must go through before they can begin to critique the way in which such knowledge is constructed and expressed. However, theoretical perspectives themselves need to have the capacity to speak to us in a way that is living and resonant just as the issues themselves are taken to be part of a lively contemporary social and cultural debate that crosses over into areas of public policy, the arts, the law, medicine and so on.

Of course I am aware that this approach has to stretch across a range of ‘issues’, such as euthanasia, bioethics, just war, stem-cell research and so on, and while some of these raise similar questions to those I have raised with abortion – that speaking for oneself is an irreducibly important part of the reality of the issue, others might appear to be less of this kind and the voice of the expert becomes important. However, if we essentially occupy our own perspective on the world then it would be rash to suggest that we can speak as experts or occupy the territory of experts on ethical matters independent of our own ethical perspective on such matters. While clearly someone can speak with considerable knowledge and we would hope they do so, I would argue that it is from the characterization of speaking for oneself I have outlined that one’s perspective is ethical. It would therefore seem to be important to enable students to discuss and write in a manner that pays due attention to ways in which personal perspectives can be articulated and which reflects Raimond Gaita’s concern that it should be a disciplined enactment in speech and action.
Given the difficulties that could be envisaged by asking students to articulate personal perspectives, there is a fundamental pedagogical issue that would need resolving. It is about creating the right environment. I would suggest this is an ethical requirement and as such it is more than the normal classroom management requirements of maintaining good order, ensuring clear aims and objectives, keeping discussion focused, lively, thoughtful and relevant and so on. It would also involve developing certain attributes in one’s students that enable them to work in the kind of environment that reflects a critical understanding and consciousness of the features of speaking for oneself that I have claimed are ethically important, for example being able to distinguish between what is ‘characterised by sensitivity, coherence, consistency and conscientiousness’ and what is superficial and ‘steeped in sentimentality, dogmatism and incoherence’. Establishing the right kind of tone is vital.

I am not suggesting any of this is easy to achieve. It raises many questions, for example, about the nature of sensitivity and attention and about the way in which critical tone is understood in the epistemic vocabulary of moral seriousness. To sum up, what I have tried to sketch is the difference between two approaches to ethical seriousness, the dominant impersonal model of moral philosophy which is to be found in the classroom and the more nuanced idea of the personal in ethics which I have tried to suggest is a question of a certain kind of first-person presence in both written and spoken form. The defining character of the former is that of the expert, the philosophical advisor who speaks from what they know. The character of the latter is that of the wise person, who speaks out of the life they have lived. The wider question to be answered is whether such a model is useful or desirable for students in educational settings.

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Rousseau’s Pedagogical Hermeneutics and Some Implications for Moral Education

David Aldridge

Rousseau’s line-by-line analysis of La Fontaine’s verse re-telling of the fable of ‘the fox and the crow’ sits in chapter two of Emile, or on Education between two equally surprising and commonly caricatured positions on – firstly – the uselessness of history, geography and foreign languages in the education of the young, and – secondly – delaying any encounters with books or learning to read (the ‘plague of childhood’) for as long as possible (Rousseau, 1979). It is hardly my aim in re-reading Rousseau’s reading to support or advocate his startling claim that – contrary to the views of most thinkers on moral education either before or since – the employment of fable does more harm than good for the moral development of the youngest children. However, it is my contention that there is an important hermeneutic significance to Rousseau’s consideration of the child’s readiness to understand fables that his critics have not really got hold of. This is all the more important since I hope to demonstrate that this issue of readiness extends beyond Rousseau’s close reading of the fable and into a consideration of the place in moral education of both narrative and – wider still – exemplarity itself.

The most rigorous philosophical advocacy of moral exemplars in the education of the young (and by extension – sometimes explicitly – of the pedagogical use of fable, as a source of such exemplars) can be found in the literature of what has come to be called ‘character’ or ‘emotions’ education. These terms can admittedly designate a relatively broad church. However, I follow Kristján Kristjánsson in attributing to a diverse range of thinkers from a number of related disciplines a certain ‘family resemblance’ that revolves around a return to some key insights of Aristotle (namely, that a ‘habituation’ into moral virtue must take in conative, affective and behavioural elements, as well as cognitive), along with the incorporation of the most recent findings
in moral psychology (cf. Kristjánsson, 2000, 2002, 2007). These thinkers also share, to a greater or lesser extent, a certain ‘othering’ of Rousseau (cf. Kilpatrick, 1992; Kristjánsson, 2002). One writer even summarizes the history of Western moral education under the pithy slogan ‘Aristotle vs Rousseau’ (Sommers, 2002, p. 5). By the end of this chapter I hope not only to have called into question this antithesis and the educational principles that have given rise to it but also to have indicated the essential part that Rousseau plays in considering the working of the exemplar in a specifically pedagogical context. This is an area which the character educators have left surprisingly undeveloped, but in which a significant theoretical aporia can already be detected.

An embarrassment of Maîtres

Rousseau acknowledges that the poetic form of La Fontaine’s re-telling of the fables of Aesop will make them easier to memorize, and the employment of animal protagonists will no doubt delight the youngest listeners. However, these strengths carry concomitant interpretive difficulties that will lead to the child mistaking the moral message that a tutor intends by selecting any given fable. The gist of Rousseau’s condemnation is that ‘no matter what effort is made to simplify them, the instruction that one wants to draw from them compels the introduction of ideas he cannot grasp’ (1979, p. 113). Furthermore, and seemingly paradoxically, ‘If they were to understand them, that would be still worse, for the moral in them is so mixed and disproportionate to their age that it would lead them more to vice than to virtue’ (Rousseau, 1979).

The fable of the fox and the crow is selected as an exemplar of La Fontaine’s work: ‘I take for example the very first because it is the one whose moral is most fitting to all ages, the one children grasp best, the one they learn with the most pleasure’ (Rousseau, 1979). The interpretive difficulties begin at the very first word, the Maître of ‘Maître Corbeau’. Rousseau asks, ‘what meaning has it on this occasion?’ (Rousseau, 1979). It seems that even the well-known advocate of ‘present interest’ (who would rather the child Emile never learned to read than be made to do so against his natural inclination) draws the line when that interest is to be piqued by the incorporation of animals in human roles. The child who does not yet understand the complex nuances of the honorific ‘Maître’ will be further confused by it being applied to a crow. The child who already understands the social complexities implied in the interactions between the two characters seems little to require their being
translated into this animal context (‘Let us always make images according to nature’), and for the child who does not yet grasp the complexity of the social and economic activities alluded to in the fable, no amount of effort by talking foxes or crow connoisseurs of cheese (‘Was it a Swiss cheese, a Brie or a Dutch?’) will provide a bridge from the familiar to the unfamiliar: rather, some awareness of the complex human interactions to be exemplified by the animals seems to be presupposed before the animals’ uncharacteristically human behaviour can be grasped as such (113).

A further problem is contained within that first word, however. It is significant that Maître is not only an honorific: it does not simply stand for Monsieur. ‘Maître’ is also the title by which Rousseau frequently refers to Emile’s tutor, because it also carries the sense of both the teacher (master, magister) and the exemplary figure who is to be emulated. With regard to his learning from the fable, the child is from the outset treated to an embarrassment of Maîtres. His tutor has of course selected the fable and intends some specific instruction by it, but if the child is to learn from examples (even negative ones), these examples set themselves up as Maîtres in collaboration with (or opposition to) the tutor’s efforts. Maître Corbeau we have already met, but later on it is the crafty fox (‘Another master!’) who claims to have sold the crow a moral lesson for the price of a cheese. Yet this does not exhaust the range of pretenders to the title of Maître, since the whole fable itself promises to instruct: stories, we know, can have ‘morals’, and the fable is paradigmatic of this relationship.

The crow hardly seems worthy of the title of Maître until we acknowledge that his example can be of a vice to be avoided as much as a virtue to be imitated. The crow thus perhaps embodies the vice of amour-propre, the desire to be applauded by one’s peers, that is Rousseau’s target elsewhere in the Emile. Perhaps there are intellectual virtues at stake here too: the crow is also just a little imprudent, or a little too trusting of apparent praise, such that he failed to see through the fox’s flattery where a wiser beast would have. In La Fontaine’s version of the fable, to give some credit to the hapless beast, there is perhaps also something positive to be emulated in the crow: the crow finally resolves never to be tricked in such a way again. By example, then, he perhaps promises to teach us that we ought to learn from our mistakes.

The fox, however, makes as many as three possible claims to the title of teacher. Firstly, there is his explicit claim to have taught the crow a lesson, presenting his devious machinations as an honest transaction – a lesson for a cheese. A pedagogical relationship between fox and crow is therefore established within the fable. However, in a curious twist on the typical form of the Aesopian fable,
La Fontaine directs this pedagogical relationship outwards by placing the moral of the story in the mouth of the fox – ‘every flatterer … Lives at the expense of the one who listens to him’ (115). The fox’s command, ‘Learn’, is thus directed to the student of the fable as much as to the crow. The third possible claim is one that troubles Rousseau greatly: the fox promises to teach the student a great deal that the tutor has good cause not to wish him taught – how to trick others and use flattery for personal gain, as well as how to hide deception through the protestation of truth. This forbidden knowledge exerts a power over the child that is difficult to resist. Every child, Rousseau reminds us, on reading a fable in which the lion represents the powerful animal who can get his own way (regardless of the moral) identifies with the lion; as soon as he is introduced to the fable in which the gnat’s special strengths award him victory over the lion, the child switches allegiance. The guiding principle here is not the identification of virtue but immediate personal gain: the lesson that the child learns from nature is not that ‘good will out’ but that the most powerful or the most cunning will triumph.

The fox thus represents the deinos or ‘clever’ figure of Aristotelian ethics, who – lacking the virtue that would lead him to the good – reasons in service of bad ends. Such a figure cannot serve as an exemplar for moral conduct except in a negative sense; he has every rational capacity except phronesis; it is thus that he operates without constraint and is able to exploit situations to his own advantage. Yet recall that the ‘moral’ of this fable is placed in the mouth of the fox. He is the privileged possessor of moral knowledge in this fable, although he is himself without virtue. He also demonstrates that one can apply this knowledge for immoral advantage while suffering no long-term harm (that the fable tells us of, at least). Furthermore, the fox claims a moral authority in the story; it is he who teaches a moral lesson to the crow. Gadamer points out that ‘it is more than accidental that such a person is given a name [deinos] that also means “terrible”. Nothing is so terrible, so uncanny, so appalling, as the exercise of such brilliant talents for evil’ (Gadamer, 2004, p. 320). Younger children, Rousseau urges, are susceptible to the ‘uncanny’ power of the fox. As soon as the idea of obedience to authority is introduced to a child, Rousseau has told us earlier in this chapter, the child will apply his emerging reason to subverting it. What tools the fox can provide him with in service of these ends!

The fable as a whole also makes a claim to the title of Maître: this might seem to stretch the term until we remember the peculiar stylistic convention of the fable, which is to include a moral and thus (in appearance at least) to contain an instruction or guideline about its own correct interpretation. Not only can the fable thus represent a teacher, but it can also exemplify two different
approaches to moral pedagogy, what might be called a ‘directive’ and a ‘non-directive’ approach. Non-directively, the narrative can offer up examples to the child (the older child, in Rousseau’s view) and invite him to make judgements about proper moral conduct. The value of this ‘active’ learning is then – in Rousseau’s opinion – undermined when the moral intrudes into the narrative and asserts a meaning (teaching directly). It is for this reason that Rousseau argues that when he does introduce fables later in a child’s education, it will be with the morals filed off (1979, p. 248).

Rousseau and the character educators

What I have offered above is not the only way of cashing out the difference between a directive and a non-directive education. As well as describing a pedagogical distinction between direct instruction and discovery, perhaps a more well-known definition, specifically where moral outcomes are concerned, is that advocated by Michael Hand (cf. Hand, 2008), where a directive approach seeks to impart moral knowledge or guide students towards a particular intended moral outcome and a non-directive approach does not. It is possible to be pedagogically non-directive in the first sense mentioned (adopting a discovery-based approach to moral learning, for instance) while being ‘directive’ in terms of intended outcome, and seeking to guide students towards particular moral perspectives, attitudes or behaviours.

Critics of Rousseau have tended to conflate the two possible senses of this distinction. So Sommers, who offered us ‘Aristotle vs Rousseau’, argues that ‘Rousseau’s views inspired the progressive movement in education, which turned away from rote teaching and sought methods to free the child’s creativity. Rousseau’s ideas are also deployed to discredit the traditional directive style of moral education associated with Aristotelian moral theory and Judaeo-Christian religion and practice’ (2002, p. 30). While Rousseau indeed eschews rote teaching, as his condemnation of learning the fables by heart demonstrates, it is not clear that he rejects ‘directive’ moral education in the second sense offered above. His argument for postponing the time of fables, for example, does not rest on any relativistic claim that the teacher should not aim to instil particular moral values into the student, or any application of an ‘epistemic criterion’ whereby a moral view might be held to be controversial, so much as a practical claim that – if introduced before the child is ready – the fable will be unsuccessful in bringing about those values (for further discussion, see Cell, 1995).
William Kilpatrick, in his own criticism of Rousseau, emphasizes his origination of the continental idea of *authenticity* – that human beings ought to look inward to find their own moral compass and should take ownership of their own individual and unique path through life. Left free to select their own exemplars or role models without direction, Kilpatrick argues, children will do without heroes or seek out their own aspirations reflected back to them in others, such as the ‘successful’ celebrities of the day (Kilpatrick, 1992, p. 106). Although he does not attribute moral relativism directly to Rousseau, Kilpatrick argues that progressively or romantically informed forms of moral education have given students the impression (whether or not by explicit intent) that there are no relatively uncontroversial moral truths.

There is a hermeneutic element of Kilpatrick’s criticism that draws explicitly on E D Hirsch (cf. Hirsch, 1987). There are shared meanings to moral texts which require an appropriate background of knowledge or cultural literacy to access (Kilpatrick, 1992, p. 117). Given free reign to interpret these texts for themselves, children will project their own meanings into the texts or simply misunderstand them. It is largely to teachers’ failure to grasp the mettle here that Kilpatrick attributes the cause of the problem that forms the title of his influential book, the question of *Why Johnny Can’t Tell Right From Wrong*. Despite E D Hirsch’s own opposition to the hermeneutics of the ‘romantics’, elements of Rousseau’s own hermeneutics appear to anticipate his perspective. If we explore the condemnation of teaching history that immediately precedes Rousseau’s discussion of fable, we note firstly that Rousseau – largely in tune with a number of prominent character educators – attests to the morally edifying value of historical narrative (Bennett, 1993; Kilpatrick, 1992; Kristjánsson, 2000). What makes it ‘ridiculous’ to attempt history with the youngest children is their lack of *readiness* to encounter such narratives as that of Alexander and Philip the Doctor. The ‘little professor’s’ reading of the tale, in which Alexander’s bravery in drinking what might be poison is interpreted as an example of putting up with unpleasant tasting medicine, is exactly the kind of reduction to the child’s limited frame of reference that Kilpatrick would ascribe to the influence of Rousseau, and yet the latter contends that the story is wasted on the child, who has been unable to comprehend its real meaning – ‘that Alexander believed in virtue; it is that he staked his head, his own life on that belief; it is that his great soul was made for believing in it’ (1979, p. 111).

Rather than being the result of an unrestrained process of self-discovery, Kilpatrick urges that moral understanding is *hard won* and requires significant external intervention. Kristjánsson offers this external aspect as a significant
difference between Aristotle and Rousseau. Where the character educators urge that moral development should be (at least in part) ‘extrinsically motivated’ and ‘heteronomously formed’, for Rousseau (Kristjánsson argues) it must strictly be ‘intrinsically motivated’ and ‘autonomously formed’ (Kristjánsson, 2007, p. 100). It is certainly true that Emile will not be habituated through reward and punishment: how could he, when he is to have no concept of obedience or duty (Rousseau, 1979, p. 89)? However, on the matter of moral motivation, Kristjánsson goes on to embellish Aristotle with a significant ‘intrinsic’ component. By citing Nietzsche’s claim that ‘the true role of a moral exemplar is to waken yourself to your “higher self” – the higher ideals to which you can aspire, the possibilities that lie dormant within yourself’, Kristjánsson draws directly on the continental tradition of authenticity that Kilpatrick opposes to the character education movement (Kristjánsson, 2007, p. 102); the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction is not thus as easily drawn as Kristjánsson contends.

Kilpatrick makes more of the necessity for heteronomous intervention into moral development, but he offers a mixed message that illuminates the aporia that I alluded to in the introduction to the chapter. He suggests that even ‘twenty minutes of excerpts’ of the behaviour of passengers and crew during the sinking of the Titanic in A Night to Remember is sufficient to consistently reduce the most blasé students to tears. To have such an effect, he argues, is a defining feature of great art. He adds that the ‘film doesn’t leave the viewer much room for ethical maneuvering’ and that ‘[w]e are not being asked to ponder a complex ethical dilemma; rather, we are being taught what is proper’ (Kilpatrick, 1992, p. 139). Sommers correspondingly offers a traditional Jewish story where (as opposed to Kohlberg’s moral dilemmas, in which there are ‘no obvious heroes or villains’) ‘the moral message is clear’, even ‘contagious’ (Sommers, 1993, p. 12). Instead of requiring a hard-won background of moral understanding in order to be intelligible, the claim seems now to be that some moral stories at least (perhaps if they are appropriately told or represented so that they can act appropriately on the emotions) act themselves as teachers, directly conveying their own moral message without ambiguity. While Kilpatrick consistently maintains that moral understanding must impose itself from a source external to the student, it is not clear whether moral exemplars require the careful preparation of teachers in order to be intelligible, or whether teachers must in fact ‘step back and not interfere with the power of the stories themselves’ (Narvaez, 2002, p. 156).

The psychological research (normally argued by character educators to be consistent with Aristotle’s thinking) indicates that even the most cherished and time-honoured moral stories do not act on children in this way. So Darcia
Narvaez, in a review of the available literature, observes that that ‘when the text does not fit with the reader’s background knowledge or schemas, readers will poorly understand… misrecall…and even distort memory to fit with their schematic form’ (2002, p. 158). ‘Theme extraction’ (or discerning the moral or ‘point’ of a story) even from simple texts (Narvaez discusses the story of the *Three Little Pigs*) proved difficult until age ten, and ‘not automatic or fundamental generally unless the topic is familiar’ (162). Narvaez makes this case to emphasize that students require continued intervention by a teacher if they are to understand the approved or legitimate meaning of the story (the author’s intention, say, or the educator’s intention in selecting the story), rather than a morally subversive but internally consistent alternative.

While the character educators urge the need for a heteronomous source of moral development – the exemplar to be imitated – the part that moral narrative plays here is in question. Is it sufficient to tell a story, or do we need to adopt the ‘time honoured’ practice of ‘driving home its moral’ (Kristjánsson, 2000, p. 8)? Perhaps the solution is to be found (and the character educators variously seem to suggest this) in identifying different stages of readiness for moral development: where the older child can be trusted to engage in non-directive discussion around moral narratives, younger children require a more didactic exposition of their significance, and those still younger must be developed through a pre-rational process of habituation, in which the teacher – rather than instructing – acts himself as moral exemplar.

The exemplarity of fable

Recall how the fable itself, with its assertion of a moral, can exemplify the teacher. Rousseau’s selection of the fable as a specific example of moral narrative can therefore demonstrate a great deal about how the teacher relates to his chosen exemplar. He observes that the intrusion of the moral into a fable raises a further question about its pedagogical value: it calls into question the power of the exemplar to *speak for itself*, or to guide its interpreter towards a single accepted or intended moral meaning. The moral seemingly intervenes to contain a narrative that threatens to disclose more than is intended in its didactic use. La Fontaine’s re-telling of the fable not only creatively puts one moral (about how flatterers flourish by exploiting the vain) in the mouth of the fox but then adds a further coda in the mouth of the crow, who articulates a sort of ‘trick me once…’ resolution for future action. A student of this fable thus has at least two
authorized morals to respond to, in addition to any of their own that they might begin to interpolate.

The tutor who chooses to employ this fable with some edifying intent has interventions of his own to perform. If the crow shows us that we ought to learn from our mistakes, then here is a fool who is to be imitated. If the fox can claim to teach the moral message, then here is a teacher who is not to be imitated. Why would a tutor choose to educate a young child with this fable, Rousseau asks, when he must then persuade that child to perform such a complicated inversion? One further inversion is implied, and although Rousseau does not elaborate it, we must situate his rather banal exposition of the meaning of the fable (that Emile ought not to be foolish, like the crow) within his wider project for Emile. Emile, we are constantly reminded, is not to be like other children; he is to be protected and preserved from the deceitful social situations that arise from being motivated from a young age by the requirement to obey (or at least, not to get caught), or from being encouraged to employ ideas that do not have their basis in experience.

Before he is ready to encounter the fable (it is held off until chapter 4), Rousseau argues that it is important for Emile to have had a very specific experience. He refers back to the experience he has contrived for Emile in chapter 2, where the child is given the opportunity to humiliate a magician by learning his trick, and then is humiliated himself by the magician, who has colluded with his tutor in preparing this event. The experience of shame and embarrassment enables Emile to realize how the magician felt when he was humiliated by Emile, and thus Emile is able to understand the wrongness of his previous action (for further discussion, see Cell, 1995). This sets him up to identify with the crow when he encounters La Fontaine's poem. Rousseau thus wishes to preserve Emile from the fox's influence until he has the tools to subvert the world that the fable holds out to him and affirm another that it conceals: not a world where wit serves only as a means of exploiting others or protecting oneself against such exploitation, but a world in which virtuous agents are motivated by a desire not to cause suffering to others. This is a truly fabulous world in which, if it could only be made real, neither of the explicit or directive 'morals' of the fable would need to be learned.

The child who learns the lesson that there are those who flatter for profit is also in a position to discern that he ought not to do the same, although no element of the story points directly towards this moral. In order to learn from the fable, he must already have the means to resist the uncanny power of the fox, although this presupposes that he has grasped the lesson that the fable conveys.
The young Emile thus joins the ranks of the adults, who are able to read La Fontaine ‘discriminately’ (Rousseau, 1979, p. 116), because they already know the moral meaning of the stories.

What is to be learned here about moral pedagogy? Let us firstly acknowledge that the fable can be interpreted not as a special or limited case of moral narrative but as an exemplar for moral exemplarity itself. The failure of the intrusion of the ‘moral’ to control or contain the reception of the fable draws attention to the failure of any narrative to teach directly in the sense of conveying an unambiguous meaning to its reader: any example, we are shown, can always be read otherwise, whatever authoritative intervention a teacher might make to drive home its significance.

This stands not only for moral narrative but for any moral exemplar, even when the teacher offers his own actions and comportment as an example to be imitated in a process of habituation. When Rousseau urges his tutor to be an example to his young charge, this is not initially as a moral agent to be imitated but as an example of the natural necessity to which Emile must become resigned (1979, p. 91). The teacher who wishes to constitute a different kind of example must demand that his actions be interpreted otherwise, but in so doing he hands over to the child the responsibility of deciding what kind of teacher he is to be, since in the very act of demanding that his actions be imitated he offers an action, the demanding itself, that must not be imitated.

This does not mean that the tutor must give up hope of employing exemplars to communicate a particular moral message (the other sense of ‘directive’ pedagogy), but it does tell us something about the conditions for a convergence of the child’s moral understanding with that of his tutor. We cannot hope – not having our own experimental ‘Emile’ (as even Rousseau did not) – to contrive for whole classes of children the experiences that would constitute a context of readiness (a ‘frame’) to receive a particular exemplar in the manner that we intend, so we must do the next best thing, which is rather to attend to a child’s moral readiness and to select or employ the exemplars that the child is ready for. This requires that we reassess the balance of heteronomy and autonomy that is argued by the character educators. While we do not abandon the aim of guiding the child in a particular virtuous direction, we must acknowledge that the exemplified in all cases is presupposed within or runs ahead of the exemplar, or that the child’s moral development begins with who they already are. There is an anamnetical element to what we learn from exemplars. As Irene Harvey puts it in her interpretation of Rousseau, ‘In thus orienting the pedagogical practice around the child’s own possibilities, one does not impose anything on him but
rather brings out what is already there’ (2002, p. 124). This gives us an insight into Kilpatrick’s experience of seeing his pupils weep at the noble conduct on the sinking Titanic: Kilpatrick’s students are not Arendt’s ‘tiny barbarians’ (see Sommers, 2002, p. 23) who need to be civilized by the redemptive power of great art; rather, they are moved because of who they already are. The emphasis of the character educators on the heteronomous grounding of the working of exemplarity thus can be seen to obscure a final insight: that the child himself is always an exemplar from which his teacher must learn if moral development is to take place.

References


Part Two

Politics
Universities, Citizens and the Public

Morgan White

Universities help create participative citizens, with the skills and dispositions required to engage in the public sphere. Academics also sometimes act as expert citizens, contributing their specialized understandings to public debate. Universities are public institutions that support democracy, not mere providers of training conceived as private or investment goods. Higher education policies are blind to the public dimension of democracy and this blinkered approach to policy undermines the democratic aspects of education.

Liberal and republican citizens

In political thought there are two general approaches to the concept of citizenship: the ancient, republican tradition and the modern, liberal understanding of the citizen (Touraine, 1997, pp. 77–89). Michael Ignatieff compares these:

> The one defends a political, the other an economic definition of man, the one an active – participatory – conception of freedom, the other a passive – acquisitive – definition of freedom; the one speaks of society as a polis; the other of society as a market-based association of competitive individuals. (Ignatieff, 1995, p. 54)

Higher education in the early twenty-first century orients itself firmly towards liberal-economic citizenship. The participative, political citizen is subsumed within the economic, instrumentally rationalist individual. Capacity for action, conceived in explicitly political terms, is diminished and replaced by steering mechanisms where individuals respond instrumentally and strategically to their environment. The tensions between the private and the public, between economics and politics, between life and world, between state, market and polis

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can be seen throughout the twentieth century. However, these tensions are particularly clear in education, and clearer still in higher education. ‘Austere’ governmental responses to the ‘fiscal crisis’ that has been running since 2008 are pulling these tensions to breaking point. Civic relations between persons pursuing a common good have been replaced by talk of market relationships alleged to result in efficient outcomes. However, these seemingly efficient outcomes occlude the public value of civic virtue and this ought to be regarded as a substantial cost.

The liberal language of contract has entwined these values of citizenship and value for money. The citizen is replaced with the taxpayer, who has been reified, turned into someone concrete who demands his or her money's worth from the public sector. The social contract is reduced to a transaction between consumers and producers. The liberal perspective on the university looks to issues of ‘fairness’ and seeks that institutions widen participation, but this neglects the broader and, perhaps, deeper issue of the degradation of the good of the university (Sandel, 2012, p. 108). To be sure, there are hidden costs incurred by the liberal market model that are difficult, if not impossible, to measure. What values, for instance, are cultivated among students and academics operating as instrumentally rational agents in a market environment? How might such instrumental rationality corrode the ethical norms associated with professional spheres such as teaching, financial accountancy, law, politics, healthcare, and academia itself, for instance? It is likely that higher education institutions saturated by instrumental rationality will produce graduates who grasp the fable of the bees, but not the tragedy of the commons.

Citizenship and education

Modern political thought displays a tendency to draw a distinction between citizens and state (with an intermediary stage of ‘civil society’). But, if we recall Aristotle, we know that citizens are those who are fit to obey and to govern. Citizenship, therefore, implies active participation, not through a civil society which sits below the state, but more directly through office holding, as well as more or less tacitly, through obeying the laws made by all citizens in common. Ignatieff reminds us that

Civic-virtue, the cultural disposition apposite to citizenship was thus two-fold: a willingness to step forward and assume the burdens of public office; and second, a willingness to subordinate private interest to the requirement of
public obedience. What Aristotle called the “right temper” of a citizen was thus a disposition to put public good ahead of private interest. (Ignatieff, 1995, p. 56)

The importance of civic-virtue and its development is under-emphasized, largely because of the overwhelming influence of the universalistic, liberal idea of the citizen. But, in terms of a political aspect to education, it is this idea of developing virtue, of some kind, which has most often connected political and educational theories.

The Aristotelian idea of citizenship, which combines, at once, ruling and being ruled, is not, however, the only model on offer. The Platonic version of citizenship, for instance, draws a sharp distinction between rulers and ruled, or the aristoi and the pseudo-aristoi. This idea leads to a conception of civic education which lays stress on the need to inculcate, on the one hand, an ability within the citizenry to choose leaders effectively and, on the other, to foster political loyalty. As Eamonn Callan puts it:

The efficacy of representative institutions in elevating the aristoi to political office and keeping out the pseudo-aristoi depends on what ordinary citizens do in that sphere of political participation, modest though it might be, that representation entails. The supposed superiority of democratic aristocracy over plain old aristocracy requires that citizens have the ability ‘to discern the talent and character of candidates vying for office, and to evaluate the performance of individuals who have attained office’. (Callan, 1997, p. 110)

For Callan, the development of this ability comes through what Michael Walzer calls ‘vicarious decision-making’ or a form of ‘democratic play’. Callan explains:

This is the making of vicarious anticipative and retrospective judgements, sometimes in deliberative solitude but more often in dialogue with others, about the proper conduct of public officials …. In a representative democracy, vicarious anticipations and retrospections regarding the decisions of office holders are a profoundly serious endeavour. That is largely because the skill and insight we develop in playing the game are what we rely on to evaluate the performance of office-holders and to measure the talent and character of candidates for office. The talent and character of candidates has to do with the quality of the decisions they are likely to make, just as the merit of current office holders depends on the quality of decisions they have made. So citizens who are inept participants in Walzer’s democratic play will be in no position to tell the difference between the aristoi and the pseudo-aristoi. (Callan, 1997, pp. 110–111)

But Callan now wants to deny that such democratic play is, in itself, an educative process. The ability to play this game of citizenship proficiently comes from
practice as well as from some antecedent teaching in the rules of the game. If citizens inhabit an open political culture which encourages democratic play, most will, eventually, learn to play the game well. Moreover, inept participants here are not those who fail to distinguish correctly the *aristoi* from their pseudo counterparts. No one can be entirely sure of this. But those who refuse to take part in the game are more likely to be poor democratic citizens.

Callan misconstrues Walzer’s idea. The point of anticipative and retrospective deliberation is not to draw the Platonic distinction between those who are and those who are not capable of rule. Rather, deliberative democracy collapses this dualism. As Walzer clearly puts it:

Vicarious decision-making precedes and follows actual decision-making. In our minds, if not in fact, we imitate the Aristotelian ideal: We rule and are ruled in turn. We decide and we (usually, but not always) abide by the decisions of others. It’s not the case, then, as elitist writers have argued, that citizens merely reaffirm or reject their leaders at periodic intervals…. The study of politics should have this purpose: It should help ordinary citizens reflect upon the most important matters of state. It should prepare leaders, would-be leaders, and vicarious leaders – which is to say, it should prepare all of us – for the democratic business of taking stands and shaping policies. (Walzer, 1980, pp. 159–160)

Through a dialogic process of this democratic play citizens learn to be better citizens. They learn to make up their minds on salient political issues of the day and to make decisions. This democratic play, however, does not teach citizens to discriminate between rulers and ruled. Rather, vicarious decision-making is an act of citizenship in itself. It implies what Hannah Arendt called ‘isonomy’, or formal political equality in terms of a capacity for action. Now, in an increasingly de-politicized culture it is precisely these sorts of ‘skills’, or rather dispositions, that universities (and schools) should encourage in their teaching, and not simply focus on those ‘employability’ skills deemed appropriate by career officers and employers or attractive to students, with at least one eye fixed on future job prospects and the income-generating capacity of a university course. If society is to describe certain abilities as ‘key skills’, surely the most relevant are those which allow us to engage as citizens. This would mean, in practical terms, an understanding of and an ability to use, rhetoric, logic, grammar (the trivium as it was once known in the mediaeval university) and critical capacities. But formal skills alone are not enough, for some sense of the duties of citizens towards others is also required, as is an
understanding of the world that individuals live within. Michael G. Gottsegen sums this up succinctly:

By one account the paramount need is to equip the youth of today with the practical skills that will be necessary in the world of tomorrow. Especially in a world that is changing as fast as ours, it is argued, there is little point in conveying knowledge which quickly becomes obsolete… [H]owever, a skill-oriented pedagogy which does not undertake at the same time to bind men to their past, and thus to their world, constitutes a danger to that very world of which the proponents of “relevant” skills believe themselves to be so mindful. More important… than the imparting of skills is the imparting of an ethos of worldliness and world-concern which the teaching of skills alone will not serve to inculcate. (Gottsegen, 1994, p. 112)

The republican, in addition to an understanding of and attachment to the world, requires an artillery of skills (of reason, empathy and of rhetoric) to engage in the agonal realm of politics; the liberal citizen can call upon a set of formal political and civil rights and duties bestowed by the state. The latter citizen appears politically passive; the former appears active.

However, the republican citizen is active in the public sphere only to the extent that he is already free. Ignatieff writes:

Since Aristotle assumed that political discussion was an exercise in rational choice of the public good, he also assumed that the only persons fit for such an exercise were those capable of rational choice. And the only ones capable of rational choice were those who were free. Dependent creatures could not be citizens: slaves, those who worked for wages, women and children who were both subject to the authority of the domestic 
\textit{oeconomia} were excluded from citizenship. Adult male property owners were the only persons vested with civic personality. (Ignatieff, 1995, p. 56)

Citizenship has always been an exclusionary category: exercising political choice and decision-making require an independent mind, and this in turn requires material and social independence. Property holding guaranteed independence and rationality free from material concerns. So, while there is a clear contradiction between a republican, property-based mode of citizenship and its liberal, rights-based counterpart, we can also see such property restrictions in the ideas of liberals like Locke, who saw rights based in property relations. However, the republican view is more than a defence of property or gendered privilege. Citizenship required certain intellectual, social and economic prerequisites for good judgement in the realm of politics. Moreover, as Ignatieff
points out, the property required for citizenship was landed, rather than held in moveable assets. As such, property-holding citizens also held a patriotic interest in the state. The point, however, is that political freedom did not stand independent of cognitive capacities, status and material wealth. We might question the degree of political freedom in heavily indebted students, focused on the economic value of their degrees and encultured into an instrumental mode of learning.

In the civic republican tradition, juridified bureaucracy was anachronistic. Offices were rotated among citizens; the establishment of a permanent bureaucracy was resisted because this might invite a separation of specialist bureaucratic interests in opposition to the public interest. This explains why the republican tradition is wary of the concept of civil society, informed, but also dominated, by the state. For republicans, citizenship is self-rule, taken in turns by members of a coherent community.

But, of course, this rule of self-rule is indeed a myth. The profits of office mean that office holders want to hold on to their positions. The civic concept of citizenship has to be supplemented by a discourse on corruption (just as the civic university requires a discourse on the degradation of its purposes). Ignatieff writes that republican ‘Citizenship implied a tragic and often nostalgic sense of lost human possibility. Civic life was a ceaseless struggle to preserve the human good – the polis – from the forces within human nature bent on its deformation into tyranny’ (Ignatieff, 1995, pp. 58–59). From the normative perspective of civic republicanism then, it is little wonder that the empirical history of the university appears as a jeremiad.

Civil, political and social rights

Certain material conditions have to be met to help to ensure the virtue of citizens. Just as private civil and political rights balance civic community, these in turn have to be balanced with social rights. The problem is that reconciling these requires that we accept their contradictions. Formal legal equality is rather empty without the social and economic equality necessary for the exercise of legal equality. Indeed, the formal legal rights of citizenship were concretized in the founding of the modern welfare state. This welfare state should be seen as an expression of those social rights which underpin purely abstract, formal civil and political rights. The state once saw its role as the guardian of equal citizenship balancing the undermining forces of the market economy. It is
because of such social rights that citizens could count on protection against illness, old age, illiteracy and unemployment. It was a welfare state founded upon universal benefits which strengthened the civic ties between individual citizens and between their private and the public interest: ‘Taxation was thus explicitly conceived as the instrument for building civic solidarity among strangers’ (Ignatieff, 1995, p. 67).

Presently, however, the welfare state has a rather different image. In place of acting as a kind of civic cement, the welfare state is often presented as an institution which provides disincentives to work, supports the feckless, removes individual responsibility, is an unnecessary drain on national income and is overly bureaucratic. Far from building solidarity among strangers, the taxation paid to fund the welfare state, once value for money is demanded from welfare services, actually serves to undermine civic ties. The welfare state, conceived as a comfort blanket that creates a suffocating culture of dependency and entitlement, is not a civic glue that binds in solidarity but a solvent that individuates and atomizes. Either welfare provision brings people closer together in the spirit of solidarity, creating civic bonds, or public services are delivered in a way which aims at efficiency which will break down civic ties between people. This civic retreat should be regarded as an anomic cost, or inefficiency.

Citizenship and university education

The erosion of civic ties is demonstrated in the case of a higher education system which takes the efficient training for future employment of students as its main aim. Students no longer receive a rounded, civilizing education:

[O]nly 2.6 per cent of American students major in English. Almost as many major in catering, domestic science, and hotel management. The British figures are heading in the same direction. It may or may not be a good thing to teach young persons the art of portion control, or to give them diplomas in the wiles of advertising, but such students are not being turned against western civilization. They are being so unblinkingly trained to take their place in the modern consumer society that to encounter a decent scepticism about western civilization would do them good…. [P]rofessional training is not enough for the whole of life. It is not exactly news that the holders of MBAs have been known to commit fraud, to throw their workers on to the street needlessly, to sacrifice production to financial manipulation, and to behave as badly as Thorstein Veblen complained that financiers behaved a hundred years ago. If they behave
badly because they have been badly trained, what they lack is not a training in analytical techniques but a sense of the duties of the powerful and the clever to the less powerful and the less clever. (Ryan, 1999, pp. 154–155)

Veblen’s complaint about financiers is prescient, but a ‘vocational’ education is usually nothing of the sort. How many of the students and graduates of these courses really have a calling for hotel management? Vocational courses are merely those which point towards a training for a future career. Ironically, of course, such career-based courses have flourished at precisely the same time as the idea of a career, in the sense of engagement in uninterrupted professional employment, is disappearing (Williams, 1988, pp. 52–53). While it is still possible to conceive of, and look forward to, a legal career or the vocation of the priesthood with reasonable confidence, for instance, we cannot look forward to a career in politics, or in television, or even hotel management with the same degree of confidence. It only really makes sense to speak of a political career in retrospect. A formal university training is a strict requirement for lawyers; it is not for television producers, journalists or politicians. Formal training may help in some ways, but this only means that we can call such training ‘vocational’ in the very loosest sense. Intuitively, then, it seems to make more sense to think of a career in hindsight. If the notion of a career as uninterrupted progress can no longer be generally relied upon, then it does seem odd that education, and higher education most markedly, has become much more career oriented. It could be argued that education, and university education with it, has gradually become integrated into the wider framework of the bureaucratized welfare state. After all, the welfare state provides for citizens in need of some assistance, but the need for this should vanish if we educate and train citizens to be able to provide for themselves, usually through employment. In this sense, a university education geared towards future employment would allow the state to step back from its responsibilities to provide wider social rights. Putative students are being misled. The instrumental university has become a tool to provide more efficient labour markets, where vocational education generates a supposedly level playing field that will allow the state to withdraw from other forms of welfare provision, such as unemployment benefit, allows employers to withdraw from work-related training and proposes that the individual student shoulders the brunt of the costs. This credentialist promise, however, of a ticket to a career, is a trade borne of desperation. The degree appears attractive because employment is becoming more precarious.

The transition to a more instrumental idea of the university was begun at the end of the nineteenth century when science became a means of capital accumulation through the application of discoveries in the fields of physics and
chemistry to commodity production. This was the result not only of advances in science itself but also because of a greater willingness on the part of capitalists to invest in research and development, a spirit which was fostered by increased industrial competition and a sufficient level of surplus capital. This industrial development created a demand for scientific-technical education which was complemented by the rationalization of state administration which compounded the demand for technocrats. Tony Smith explains:

No longer was the goal of a university education the formation of character. Rather than being oriented towards the ideal of *Bildung* [self-formation], the university now had the goal of producing persons capable of discovering and applying technically employable knowledge. No longer was the ideal the well-rounded humanist of the *Universitas litterarum*. Instead the ideal became the specialist, one who concentrated on a particular area and was able to produce causal knowledge of the regularities of that object realm. (Smith, 1991, p. 196)

But, although the ideal related to the specialist, this was combined with a notion that we can all be specialists because the logic at work here was to *produce* a band of trained researchers capable of making further efficiency savings or finding or creating new markets for goods and services.

Higher education now cannot be claimed to remain the preserve of an elite. Instead, it has become one agency among others charged with increasing the opportunities of individuals. And opportunity, because it is conceived in a strictly materialist fashion, is synonymous with production and consumption: job opportunities, career prospects and earnings potential. This is most evident in the new subject areas: leisure and tourism studies, media studies, fashion design and business administration (but we might also include things like education studies too). Ronald Barnett points out that these

newer forms of study are not merely operational but are instrumental in character. That is, they are designed to bring about technical effects on a taken-for-granted world (or slice of it). They are built around a technical interest in the world in which the world is objectified and externalized, and it is understood to be a suitable vehicle for instrumental operations to be wrought upon it. The action that they encourage can be said to be critical, but its critical component is arrested at the instrumental level. It is a critical action that accepts the world largely as given and seeks to produce more effective operations within it. Transformations are entirely acceptable *providing* that they produce greater profitability, power and security. (Barnett, 1997, p. 79)

It could, however, be suggested that this is nothing new. Universities, in their mediaeval form, were, after all, about training for the elite professions of law,
medicine and public administration. But Barnett argues that the link between the university and work was entirely different in the mediaeval period. He refers to Basil Bernstein on this point:

The mediaeval curriculum might, in the professional schools, have contained an operational character, but it was not instrumental . . . . Not only were the studies framed in the larger curriculum of the Trivium (grammar, logic and rhetoric) and the Quadrivium (arithmetic, astronomy, geometry and music), but the Trivium, “as exploration of the word” took precedence over the Quadrivium, “as the exploration of the world”. “The construction of the inner was the guarantee for the construction of the outer. In this we can find the origin of the professions”. But we have been seeing the abandonment of the inner world, except that the inner world is now finding its way back in the form of an instrumental control of the self by the self (in other words, self-control). As a result, ‘knowledge, after nearly a thousand years, is divorced from inwardness and literally dehumanised’. (Barnett, 1997, p. 79)

Knowledge, however, is also divorced from a public form of outwardness. Once knowledge acquires a private instrumental value, a value without a public value, it is also dehumanized because it forecloses the possibility of action. The outer, it should be noted, develops the inner; the Quadrivium builds our understanding of the Trivium. Private, instrumental values attached to knowledge curb the vita activa; outward, publicly oriented values enable it to flourish.

It is here that citizenship, earning income and education come together. We are regarded as citizens to the extent that we can partake in social life, and social life has come to mean, for many, little more than production and consumption. And so good citizenship loses its ties to traditional ideas of virtue and worldliness. Instead, virtue is demonstrated by secular signifiers: what we can consume and those things we consume are primarily determined by what we earn, and how we earn it, since leisure time is also required to consume. What we earn has, in the past, been largely determined by educational background (or rather what we earned was determined by class background and this correlated with educational background), and so, it follows, some kind of flow between the roles of citizenship, employment and education can be expected.

Of course, this is all entirely contingent. The idea that those with more material goods live fuller lives is precisely the inequality that democracy attempts to iron out. What we have is a democratic state which reinforces this message which celebrates consumption and encourages fairness through encouraging what it calls a ‘meritocracy’. However, the merit rewarded in this system is that which corresponds with the status quo ante. This takes away the critical voice of dissent
and leaves us as narrower, more limited, citizens. As citizens we can take part in the life of society but we cannot mount a political challenge to the world we inhabit and the corruption of the goods we value. In short, and in Arendtian terms, the idea of citizenship has shifted from a political to a social meaning.

In our rather impoverished understanding of higher education, learning is either productive, in that it is regarded as an investment which will pay dividends in terms of future earnings, or it is consumptive, in that it is like a leisurely activity, a kind of high-minded frivolity. But this is to mistake education for training or entertainment. While education, Arendt maintains, belongs to the realm of the world, training and entertainment relate to life. Education introduces learners to the world; it teaches them to question it in a process of becoming and ensures the continuance of the world. Training and entertainment, on the other hand, are consumer goods destined to be used up:

*Panis et circenses* truly belong together; both are necessary for life, for its preservation and recuperation, and both vanish in the course of the life process – that is, both must constantly be produced anew and offered anew, lest this process cease entirely. The standards by which both should be judged are freshness and novelty, and the extent to which we use these standards today to judge cultural and artistic objects as well, things which are supposed to remain in the world after we have left it, indicates clearly the extent to which the need for entertainment has begun to threaten the cultural world. (Arendt, 1993, p. 286)

Arendt here compares the worldly realms of culture and art with the business of earning and entertainment. But the point pertains equally to education. In a rush to provide equality of opportunity, to broaden the range of groups participating in higher education and in connecting efficiency indicators to teaching and research, we have forgotten the purposes of education generally, and higher education specifically. As higher education comes under the fiscal pressures of austerity, the need to recall those purposes is urgent.

Higher education should not be necessary for developing basic democratic virtues, such as toleration, truth-telling and a predisposition to respect others. What universities can do, however, is encourage the kind of vicarious decision-making advocated by Walz. As Gutmann puts it:

[L]earning how to think carefully and critically about political problems, to articulate one’s views and defend them before people with whom one disagrees is a form of moral education to which young adults are more receptive [than young children] and for which universities are well-suited. (Gutmann, 1999, p. 173)
Democratic citizenship and academic autonomy

But what is taught is not the only directly relevant factor, for the idea of democratic citizenship not only offers a platform from which to criticize the vocational nature of much of what is taught in universities. It also offers a defence of institutional, scholarly autonomy. Academics can (sometimes) be regarded as an especially important category of citizen:

Control of the creation of ideas – whether by a majority or a minority – subverts the ideal of conscious social reproduction at the heart of democratic education and democratic politics. As institutional sanctuaries for free scholarly inquiry, universities can help prevent such subversion. They can provide a realm where new and unorthodox ideas are judged on their intellectual merits; where the men and women who defend such ideas, provided they defend them well, are not strangers but valuable members of a community. Universities thereby serve democracy as sanctuaries of nonrepression. In addition to creating and funding universities, democratic governments can further this primary purpose of higher education in two ways: by respecting what is commonly called the ‘academic freedom’ of scholars, and by respecting what might be called the ‘freedom of the academy’. (Gutmann, 1999, pp. 174–175)

The academic freedom of scholars is neither a right of citizenship nor a contractual right of university employees, though it is most obviously expressed through permanent academic tenure (Shils, 1997, pp. 80–82). It is the democratic purpose of the university, and not contracts held between employers and employees, which grounds the freedom of academic scholars.

The core of academic freedom is the freedom of scholars to assess existing theories, established institutions, and widely held beliefs according to the canons of truth adopted by their academic disciplines, without fear of sanction by anyone if they arrive at unpopular conclusions. Academic freedom allows scholars to follow their autonomous judgment wherever it leads them, provided that they remain within the bounds of scholarly standards of inquiry. (Gutmann, 1999, p. 175)

In return for this freedom scholars have a duty to observe scholarly standards of inquiry. To neglect this would make the freedom of the scholar indistinct from more general freedoms of speech that all citizens hold. To be sure, it is precisely a blurring of these categories which occurs when an academic scholar takes on the role of a consultant. One way, then, that we might assess the decline in academic freedom would be through the increasing expectation that academics behave like
consultants and, connectedly, the increasing prevalence of short-term temporary employment contracts for academics. Of course, the notion that academics can also act as consultants reinforces the pressure to keep levels of pay down and to offer temporary employment. The myth we are encouraged to believe in is that good teachers and good researchers will also be able to function as successful consultants in the real world of business. Seldom do we come across the point that education, from a normative point of view, takes as its task the preservation of the world, which entails a cultivation of civilization, while the ‘real world’ of private business and industry, in fact, belongs to a life process and sometimes does considerable harm to the world in concrete terms.

Now, one form which academic freedom takes is the ability for academics to be able to control the educational environment within which teaching and research take place. The institutional administration of universities, however, varies between cultures in important ways.

Whereas German universities were generally self-governing bodies of scholars who made administrative decisions either collegially or through democratically elected administrators, American universities (with few exceptions) are administered by lay governing boards and administrators chosen by those boards. Therefore, while the scholar’s right of academic freedom in the German context could readily be extended to a right collectively to control the academic environment of the university, the academic freedom of faculty in the American context had to be used as a defense against the universities’ legally constituted (lay) administrative authority. Recurrent threats by universities’ trustees and administrators to the academic freedom of faculty members made it easy for faculty to overlook their stake in defending their universities against state regulation of education policies. (Gutmann, 1999, p. 176)

When we look to the administration of British higher education, we see a marked shift from a more or less Germanic model of governance to an American system of management (Salter and Tapper, 2000). The crucial difference, however, is that in British higher education institutions, professional administrators, teaching and research staff with administrative responsibilities and lay members of universities’ governing bodies are all guided by the norms laid down by state-determined performance indicators which attempt to reproduce a market, or at least a competitive, environment. The public good of the university is polluted, degraded and colonized by both state and market.

The managerial argument against the kinds of points I sketched out above claims that academic freedom is the slogan which academics appeal to whenever their authority is undermined. Academic freedom, so the argument
goes, is a concept which applies to the freedom of students just as much as academic staff. Therefore, academic freedom entails duties towards teaching students well. The managerialism of today’s university culture is no more than enshrining this duty in the procedures of faculty against the vested interests of academic staff. In response to this it can be said that there is obviously a duty to teach students well, to operate a fair admissions policy, as far as possible, to assess students’ work fairly and accurately, and to allow students to have control over what they study even. Academic freedom is not a freedom to provide poor teaching or poor research. It is, in fact, a freedom to do good research and good teaching, whatever form this takes – and that is a judgement for the academic community. The problem with the managerialist approach is that its procedures have never been discursively redeemed in argument. Rather, performance indicators and working practices have been handed down by the state to the administrators of our universities based on business norms (Kedourie, 1989, pp. 27–34) which (generally) regard students and their families as consumers demanding higher education. Of course, this denies the legitimate authority of academic staff over their students, which is not to say that students have no claim to academic freedom, but, rather, that academic freedom could best be served through procedures settled on – though they remain fallible – by participants: the academic community (and not only its managers), the state and the wider public.

With regard to citizenship, however, universities not only help to create citizens through teaching students; they also, through the academic freedom of faculty staff, help to lead political debate in new, or old and forgotten, directions. The autonomy of the modern university is rooted, like the idea of the active citizen, in the protection of democracy against the threat of domination. The academic freedoms of scholars and universities guard against political repression for all citizens, not only scholars. This is so precisely because the rational pursuit of truth lies at the heart of the intellectual exercise.

But the freedom of faculty scholars does not have to be directly impinged upon to infringe the academic freedom of universities. Central to understanding this is the idea that an academic community of scholars creates its own scholarly standards. Democratic societies can ‘foster the general freedom of conscious social reproduction within politics by fostering the particular freedom of defending unpopular ideas within universities’ (Gutmann, 1999, p. 177). This marks the difference between populism and democracy. We can, and should, defend unpopular ideas if these ideas meet other standards of legitimacy. In this case, this means meeting standards of scholarly merit. To undermine academic freedom means to undermine an important distinction between democracy
and populism. So, academic freedom (from accountability mechanisms and
to cultivate civic engagement) is important to democratic citizenship because
it serves as a block to a rather insidious form of tyranny. The scholarly
university, that is, the true university, provides a space for action in which
students and scholars share a public, civic-minded ethic and supports students
and academics in their democratic forays into the public realm. The league-
table obsessed, branded, performative empirical reality of universities in the
twenty-first century may speak of widening participation, but the hierarchical
system they represent only reinforces the inequality of citizens (Delbanco, 2012,
p. 135). At the normative level, however, the university, insofar as it supports
and encourages an active, worldly, republican conception of citizenship, in both
teaching and research ought to be regarded as a public good, only guided by
market norms at the margins, only steered by state bureaucracy peripherally.
The resuscitation of the authority of the university depends upon such scholarly
integrity.

Notes

1 Williams writes that ‘Career is still used in the abstract spectacular sense of
politicians and entertainers, but more generally it is applied, with some conscious
and unconscious class distinction, to work or a job which contains some implicit
promise of progress. It has been most widely used for jobs with explicit internal
development – “a career in the Civil Service” – but it has since been extended to
any favourable or desired or flattered occupation – “a career in coalmining”. Career
now usually implies continuity if not necessarily promotion or advancement, yet
the distinction between a career and a job only partly depends on this and is often
associated also with class distinctions between different kinds of work.’

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The Interpretive Tradition and Its Legacy
Jon Nixon

And what is hermeneutical imagination? It is a sense of the questionableness of something and what this requires of us. (Hans-Georg Gadamer, 2004, pp. 41–42)

Universities are centrally concerned with the sustainability of research, scholarship and teaching. These practices – in varied combinations – constitute the field of higher education: research and scholarship inform teaching, which in turn helps disseminate research and enrich scholarly discourse. The continuity of human understanding from generation to generation is preserved, therefore, through the practices of higher education within an institutional context of which universities are an important element. That continuity is often conceptualized as one of selective transmission: the accumulation of received wisdom culled from the past and carried forward into the future. Underlying this notion of continuity is a view of history as either inherently progressive (the so-called Whig view of history) or in terminal decline (a view associated more with a conservative cast of mind). In this chapter I present a different view of continuity.

I argue – with reference mainly to the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer – that, while the past may bequeath us some insights, its main legacy is the questions we ask of it and the ‘questionableness’ it requires of us. We do not simply receive history. We make it. We do so through a process of understanding that is inherently dialogical and that acknowledges the plurality of the human world. Although the chapter focuses primarily on higher education, the implications of the argument are by no means restricted to that sector. The aim is to explore – with reference to a particular framework of ideas – how education might be
applied within a changing world. Implicit in that aim are two assumptions. First, philosophy is useful, practical: its beauty lies in its usefulness. Second, education is incomplete, provisional: its intrinsic value lies in it being not-yet-finished. These two assumptions inform the argument throughout and ensure, I hope, that the chapter is not so much an exercise in the philosophy of education as an initial and highly partial attempt at developing a philosophy for education.

The primacy of the question

In mid-eighteenth-century Milan, an obscure professor of rhetoric named Giambattista Vico claimed to have uncovered ‘the order of all progress from its first origins’. He elaborated this ‘order of progress’ in terms of what he termed ‘the course of nations’, central to which was ‘the recurrence of human institutions’: ‘at first there were forests, then cultivated fields and huts, next small houses and villages, thence cities, and at last academies and philosophers’ (Vico, 2001, p. 15). Implicit in his argument is that these human institutions are historically situated, but that they constitute a category that is sustainable across history. Writing both within and against the Enlightenment that had illuminated the scientific potential of the natural world, Vico was exercised by the idea that the divinely ordained natural world can only be understood in the light of the human world that had evolved and was still evolving in time.

That world, he sought to show, could only be understood chronologically. History was, as Vico saw it, the key to worldly understanding. He set out to establish an understanding of the evolution of human societies that was as revolutionary in its time as Darwin’s application of the notion of ‘evolution’ to the life sciences over a hundred years later. He lay the foundations of what we now categorize as ‘the humanities’ and of what is now practised as ‘anthropology’, ‘cultural studies’, ‘history’, ‘sociology’, and so on – but never lost sight of the partiality of human understanding. ‘There is always’, as Edward Said (2004, p. 12) put it, ‘something radically incomplete, insufficient, provisional, disputable, and arguable about humanistic knowledge that Vico never loses sight of’.

However, the impact of Vico’s New Science extends beyond ‘the humanities’. The third edition of this work published in the year of his death – and ‘thoroughly corrected revised, and expanded by the author’ – shows how all human knowledge is historically located and therefore open to interpretation. The ‘rules’ of science, as developed by contemporaries such as Newton, were
not – he implied – absolute and for all time. They were necessarily relative to their age and, as such, open to question. They were *interpretable*. Vico routed the tradition of hermeneutic enquiry – that was as old as Socrates – into the modern age of scientific enquiry. He was virtually unrecognized in his day and his work had little influence, but his long-term impact is indisputable. The world is not entirely given but made through our own understanding of it; and, as Marx went on to argue, if the world is what we make of it, then we can struggle to make of it a better world. Vico’s great, sprawling and (by our standards) unscholarly work is the hinge upon which the interpretive tradition turns towards historical consciousness.

Two insights in particular form the basis of that tradition. The first idea is that *in any attempt at interpretation we are interpreting that which has already been interpreted*. The object of our interpretation is a construct that we inherit from the historical layering of countless prior interpretations and re-interpretations. There is no blank page of history upon which we can inscribe our entirely original understandings. History is a palimpsest of layered inscriptions and layered commentaries. The second insight follows from the first. If all understanding is always already interpretation, then *the interpreter is always already part of what is being interpreted*. The subject that interprets is implicit in the object of interpretation. Notions of ‘objectivity’ and ‘neutrality’ as the privileged criteria of rationality become increasingly difficult to justify in the light of this second insight.

These two insights were implicit – rather than explicit – in *New Science*. Vico was feeling his way towards a new world view that was still embryonic. He was fascinated by pre-history and how, prior to a chronological and sequential notion of time, people nevertheless located themselves historically. He understood that the past was another country which had to be understood on its own terms rather than on our terms. His formulation of the ‘epochs of world history’ into ‘the ages of gods, heroes, and men’ may seem strange and esoteric to us, but in its time it was path-breaking in its insistence on past epochs as interpretive constructs expressed in terms of mythology, political constitutions and legal frameworks. History is what we make of it, and what we make of it is inextricable from how we understand it. These were ideas that would inspire and inform the work of Karl Marx and James Joyce. At the time, however, Vico was still finding a language and form within which to express and elaborate them.

A third insight follows from the first two and was developed in particular by Gadamer. If all understanding is always already interpretation and
the interpreter is always already part of what is being interpreted, then all understanding necessarily involves an element of self-understanding. Gadamer elaborated this insight with reference to the notion of ‘application’, which he understood as being implicit in all understanding from the moment of its inception. It is not that understanding is achieved and then applied but that the application is intrinsic to the process of understanding: ‘in all understanding an application occurs, such that the person who is understanding is himself or herself right there in the understood meaning. He or she belongs to the subject-matter that he or she is understanding … Everyone who understands something understands himself or herself in it’ (original emphases). (Gadamer, 2001, pp. 47–48) The hermeneutical task, as Gadamer defines it, is to locate oneself within one’s own field – or, as he would put it, ‘tradition’ – of understanding.

The idea of ‘tradition’ is central to hermeneutics as developed by Gadamer: ‘we stand in traditions, whether we know these traditions or not; that is, whether we are conscious of these or are so arrogant as to think we can begin without presuppositions – none of this changes the way traditions are working on us and in our understanding’ (Gadamer, 2001, p. 45). Traditions pose questions in response to which we define ourselves and our own sense of purpose. The coherence of any tradition, as understood by Gadamer, can only be defined with reference to its intrinsic plurality and potential for innovation. Traditions are constantly evolving as new generations interpret and re-interpret them and, by so doing, modify and elaborate them. Traditions may initially present themselves to us as assertions, but, as Gadamer (1977, pp. 11–13) insists, ‘no assertion is possible that cannot be understood as an answer to a question, and assertions can only be understood in this way … The real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable’.

Central to the argument of Gadamer’s (2004) Truth and Method is what he calls ‘the hermeneutic priority of the question’ (pp. 356–371). ‘Understanding begins,’ as he puts it, ‘when something addresses us. This is the first condition of hermeneutics’ (p. 298). In becoming receptive to that which addresses us we are opening ourselves to the question it asks of us: ‘the essence of the question is to open up possibilities and keep them open’ (p. 298) (original emphasis). Interpretation is the process whereby we receive the object of interpretation as a question and thereby gain ‘a sense of the questionableness of something and what this requires of us’ (Gadamer, 2001, p. 42). Gadamer’s major contribution to the interpretive – or hermeneutic – tradition is his insight into the dialogical nature of all interpretive acts. The inherent structure of that tradition, he argues, is that of question and answer."
Understanding as dialogue

The interpretive tradition as understood and developed by Gadamer is not, therefore, a bounded and impermeable system but an open and dialogical process that relies heavily on *phronesis* (‘deliberation’ or ‘practical reasoning’). Gadamer insists that *phronesis*, rightly understood, is not simply a process of applying general laws, rules or precepts to specific cases and thereby involving technical knowledge of the means. His central insight was that this process of application necessarily involves – in addition to, and in conjunction with, knowledge of the means – knowledge of the ends. *Phronesis*, in other words, is not just a form of technical reasoning but a mode of ethical reasoning requiring an understanding of the common good. ‘It’s clear’, as Gadamer (2006, p. 35) put it towards the end of his life, ‘that the knowledge of the means can’t leave out of consideration the knowledge of the final end of every action’. Human understanding is, from this perspective, (1) a highly complex process of ‘fusion’ which (2) necessarily involves ‘prejudices’ or ‘fore-meanings’ and (3) cannot, given its inherent unpredictability, be reduced to ‘method’.

The first of these elements relates to the notion of ‘the fusion of horizons’. The idea of ‘horizon’ – as developed by Gadamer – relates directly to the importance he places in tradition as the legacy of the past to the future and the corresponding debt owed by the present to the past. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer provides a general explanation of how and why he is using the concept: ‘The concept of “horizon” suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand – not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and in true proportion’ (Gadamer, 2004, p. 304). The concept as applied by Gadamer invariably relates to our understanding of the past and of how we interpret the past with reference to the sources available to us. Gadamer’s central point on this matter is that our horizons of understanding are never static: ‘Every historian and philologist must reckon with the fundamental non-definitiveness of the horizon in which his understanding moves. Historical tradition can be understood only as something always in the process of being defined by the course of events’ (Gadamer, 2004, p. 366).

The meaning to be derived from any act of interpretation is always *in between*: between the interpreted and the interpreter, between the object of interpretation and the interpreter as subject, between different historical positions and perspectives. This means that the object of interpretation
does not simply surrender its meaning as a form of divine revelation or authorial intention. Notwithstanding its historical roots in biblical exegesis, hermeneutics is in this respect both secular and humanist in its assumption that neither divine authority nor authorial intention provides the final arbiter in any interpretive act. There can be no appeal to a divine purpose that lies outside the historical course of events or to a human will that is immune to the consequences of those events.

The _in between_ nature of human understanding also means that interpretation is not simply imposed – as imported theory or pre-specified criteria – by the interpreter on the object of interpretation. Although the world is always already interpreted, every act of interpretation is a new beginning occasioning a necessary shift in the interpreter’s self-understanding; or, as Joseph Dunne (1997, p. 121) puts it, ‘the interpreter’s horizon is already being stretched beyond itself, so that it is no longer the same horizon that it was independently of this encounter’. Because both interpreter and interpreted are located in the process of history – _in medias res_ – the horizon of interpretation can never achieve permanent fixity. It changes constantly, just as our visual horizon varies with each step we take. Each interpretation is, therefore, both unique and open to reinterpretation – and ‘the fusion of horizons’, a process rather than an achieved state: ‘horizons are not rigid but mobile; they are in motion because our prejudgements are constantly put to the test’ (Gadamer, 2001, p. 48).

That brings us to the second element: namely, _the power of ‘prejudices’ or ‘fore-meanings’_ in the constitution of understanding. What the interpreter brings to the process of interpretation is vitally important. We understand the world in relation to what we bring to it by way of prior assumptions, preconceptions and prejudices. We understand the world in and through our experience of the world. This perspective, as Gadamer (2004, p. 271) puts it, ‘involves neither “neutrality” with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices’. If we are an integral part of the world that we are seeking to understand, then we can ‘formulate the fundamental epistemological question for a truly historical hermeneutics as follows: what is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices? What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the countless others which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?’ (p. 278) Prejudice – our historicity – is where interpretation begins: ‘the concept of “prejudice” is where we can start’ (p. 273). In any attempt at interpretation we consider prior values and assumptions that shape what and how we interpret.
Gadamer insists that this importing of ourselves into the process of understanding is a necessary component of that understanding. However, he also insists that we must be aware of what we are importing. Some of our prejudices may assist understanding, while others may distort or deny understanding. A large part of the hermeneutical task involves self-examination through the sifting of prejudices. To have trust in an interpretation is to trust that the interpreter has undergone this process of self-examination in respect of the values and assumptions that have shaped that interpretation. Similarly, to trust in one’s own interpretive capacity is not to have blind faith in one’s own convictions but to trust in one’s own commitment to questioning those convictions. Trust is a necessary condition of understanding and understanding is a necessary condition of our being in the world. If we trusted nothing in this world of ours, then it would be a world beyond our understanding – and a world beyond our understanding is no longer our world.

That is why Gadamer (1977, p. 8) argues that hermeneutics cannot be ‘restricted to a technique for avoiding misinterpretation’: misinterpretation through the application of inappropriate prejudices is to be avoided, but that avoidance does not in itself constitute understanding. I gain understanding not only by rejecting inappropriate prejudices but by using other of my prejudices to connect with what I seek to understand. In explicit opposition to the scientific ideal of objectivity devoid of all prejudice, Gadamer insists on the productive power of prejudice. He rejects as alienating the mistrust of the subject – and of ‘subjectivity’ – that he sees as implicit in that ideal. He argues, instead, for the necessity of trusting to the subject – and to ‘subjectivity’ – in all understanding.

Gadamer is not arguing on behalf of relativism: an ethics of ‘anything goes’. Rather, he is arguing for an ethics of deliberation. He is arguing on behalf of mutuality and reciprocity as the conditions necessary for whatever shared understanding is necessary for being together. Understanding implies – and requires as a necessary condition – recognition of both selfhood and difference and of the necessary relation between the two. To seek to understand is to adopt an ethical stance – not a moralistic or moralizing stance, but a stance which affirms the central importance of personhood (of the other and of the self). If our world is shaped by our understanding of it, and if that understanding is conditional upon our meeting of minds, then understanding is nothing if not ethical. The originality of Truth and Method lies in its injunction to overcome what Gadamer sees as the alienation implicit in the ideal of prejudiceless objectivity: acknowledge the presence of yourself in your own understanding; recognize the other person’s understanding as central to your
own understanding; develop your understanding as you would a dialogue. Above all, Gadamer insists, do not assume that human understanding can be reduced to method. That is not how human understanding works.

**Beyond method**

This third element – *the irreducibility of human understanding to ‘method’* – is in part an attempt by Gadamer to distinguish ‘the humanities’ from ‘the sciences’. However, it is also an attempt to resist what he saw as the methodological appropriation of the former by the latter. At the time when Gadamer was writing, ‘method’ was in the ascendancy. The idea of ‘method’ was particularly associated with scientific enquiry, but the idea of there being a pre-ordained methodology of enquiry across disciplines and fields of study held sway. For enquiry to be taken seriously – whether within the natural, human, or social sciences – it had to be conducted systematically and in accordance with pre-specified methodological procedures.

In its most extreme form, this scientific positivism – buttressed by the philosophical presuppositions of logical positivism or logical empiricism as it is sometimes termed – claimed that observational evidence is indispensable for knowledge of the world and that only when supported by such evidence could a belief that such and such is the case actually be the case (i.e. be ‘true’). A methodical approach to the selection, gathering and analysis of empirical ‘data’ – and to the inferential process whereby ‘findings’ were derived from this approach – was and to a large extent still is the means by which scientific enquiry gained legitimacy and public recognition. ‘Method’ would enable one to gather and analyse ‘data’ which would then provide knowledge in the form of ‘findings’. This became the dominant paradigm of scientific enquiry and exerted a strong influence on the social sciences generally and on social psychology in particular, where it was supported by the presuppositions of behaviourism.

Gadamer’s starting point in *Truth and Method* is the ‘problem of method’ as he terms it (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 3–8). Understanding, he maintains, cannot be reduced to a method, although interpretive methods may contribute to our understanding. Gadamer does not deny that there are methods, but he denies that such methods are constitutive of human understanding:

> Of course there are methods and one must learn them and apply them… As tools, methods are always good to have. But one must understand where these can be fruitfully used. Methodical sterility is a generally known phenomenon. …
What does the truly productive researcher do? … Applying the method is what the person does who never finds out anything new, who never brings to light an interpretation that has revelatory power. No, it is not their mastery of methods but their hermeneutical imagination that distinguishes truly productive researchers. And what is hermeneutical imagination? It is a sense of the questionableness of something and what this requires of us. (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 41–42)

Implicit in Gadamer’s critique of method is the idea that understanding involves self-formation and human flourishing that is open-ended in the extent and scope of its proliferation. The application of method, on the other hand, assumes a notion of rationality that seeks closure and predictability. Human understanding, argues Gadamer, must be true to the nature of humanity: a humanity that is necessarily fragile and vulnerable by virtue of its complex interconnectivities and its uncertain relation to the future. Gadamer saw this as a struggle between the human and natural sciences, with the latter imposing an inappropriate methodology on the former: when inappropriately applied to the human world, the scientific method insists upon an ideologically skewed version of humanity. Moreover, since the natural world is always already an interpreted world, the methodology derived from the natural sciences may be severely limited even when applied within its own traditional domain.

Worldly understanding

What Gadamer calls ‘the hermeneutical imagination’ begins and ends in dialogue. His attempt to elaborate the dialogical nature of human understanding remains hugely important in an increasingly globalized world of complex interconnectivity. Almost all the problems we now face are collective problems – problems, that is, that cannot be resolved by individuals working in isolation. The global inter-connectivity of human life means that working together towards collective solutions is much more difficult and much more crucial than it was in the past. Our networks of inter-connectivity are no longer knowable and bounded communities, but they are boundless spaces – the full communicative potential of which is unknowable.

Our big problems are all ‘bigger than selfproblems.’ Such problems – economic, environmental, religious and political – are, as Martha C. Nussbaum (2010, p. 79) argues, problems that require both collective and global understanding:
They have no hope of being solved unless people once distant come together and cooperate in ways they have not before. Think of global warming; decent trade regulations; the protection of the environment and animal species; the future of nuclear energy and the dangers of nuclear weapons; the movement of labor and the establishment of decent labor standards; the protection of children from trafficking, sexual abuse, and forced labor. All these can only truly be addressed by multinational discussions.

Such a list could, as Nussbaum points out, be extended almost indefinitely. The point is that our problems are increasingly not only collective problems but globally collective problems requiring globally collective solutions: problems which at every level of impact – the individual, inter-personal, institutional, national and international – are experienced globally. The collective solutions will emerge not from any totalizing consensus but from a willingness to reason together and in doing so to acknowledge and respect our differences. ‘People love homogeneity and are startled by difference’, Nussbaum (2008, p. 362) writes in her defence of religious equality; but it is the willingness to be ‘startled by difference’ that finally wins through in the long haul towards collective solutions: the collective, open-ended argument that constitutes deliberative democracy and locates within it mutual respect for our shared human dignity.

Globalization presents us not only with economic, political and social challenges but also with a huge hermeneutical challenge: How, in a world of difference, are we to engage in conversations that are both constitutive of and conditional upon shared understanding? Indeed, the economic, political and social terms within which debates on globalization are invariably couched may serve to obscure its impact on how we understand our world – and on how, in turn, that understanding impacts upon the economic, political and social construction of that world. How are we to learn to live together in a world of incommensurable difference? How are we to achieve understanding in – and for – the world?

Technical know-how (techne) and propositional knowledge derived from theory (theoria) are necessary resources for addressing such questions, but they are by no means sufficient. Indeed, as Gadamer seeks to show, they reveal a deficiency in the hermeneutical resources necessary for a worldly understanding of the world. Gadamer’s notion of understanding as intrinsically dialogical – and of phronesis as a distinct dialogical and conversational form – reminds us that in the sheer ordinariness of human understanding we possess the resources necessary not only for addressing those questions but for responding to them creatively and collectively. As Raymond Geuss (2010, p. 152) points out,
to speak of a “conversation” is to be very explicit about the inherently social nature of what makes us human and … directs attention away from trying to understand this activity as the activation of pre-given formal rules, or as aspiring to satisfy some antecedently given consensus of cogency, relevance, or accuracy’. That is, as Geuss acknowledges, an important part of the hermeneutical legacy bequeathed by Gadamer – and one which clearly has a bearing on the ends and purposes of higher education.

A critical legacy

But it is only part of that legacy. Given Gadamer’s insistence on the significance of the question in the constitution of human understanding, a large part of his legacy also lies in the questions his work raises and the critiques it invites. This is crucial: Gadamer’s framework of ideas provides us with an authoritative basis from which to critique that framework. Notwithstanding the power of any such critique, it is important to recall that ‘answering back’ is one of the defining features of Gadamer’s hermeneutical emphasis on the primacy of the question. Gadamer invites – requires even – a critical response.

One such critique questions whether Gadamer’s understanding of the dialogical – and of phronesis as a distinct dialogical and conversational form – fully acknowledges the powerful plurality that underpins it. Indeed, does Gadamer’s avowedly liberal perspective lead to a denial of that plurality and the power implicit in that plurality? Is there an inherent exclusivity in Gadamer’s conceptualization of phronesis that is unacknowledged – or repressed – within his conceptual framework? Is there a denial of radical difference? Such questions imply a critique of the critical capacity of Gadamer’s hermeneutics; its capacity, that is, to expose to critical scrutiny not only its own presuppositions but also its own preconditions. Does Gadamer take sufficient account of the systematically distorted communication that constitutes ideology? Or is it the case that, as Jürgen Habermas argues, ‘Gadamer’s prejudice for the rights of prejudices certified by tradition denies the power of reflection’ (Habermas, 1977, p. 358). 8

These questions invariably lead to a consideration of the historical setting of Gadamer’s life and work – and, in particular, Gadamer’s relation to Nazism and the post-war reconstruction of Germany within Europe. Unlike Heidegger, Gadamer was not a member of the Nazi Party. Nevertheless, he did accommodate himself to Nazism sufficiently to remain in an academic post throughout the
period that the Nazi regime controlled all the major institutions within Germany, including the universities. Reflecting back on that period in an audio-taped conversation with Dorte von Westernhagen in or shortly before 1990, he said: 'My cleverness [Geschicktheit] consisted in taking seriously as colleagues those who were Nazis but who were also at the same time genuine, rational scholars; avoiding, of course, political conversation' (Gadamer, 2001, p. 129). Interviewed in 1993 by Christiane Gehron and Jonathan Ree on behalf of Radical Philosophy, he re-asserted his earlier uneasy relation to Nazism: ‘I think we could teach philosophising even under the Nazi system’ (Gadamer, 1995, p. 31). It is difficult not to infer from such statements that, for Gadamer, philosophically collegial discourse could be based on both a shallow and a narrow consensus – one that clearly avoided ‘political conversation’.9

Such an inference has a direct bearing on how we interpret Gadamer. If the sifting of prejudices and fore-meanings is central to his hermeneutics, then how does that sifting occur? Does, for example, the avoidance of ‘political conversation’ – albeit under exceptional circumstances – constitute an example of such sifting? Do we not sometimes – when, for example, refuting the claims of racist ideology – require the resources of ‘scientific method’ to help us in that task of sifting? If so, does Gadamer polarize humanistic and scientific modes of understanding in ways that may provide a rhetorical cutting edge to his argument but that are ultimately unhelpful in any attempt to gather the educative resources necessary for worldly understanding? The global citizens of the future will need to have not only a humanistic understanding of the world but also a technological and scientific understanding of the way the world works.10 This requirement has important implications for how we conceive of education at every level and – in particular – how we conceive of an all-through, comprehensive further and higher education curriculum.

It also has pedagogical implications with regard to how radically different viewpoints, opinions and perspectives might be mediated and negotiated. How inclusive of difference is the dialogical component of understanding as assumed by Gadamer? We live within and across microcosms of difference: differences of race, class and gender; differences of value and identity affiliation; differences of sexual orientation and life style. We all have membership of different communities: to reduce individuals to a unitary identity is to violate the complexity of that identity.11 We carry difference around with us in our heads and in the relationships that sustain and form us. Reasoning together requires a responsive understanding of these worlds of difference that constitute the self and the relationship of self with others. A consensus that denies these
differentials – and the agonistic element that binds and divides them – denies also its own democratic authenticity. The pedagogical task is to find ways of recognizing difference and valuing dissensus. Given Gadamer’s limited emphasis on plurality, his work may be of limited value in setting about this task.

That limitation is also evident in Gadamer’s notion of tradition, which he defines almost entirely in terms of Western culture. This raises a number of questions: Is Western culture a single tradition? Is it one tradition among many? How are national differences accommodated within a tradition? Gadamer does not address these questions in any detail. Yet, as Said (2003, p. 332) argues, such questions are highly germane to any discussion of how interpretation operates in the context of global interconnectivity and disconnectivity: ‘debates today about “Frenchness” and “Englishness” in France and Britain respectively, or about Islam in countries such as Egypt and Pakistan, are part of that same interpretive process which involves the identities of different “others”, whether they be outsiders and refugees, or apostates and infidels’.

Fazal Rizvi (2009, p. 265) explores the pedagogical implications of this perspective with reference to what he calls ‘cosmopolitan learning’. Such learning, he argues, ‘involves pedagogic tasks that help students explore the criss-crossing of transnational circuits of communication, the flows of global capital and the cross-cutting of local, translocal and transnational social practices’. In so doing it ‘encourages students to consider the contested politics of place making, the social construction of power differentials and the dynamic processes relating to the formation of individual, group, national and transnational identities, and their corresponding fields of difference’.

Similarly, Bob Lingard (2008, p. 210) writes about the need to ‘deparochialize pedagogies’: ‘to construct and work towards pedagogies which make a difference in the distribution of knowledge and construction of identities and construction of global citizens who can work with and value difference’. Joelle Fanghanel (2012, pp. 108–112) also addresses these issues with reference to academic practice and the globalization of higher education.

Conclusion

The interpretive tradition as presented in this chapter highlights the dialogical nature of human understanding and the significance of phronesis as a distinct dialogical and conversational form. It also, however, highlights the need to relate phronetic forms of understanding with technological (techne) and
explanatory (*theoria*) forms of reasoning. That in turn has implications for how we conceive of method. As Paul Ricoeur (1977, p. 329) puts it, ‘there are no rules for making good guesses. But there are methods for validating guesses’. Good students need to be able to make good guesses, but they also need to be good at validating their guesses. They need, that is, to operate across different modes of understanding: to be able to deliberate and reason together, to have the technical know-how appropriate to particular tasks and to find their way in and around different explanatory frameworks. In doing so, they also need to be able to recognize radical differences of received opinion, cultural values and beliefs, and intellectual background. Finally, they need to be able to relate to the complex inter-connectivities of a world in which the global saturates the local and the local permeates the global.17

What are required are *pedagogical processes* that provide opportunities for dialogical interaction between students and between students and teachers, *curricular frameworks* that give access to different modes of understanding and different ways of ensuring complementarity across the arts, humanities and sciences, and *institutional systems* that are inclusive, participatory and outward-looking. The risk is that at a time of shrinking resources – when universities are under threat and higher education is being increasingly deprived of public funding – such fundamental requirements will be seen as unrealistic accessories. The only acceptable utopias now, as Ronald Barnett (2012) reminds us, are ‘feasible utopias’. All others are deemed to be either nostalgic yearnings or idealistic longings. What is central to higher education – and to academic practice – thereby becomes marginalized and isolated. If utopian thinking is limited to what is feasible, then we all too easily find ourselves inhabiting an alienated and alienating dystopia. ‘We need’, as Jan McArthur (2013, p. 160) insists, ‘to resist our own acceptance of this isolation. We should cease to feel the need to apologize for academic work that shows its passionate motivations and committed values.’ We need to reaffirm the central importance of both human understanding within an increasingly decimated higher education sector and also higher education within an increasingly stratified and fragmented university system.

The world view against which Gadamer was reacting was, as Richard Rorty (2000, p. 25) put it, ‘dominated by the thought that there is something nonhuman that human beings should try to live up to – a thought which today finds its most plausible expression in the scientistic conception of culture’. Rorty went on to define Gadamer’s legacy in the following terms: ‘In a future Gadamerian culture, human beings would wish only to live up to one another… The relationship
between predecessor and successor would be conceived…not as the power-laden relation of “overcoming” ( Uberwindung ) but as the gentler relation of turning to new “purposes” ( Verwindung ). In such a culture, Rorty concludes, ‘Gadamer would be seen as one of the figures who helped give a new, more literal, sense to Holderlin’s line, “Ever since we are a conversation” (“Seit wir ein Gespräch sind”). He would also be seen, we might add, as one of the figures who helped envisage a more democratic, secular and cosmopolitan world.

Notes

1 See Carolyn Kreber’s discussion of ‘the inseparability of academic functions’ in Kreber (2013, pp. 66–69).

2 Both ideas are central to the life and work of William Morris and to the Manifesto of the Socialist League which Morris drafted and which was adopted at the General Conference of the Socialist League on 5 July 1885. (see E.P. Thompson 1976, pp. 732–740).

3 Hans-Georg Gadamer was born on 11 February 1900 in Breslau (Germany) and died on 13 March 2002 in Heidelberg (see Jean Grondin 2003).

4 A similar argument had previously been advanced by R. G. Collingwood in Chapter 5 (‘Question and Answer’) of his autobiography which was first published in 1939 (see Collingwood, 1978, pp. 29–43). Fred Inglis’s (2009) recent biography provides a readable and non-technical introduction to Collingwood’s life and thought.

5 In his analysis of ‘prejudice’, Gadamer starts from the structure of the German word – das Vorurteil (‘pre-judice’). Duska Dobrosavljev’s (2002, p. 608) gloss on Gadamer’s usage of the term is helpful: ‘Prejudice is a soil where our judgement is grown’.


7 See WWF-UK (2010). Appendix two of this report provides a comprehensive review of the literature relating to this category of problem.

8 Habermas’s major and highly influential critique of Gadamer’s Truth and Method was published in German in 1970 and subsequently translated into English in 1977 (see Habermas, 1977).

9 Dmitri N. Shalin (2010) provides a comprehensive overview of the ongoing debate on Gadamer’s relation to Nazism. See, also, Yvonne Sherratt (2013).

10 It is worth bearing in mind that, as Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld (1938) showed in their remarkable The Evolution of Physics, science is also deeply interpretive: ‘Science is not just a collection of laws, a catalogue of unrelated facts.'
It is a creation of the human mind, with its freely invented ideas and concepts’ (p. 310). See also Werner Heisenberg (2000).

11 See Amartya Sen (2007) for a fuller elaboration of this argument regarding the violence imposed upon identity through the process of cultural homogenization.

12 See Chantal Mouffe (1993 and 2005) for a discussion of agonistic element in democratic discourse. ‘Democracy’, she argues, ‘is in peril not only when there is insufficient consensus and allegiance to the values it embodies, but also when its agonistic dynamic is hindered by an apparent excess of consensus, which usually masks a disquieting apathy’ (1993, p. 6).

13 See Jacques Ranciere (2010 and 2011) on the democratic significance of dissensus.

14 These questions were put to Gadamer in the 1993 interview conducted by Christiane Gehron and Jonathan Ree on behalf of Radical Philosophy, but received little in the way of detailed response (see Gadamer, 1995, p. 32).

15 Rizvi (2008) develops a similar argument.

16 See also my discussion of ‘cosmopolitan imaginaries’ in Nixon (2011, pp. 51–65).

17 Anatoly Oleksiyenko (2012) shows how what he terms a ‘glonacal’ (i.e. global–national–local) institutional partnership in Central Asia involving the governments of three diverse national regions – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – is seeking to promote and support such learning.

References


To begin, here are some examples of the epistemic monoculture, the hegemony of instrumental reason, in which increasingly we live (I write throughout from a UK perspective, but I believe my points have wider interest). There is space here for only a few egregious instances. The President of the Royal British Legion (which ‘provides help and welfare to the serving and ex-Service community and their families’) resigned after he was discovered to have described the annual events to commemorate those killed in war, such as the ceremony at the Cenotaph in London’s Whitehall, as a ‘tremendous networking opportunity’ in which he could help defence companies (i.e. arms manufacturers), lobby ministers and senior members in the armed services (The Guardian, 15 October 2013). I have elsewhere (Smith, 2012) quoted the mayor of London, Boris Johnson, welcoming the London Olympics as a ‘gigantic schmooze-athon’, the opportunity to show the world the ‘wealth of … amazing investment opportunities’ in Britain. The website of the government’s department of Business, Industry and skills (BIS) where this appeared without apparent embarrassment or shame quoted other politicians from the Coalition government, such as the Business Secretary, Vince Cable: ‘Tomorrow we welcome the world to London as the 2012 Olympic Games get underway. This summer is more than just a great sporting spectacle – it is an unrivalled opportunity to promote the best of British industry and make the most of our openness to foreign trade and investment.’ Thus sport, which one might have thought was above all something to be enjoyed for its own sake, or at least not for the sake of foreign trade and investment, becomes instrumentalized for the benefit of the economy. Another, recent, example, a headline from the Guardian, 27 December 2013, reads ‘Tour de France to bring cash and cachet to Yorkshire’. A sub-heading reads ‘organisers predict £100m lift for regional economy’. Nothing, it seems, is left untouched by this process. Hull’s success in
being named as UK’s City of Culture for 2017 was reported in the local paper the Hull Daily Mail in almost exclusively instrumental terms as helping to deliver ‘the £190m ten-year City Plan outlined by Hull City Council to create 7,500 jobs’. The newspaper’s headline made the relative standing of culture clear by putting the money at the beginning of its headline: ‘£60m UK City of Culture boost for Hull is “start of the future”’. In similar terms, the Ilkley Gazette celebrated the 40th anniversary of its town’s Literature Festival with the headline ‘Literature festival estimated to boost economy by £2,50,000’ (4 October 2013). Of course, these headlines do not come from nowhere: they probably recycle press releases from the organizations that have an interest in the various events they promote. This is one more way in which the monoculture takes root.

What I mean, then, by saying that we are coming to live in an epistemic monoculture is that increasingly the only form of reason that is valued or even acknowledged is the instrumental, means–end kind. We are becoming insensible to the value of sport, the importance of remembrance, the complex delights and satisfactions of literature and other forms of the arts. With increasing speed we are coming to resemble those responsible for that other distinctive monoculture of our time, that of high-profit agriculture: where the profits made from the intensive farming of wheat or oil-seed rape (not to mention here the destruction of the rainforest) are made at the cost of grubbing out the hedgerows and over-using insecticides to the point where what used to be called the ‘countryside’ cannot sustain those other cultures such as wildlife and the people who once lived side by side with them.

I turn now to the way that what I shall simply call ‘the university’, for centuries widely held to be a place committed to the critical examination of thinking rather than to its ossification, and even to the generation of different forms of thinking, is now meekly collaborating in the triumph of instrumental thought. While my examples come from the United Kingdom (or at any rate England) in the second decade of the twenty-first century, since the political and economic forces affecting the United Kingdom are similar elsewhere in the Anglophone world, and beyond, my argument may have wider application. Here our condition, as I diagnose it, can be put briefly as follows. The ever-increasing reach of instrumentalism, stimulated by the growth of neoliberalism and the market, has brought us to the point where it has become difficult to imagine the purpose of university education in any other terms. Studying at university is now widely conceived as above all the acquisition of ‘employability skills’. A degree is a passport to a career – or at any rate a job – that offers you the chance of enjoying at least a reasonable standard of living and, of course, being able
to repay the fees that you have incurred. At the same time, university research and scholarship are more and more judged in terms of their 'impact', as if the ideal to which all research should aspire was the invention of a light-sabre or personal jet-pack. Under these circumstances, management and administration – often dignified as 'governance' by a curious twist of language that there is no room to explore here – naturally assume new significance, since it is precisely in the finding of means to achieve ends that managers are supposedly skilled (MacIntyre, 1981).

Critiques of the culture of managerialism, targets and performance indicators in the university are often suspected of nostalgia for an older and more relaxed vision of higher education associated with a time when numbers of students (and academics) were smaller and management was more collegial. In order to pre-empt what is in my view a rather cheap dismissal of my line of argument, let me make it clear that I am not saying instrumental thinking has no place at all in the university. Clearly, it is good that academic researchers find cures for diseases and discover ways of ameliorating climate change. I reject too any suggestion that students who pursue university qualifications essentially as a means to an end are in some sense inferior to those who – whether now or in some imagined past – came or came in search of knowledge for its own sake. Perhaps I can best emphasize this by sketching two of my own recent students, with some composite features for the sake of anonymity.

Carol was a middle-manager in a Primary Care Trust (a local tier of the United Kingdom’s National Health Service). Although she was very good at her job she had hit a ceiling beyond which she was unlikely to be promoted. Every year she saw colleagues who held university degrees being promoted above her. Eventually she took the risk – both financial and in terms of the potential damage to her self-belief if she did not succeed – of applying to university, at the age of 37, initially as a part-time student. After three years of this she changed to full-time study, partly to reach her goal more quickly and partly to do herself the justice she now saw she was capable of. She has her own family and bears significant responsibilities as one of the carers for her elderly mother. During her years of study she did not play university sport, go to student parties or involve herself with any of the numerous student societies – all the things which this particular university's vice-chancellor likes to recommend as ways of 'not letting your degree get in the way of your education'. She was seldom able to do more than the essential reading and certainly did not have time to explore 'the fascinating by-ways and nooks and crannies' of her subject that one lecturer insisted was the difference between real university education and a poor
Towards the end of her final year Carol sat in a restaurant with a dozen fellow-students and shocked them with the revelation that this was the first time she had had any substantial social contact with other students over her six years of study. With her newly conferred degree she was quickly promoted. She talks now of her career, rather than her job, of her sense of status in her workplace and of her new self-respect.

Tom came to university as an eighteen-year-old from a rural background in the west of England. He liked to present himself as a country boy, more comfortable on a tractor than in the library. Nothing however could disguise his intelligence, ambition and capacity for hard work. He aimed to secure a place on the graduate scheme of one of the major consultancy and accounting firms. Despite being on route to the first-class degree that he eventually secured, he was unsuccessful in all his applications. He decided to take a master’s degree in International Politics, reasoning that although he was not particularly interested in the subject, this would help him stand out from the hundreds of applicants who only held a bachelor’s degree. Now his applications quickly led to offers. Throughout his time as an undergraduate he made his career plans known and defended them against those disposed to characterize them as ‘selling out’ or ‘working for the man’. He doggedly used to explain that ‘for someone like me’ working in the city represented a crucial break from his roots, marking him out from the peers with whom he had grown up and taking him to a wholly new place (he never used the word ‘class’). Tom enjoyed student life to the full, including sport; but his career goal was always paramount. For him university stood for more than many of his contemporaries could easily understand. If it was a means to an end, the meaning of that end was rich and complex.

As these two brief examples show, the pursuit of vocational ends by way of university study can be life-transforming. Instrumental thinking in higher education has its place. The problem is that instrumental thinking has now become dominant and pervasive, reaching into every aspect of the university and driving out other kinds of thinking or, as I shall put it, other modes of rationality. No clearer instance of this can be given than the way that media reporting and discussion of university education in England has for several years focused on the question of fees, the debts that graduates will incur and whether these will prove to have been a good investment in the light of the salaries they earn in the jobs or careers that they embark on. The question of the worthwhileness of university study thus becomes answerable in terms of calculating financial outlay against financial return. This is instrumental thinking of the crudest
sort. Its inevitability is confirmed by TV news clips or newspaper photographs (the complicity of the media should again be noted) showing young people, wearing academic gowns and fresh from their graduation ceremonies, tossing their mortar-boards into the air. Text accompanying the pictures highlights the annual fees to be paid for tuition and the amount of debt incurred over the three (or more) years of study. The message is clear: any idea that the point of all this was pleasure in academic achievement or the acquisition of understanding for its own sake, the mastery of a subject or discipline or exhilaration in a sense of the boundlessness of knowledge, is shown up as naive against the ineluctable numbers, the reckoning of profit and loss.

Instrumental thinking here is closely bound up with the assumptions of neoliberalism: that university education is a market good whose purchase is entirely comparable to a house, car or any other commodity. The market knows only means–end, instrumental thinking. As Adam Smith memorably noted in *The Wealth of Nations*, the butcher, the baker and the brewer aim to please their customers not out of any benevolent motive but from the knowledge that this is the only way for their business to flourish. If they serve them badly, the customers will go elsewhere. So too the university is now reconceived as one more industry that must submit to ‘the discipline of the market’. Students are now customers who must be served well if the institution is to survive and prosper. Any other kind of thinking, such as that the lecturer came into this line of work motivated by a desire to introduce the next generation to the fascination and frustration of her subject, is discounted. Whole batteries of information, known as ‘Key Information Sets’ (KIS), are now available online, allowing students to discover, for any course of study they are interested in, the percentage of graduates at work or further study after six months, the percentage of them in professional and managerial roles after six months, their satisfaction with the support and guidance they received, the costs of accommodation and so on. Accordingly, universities have made rapid progress in foregrounding the ‘employability skills’ their courses equip students with. Staff are encouraged to diversify modes of assessment, on the grounds that, say, having to make a presentation to other students in a seminar means that you can claim to have ‘communication skills’ on your CV. Any course or module making a plausible case to supply ‘employability skills’ now seems to enjoy a charmed passage through university validation committees. Again, the point is not that students should not acquire such skills (if we only knew what they were) or should not have data from KIS, but that other ways of thinking about what to study and where, and why, are rendered invisible.
Fully to grasp the extent to which instrumental thinking and neoliberal theory have colonized the English university is to be in a position to make sense of various other oddities of the educational landscape. Three examples will suffice. First, it is a phenomenon more remarkable than we tend to notice, having become familiar with it, that the universities of the United Kingdom are the responsibility not of the Department for Education, nor any other government department with ‘education’ in its title, but of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (colleagues from other parts of the world tend to find this beyond parody). This is commonly abbreviated to BIS, some image management consultant having decreed, or so I assume, that the abandonment of words and comma signify the urgent, businesslike and innovative discovery of means towards the skilling-up of the workforce (as the consultant would no doubt put it) in the interest of the economy. Secondly, the Coalition government put the key higher education funding proposals, including the massive increase in fees, to a vote in parliament in December 2010 and only then published a White Paper, *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*, in June 2011. The usual practice is the other way round: White Papers set out principles and policies, from which follow consultation and discussion, and then the detailed draft legislation on which parliament eventually votes. Here instrumental considerations of how the university system was to be funded took priority over, or rather obviated, considerations of just what universities are for.

Thirdly, university research is now judged partly on its ‘impact’, that is on the extent to which it brings benefits to the world outside academe. As I noted above, in one sense this is unexceptionable, and there is a strong case in principle for saying that much of the research done by university departments and their staff should be in some way useful to the wider society, rather than merely being valued by other academics. Why else, it may be asked, should the tax-payer fund it? Yet the matter is far from straightforward. For a start, some subjects, such as philosophy, classics or English literature are bound to find it much more difficult to demonstrate such ‘impact’ than others such as physics or engineering. Any overt proposal to cease the teaching of the humanities (to ‘disinvest’ in them, no doubt) on the grounds that they are not socially useful would almost certainly cause public disquiet: it is obvious enough – or so we might think – that their value cannot be conceived in this kind of way. But the criterion of ‘impact’ seems likely to have a similarly disastrous effect, seeming to offer the humanities in particular the chance to succeed on a yardstick against which they can in fact hardly be measured while still being the kinds of subjects that they are.
Furthermore, it is well-known that even research that does have ‘impact’ seldom does so within the lifetime of a particular university research assessment period of roughly eight years. Peter Higgs’ theorization of what has become known as the Higgs boson particle is often cited in this context: Higgs’ seminal work was published in 1964 but the particle’s discovery was not announced at CERN (the European Centre for Nuclear Research) until the summer of 2012, and it is still far from clear what the use of the discovery is even while it is widely agreed that it is of enormous scientific importance. (Higgs has observed that he would be unlikely to be kept on his university post these days, even supposing that he was appointed to one in the first place.) To give your research maximum ‘impact’ you would need to publish or otherwise disseminate it at the beginning of a research cycle, but this only points up the arbitrary nature of whether research has ‘impact’, in the terms proposed, or not.

One of the most disquieting aspects of the introduction of ‘impact’ as a criterion is the way that it has colonized the academic imagination. For the forthcoming UK research assessment exercise, the ‘Research Excellence Framework’, ‘impact’ will actually account for no more than 20 per cent of a department’s score (and thus for 20 per cent of its research income from central sources); 65 per cent is contributed by ‘outputs’, that is publications. The criteria for the quality of these is clear: they are originality, significance and rigour. Not only does ‘impact’ not figure here: research assessors are explicitly instructed not to let their judgements be affected by any thoughts they have about what the impact of publications is likely to be. Nevertheless, academics and their managers can be heard constantly talking as if research that has ‘impact’ is the only game in town. At my own university, for example, applicants for research leave are now required to indicate what they expect the impact of their proposed research – research not even started yet – to be. Similar demands are also made of lecturers attempting to pass their probation, or to secure promotion. A particular sort of academic, whose publications are indifferent but who likes to think of his or her research as on the jet-pack end of the spectrum, now has licence for self-importance.

It is not easy to see how this state of things can successfully be countered. It seems to be impervious to sound argument and criticism. I take this to be a clear sign that a particular kind of rationality and language have made themselves at home, and that its most fluent practitioners, the self-important especially, now seeing little around them except the monoculture which they themselves have helped to create, take this simply as the natural and given, and no doubt desirable, order of things. The philosopher Richard Rorty (1989) has written
about the difficulty of mounting successful arguments against an entrenched language or viewpoint such as that constituted by instrumental reason. He thinks that radical social changes generally take place not because an individual thinker or even a group of thinkers puts forward a convincing argument: it is more that a language which has long seemed to be the only language to use starts to seem old-fashioned or inadequate. He gives the example (p. 12) of how ‘the traditional Aristotelian vocabulary got in the way of the mathematical vocabulary that was being developed in the sixteenth century by students of mechanics’.

This line of thought seems plausible. What the monoculture of instrumental reason and its vocabulary ‘gets in the way of’, I would say, is a conception of rationality that allows us to do greater justice to human well-being and human needs, particularly the need to live a meaningful life. We do not have to invent such a conception ex nihilo. Other epochs have set out richer visions of rationality than we now enjoy, sometimes apparently in response to a similar narrowing of the prevailing horizons of thought. Perhaps the most obvious recent example is the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, which countered the mathematical and geometric rationality of the Enlightenment with a celebration of spontaneity and irregularity (the poet Wordsworth was wandering when he happened to come upon the daffodils, as was William Blake through the ‘charter’d’ – that is, always for sale – streets of London) and recommended attunement to the natural world instead of mastery of it. I have written elsewhere (Smith, 1999) of Dickens’ marvellous treatment of this in *Hard Times*, where he contrasts the rigid formalism of Mr Gradgrind’s utilitarianism with the uncalculating élan of ‘the horse-riding’, the travelling circus. (*The Coketown Gazette* no doubt carried a headline: ‘100 guinea boost to Coketown economy when circus comes to town’.)

Elements of a strikingly similar ‘romantic rationality’ can be found in Plato. It is tempting to interpret this as a reaction against the realpolitik and knowingness that had ended in the disaster of the war against Sparta at the end of the fifth century BC. It is worth giving an example at length. In Plato’s *Phaedrus*, the young man after whom the dialogue is named first appears in conversation with Socrates while walking in the countryside outside the city walls of Athens. His doctor has advised him of the health benefits of country walks. They are means to an end. Our suspicion that Phaedrus is the model of an instrumental thinker is confirmed when we learn that he has been listening to a presentation by the itinerant sophist Lysias. This was on the subject of love (*eros*, which has a stronger sexual connotation than our word ‘love’): Lysias argued that an attractive and promising young man – rather like Phaedrus
himself, perhaps – ought to offer himself not to an older man who is in love with him but to one who is not. Phaedrus has a copy of the speech and reads it to Socrates. A young man is best advised to trade what he has to offer in return for the support a more experienced and better placed (politically and financially, no doubt) man can give him in his pursuit of his ambitions.

The fitting thing is rather to grant favours not to those who stand in great need of them but to those who are most able to pay a favour back; not to those who are merely in love with you but to those who deserve the thing you have to give; not to the sort who will take advantage of your youthful beauty but to the ones who will share their own advantages with you when you become older. (Phaedrus, 233e6–234a3)

In Plato’s dialogue Socrates offers Phaedrus a superior speech, but along the same general lines as Lysias’. Then he declares the conversation over and makes to leave. But some supernatural force prevents him. He explains that the speech he has just made was dreadful, as was Lysias’. Both speeches made the mistake of denigrating being in love as a kind of madness, and so praised relationships based on cool, prudential rationality. Socrates says: ‘That would be rightly said if it were a simple truth that madness is a bad thing; but as it is, the greatest of goods come to us through madness, provided that it is bestowed by divine gift … god-sent madness is a finer thing than man-made sanity’ (Phaedrus, 244a6–244d3). And this is true about language itself, about speech and writing.

The man who arrives at the doors of poetry without madness from the Muses, convinced that after all expertise will make him a good poet, both he and his poetry – the poetry of the sane – are eclipsed by that of the mad, remaining imperfect and unfulfilled. (Phaedrus, 245a6–245a10)

The dialogue asks us to open our minds to more than means–end calculation. The sensuality and magic of the setting, under a plane-tree by the river Ilissus, with the cicadas making their hypnotic music overhead, create an atmosphere in which both Socrates and Phaedrus become unusually receptive, both to the place and to each other. There is a heightened sense of awareness here in which their understanding of their ends re-shapes itself in ways that are only shadowed by the words that are written as having been spoken and are thus doubly removed from intention and calculation, the workings of dispassionate intellect. Can this vision of reason as an alternative to the relentlessly instrumental kind still speak to us today? The cynicism (some might call it ‘realism’) of the instrumental approach to human relationships that Lysias recommends can
be appreciated if we place it in a modern setting (see Nussbaum, 1986, for an illuminating discussion along these lines). A young woman can look for the elusive ‘real thing’ in her personal life, or she can form a relationship with an older man in her workplace, her line manager, perhaps, or ‘one of the partners’, someone who can help her up the career ladder and take her out for better meals than her regular boyfriend can afford. Another modern parallel is supplied by the numerous Internet sites offering instructions on how to write a love letter. (“The purpose of a software program for love letters is to get your creative juices flowing by presenting you with a wealth of ideas, tips, and examples to help you compose a love letter that is deeply personal and effective – a letter someone will cherish for a long time.”)

The reaction against exclusively means–end thinking, and the attempt to articulate a different version of reason, can also be found in Aristotle’s account of phronesis, variously translated as practical judgement, practical reasoning or practical wisdom, in the Nicomachean Ethics, written around 350 BC, some ten years after Plato’s Phaedrus. Aristotle distinguishes phronesis from techne: the latter, often translated as ‘skill’, belongs in the realm of instrumental reason and has connotations of what in our own time we would call ‘science’. Techne is displayed by the craftsman who plans and makes a chair. Once he has acquired the relevant skill or set of skills he can replicate the procedure more or less accurately and teach the procedure to others so that they can make a chair in just the way that he does (vases from the workshops of classical Greek potters are often hard to attribute to particular craftsmen for precisely this reason; so too paintings from, say, ‘the school of Peter Paul Rubens’). He can give an explanation for making the chair one way rather than another, pointing out, say, that the legs characteristically splay slightly in order for the chair to have greater stability. Thus there is a rationale behind his craft which makes it possible to think of it as a distinctive kind of rationality.

The example of phronesis most-often cited, and used by Aristotle himself, is the activity of politics. Politics cannot consist simply in the pursuit of certain ends such as low inflation and territorial expansion while being indifferent to means. The good nation-state, in terms that Aristotle would recognize, is characterized by open and honest dealings among the citizenry, as opposed to corruption and what we would now call ‘spin’ and ‘sleaze’. In the world of industry or commerce, similarly, the pursuit of such goals as competitive advantage does not justify using any means, including (e.g.) the hacking of one’s rivals’ communication systems, to ensure those goals are achieved. That is to say that particular values are internal to the practice of the good organization. Good
teaching, management or professionalism in general by its very nature does its work with respectful adherence to values and ethical norms, which it is no less concerned to respect as it is to achieve ‘external’ ends such as profit, advantage over its competitors or a higher position in educational or other league tables. Internal goods include the professional integrity of those exercising judgement. If they are phronimoi, people who have good practical judgement, they cannot be treated simply as good technical operatives, possessors of skills in which the real value and usefulness is held to lie and which would in principle be no less and no more valuable if they were possessed by another operative (or ‘hand’, as the revealing word has it: someone whose value lies exhaustively in his dexterity). In practical judgement knowledge, wisdom and feeling hold together and inform each other. To draw on Lasch’s (1984, p. 253) helpful way of putting it, ‘the choice of means has to be governed by their conformity to standards of excellence designed to extend human capacities for self-understanding and self-mastery’. There are connections here, which I do not have space to explore, via the notion of praxis with Marxist ideas and with critical theory, which themselves can claim to be distinctive forms of rationality.

There are two features of phronesis that mark it out sharply from technical reason. First, it is marked by attentiveness to the particular case and by flexibility. This attentiveness is what Aristotle calls aesthesis: ‘alertness’ is sometimes used to translate the term. It comprises sensitivity and a kind of attunement to the subject, involving a degree of openness and passivity, where by contrast instrumental or technical reason is characterized by mastery and control. Whereas techne is marked by a high degree of pre-planning (the skilled maker of chairs may follow a blueprint), phronesis is more typically exercised in the course of what is sometimes called ‘hot action’. It also involves being open to further experience. The phronimos does not rest content once she has achieved a satisfactory set of procedures but is aware of the danger of settling into unreflective routine. Here there are no algorithms to follow. In this too there is a connection with certain elements of critical theory, particularly its emphasis on personal development through reflection. Secondly, phronesis has an ethical side to it which technical rationality lacks. Questions of character, of what kind of person the individual exercising judgement is, are at issue here: it does not simply come down to what ‘skills’ he or she is exercising. A person who is open, alert, attuned and self-critical is a better person than one who is not. We only need to pause to consider whether we would prefer to have friends who were like this than ones who are obtuse, insensitive and lacking in the ability to reflect on their own judgements and decisions.
I have developed this second example at length in order to show that in the idea of *phronesis* there is a complex and highly coherent alternative to means–end reason, one that can properly be called a form of rationality since it offers a framework within which reasons can be given and justifications offered. It has attracted much interest in recent decades, partly through the work of Alasdair MacIntyre (1981, 1988), whose influence on this chapter is extensive, and the work of Joseph Dunne (1993). It has proved appealing to management theorists (see Dobson, 2009, for an overview and critique) and educational philosophers: a brief vignette from education may help to point up what is at issue here.

The history teacher cannot adopt a simple means–end approach to improving her pupils’ understanding of the subject. It is not just that basic ethical and legal considerations rule out inflicting physical punishment on those failing to hand in their homework or to achieve adequate marks in tests: the good aimed for here is understanding history, which is to be achieved through the action – the action of learning to understand history – and not through some other means. This is why extrinsic rewards for good work are no less problematic than extrinsic punishments. They will not extend the children’s capacity for ‘self-understanding and self-mastery’ (Lasch’s words again), for example their capacity for coming to realize that they love history, or prefer science (as opposed to loving the rewards and hating the punishments), or for realizing that they need to read primary sources less carelessly and more critically (as opposed to simply perceiving that they need to score higher marks). The issue of capacity-building, as it is now often described in organizational contexts, applies, for all its industrial connotations, to the teacher too. The teacher whose teaching of history emanates from, and in turn nurtures, her own love of the subject is a different teacher from the one who is mainly concerned to increase the proportion of her pupils who secure good grades. Of course the pressures on schools now mean that there are more of the second kind of teacher than the first. The first kind of teacher is nourished by her work while the second risks being made exhausted (literally, ‘drained’) by it. This point, which cannot be emphasized too strongly, can be expressed by saying that practical judgement, learning and human flourishing are intrinsically and essentially linked.

If there were space here I would want to explore how the body of ideas that is usually described as ‘postmodern’ can helpfully be understood as the most recent way of trying to find an alternative rationality to the instrumentalism of our age, its characteristic features being playfulness and a refusal to construct systems, acknowledgement of the instability of language, interest in the marginal
and ephemeral, *petits récits* rather than grand narratives, exploration of the sublime, of what cannot be said yet demands to be heard. There is a challenge in justifying this as any kind of cohesive theory or set of theories, not least because its proponents (e.g. Lyotard, Derrida) generally refuse to describe themselves as ‘postmodernists’, and in justifying it as a form of rationality. Its power to disrupt the neoliberal, instrumental assumptions of our age can however perhaps be detected in the denegation to which ‘postmodernism’ is routinely subjected, usually by those who have heard that it amounts to ‘anything goes’ and are anxious to position themselves on the side of those who are in the know about these things. ‘Romantic’ thinking can of course be dismissed with the same facility.

My final point concerns the position of the university with regard to the state of things I have described in this chapter. Having rushed, for instrumental reasons, to make common cause with the forces of neoliberalism and means–end thinking, it may seem an institution ill-fitted for challenging the new consensus. Yet the alternative notions of rationality that I have sketched here – ideas from Plato, Aristotle and romanticism, let alone postmodernism – are ones that are entirely familiar in the study of the humanities and social sciences, and ones that would hardly have been recovered or developed were it not for the university in the form we know it in western developed nations in our time. We thus have an ever-increasing tension between, on the one hand, what the university still, in its teaching and research, does, and the strategies, philosophies and rhetoric of its leaders and managers, on the other. Between the richness of ideas that may be uncomfortable, strange, even eccentric, and the self-destructive wasteland of a monoculture from which they offer us relief and, possibly, salvation.

Notes

1 I owe this telling point, as well as many other helpful suggestions, to Morgan White.
2 See, for example, Simon Jenkins’ (2012) remarks on Stefan Collini’s book, *What Are Universities For?*
4 All translations are from Rowe (2005).
References


Two discernible trends can be found in recent work in philosophy of education, giving rise to significant internal tensions and debates. In what follows, I will identify the form and some of the key features of these trends and suggest how a critical, anarchist-inspired perspective on them can offer some fruitful ways of thinking about the important philosophical and practical educational questions that they address. I am not referring to ‘rival conceptions’ (Standish, 2007) of the discipline, or to the distinction between ‘analytic’ and ‘continental’ traditions. What I want to draw attention to is not primarily a question of philosophical tradition(s), style or method, but rather a question of how the relationship between education, schooling, the state and social change is conceptualized, and how this in turn structures the way we bring philosophical arguments to bear on educational questions. I do not claim to offer an exhaustive description of the current state of the discipline; there are certainly important themes developed by philosophers of education that do not fall neatly into this account. However, I do think that the themes I identify are significant in terms of their influence in setting the terms of the debate in which so much of our academic discussion takes place.

One strand is concerned chiefly with offering a clear, normative account of ‘what education is for’ that will, it is supposed, be of use to policymakers, teachers, educational theorists and, to a lesser extent, parents. Most of the work within this area is conducted in the form of tightly constructed philosophical argument, although it often draws on policy analysis, empirical sociology and history. In addition, the language in which it talks of education is predominantly that of the formal school system: curricula, teacher training and policies on access and provision. It is important to note that while this kind of work has obvious intellectual antecedents in what is usually referred to as the analytic tradition in philosophy of education, it has moved away from this tradition in significant ways. Although, as John White points out (White, 2010), it is
doubtful whether even the classic work by key figures in this tradition such as Hirst, Peters, Dearden and Elliot was ever as narrowly confined to conceptual analysis, committed to social atomism, suspicious of articulating norms and values, or insulated from historical and political arguments as some of its detractors make out, the articulation of substantive political and moral positions has been far more explicit and prominent in recent work by theorists working within this tradition. Thus Harry Brighouse, Eamonn Callan, Graham Haydon, Meira Levinson, John White, Patricia White and Christopher Winch, to name but a few, have all developed accounts both of general educational aims and of subject-specific aims which, while written with the argumentative style and clarity so familiar to the analytic tradition, certainly do not aspire to offer a universal, ‘neutral’ or value-free account, and which are explicitly situated within a particular political and historical context.

The second strand is philosophically oriented to the Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian tradition, or to post-structuralism, and is characterized by a suspicion of the project of offering either a conceptual analysis of the structure of aims or a defence of specific aims within a clearly articulated substantive moral or political position that is supposed to lead, logically and unproblematically, to prescriptions for educational policies, curricular design and classroom practice. As Standish puts this, ‘the suspicion that emerges is that stating the aims of education may lead to a kind of stifling’ (Standish, 1999, p. 42). Many philosophers of education working in this second vein have developed accounts of ‘the goods internal to education’ – accounts that go hand in hand with a concern that conceptualizing educational success in terms connected to the productive, political and economic sphere runs the risk of subverting or displacing these intrinsic goods (see Dunne, 2005, Hogan, 2009, 2010, 2011).

I will argue that both these approaches, due to their unexamined and unarticulated assumptions about the state, lead to a constriction of our ability to think about education, the political, the social and the relationship between these. A consideration of the anarchist perspective can, I suggest, open up our thinking and, in doing so, suggest a more critical and dynamic role for philosophy of education.

Education without aims

As explained above, although contemporary philosophers of education working within the analytic tradition have long ago abandoned the aspiration to provide
a purely conceptual, second-order account of educational concepts and are generally explicit about their commitment to a set of substantive (liberal) values, their work often, as Standish suggests (1999, p. 40), takes the same ‘discursive form’ as older analytic accounts within this tradition, which offered, for example, defences of autonomy as an educational aim.

What concerns critics like Standish is that this type of philosophizing about education seems to ‘assume the possibility of an overview and the possibility of completeness’ (Standish, 1995, p.133). In their critique of the idea of perfectibility and of the dominance of performativity in educational thought and practice (see Blake et al., 1998, 2000, Smith, 2002, Standish, 2007), these philosophers are not all invoking a defence of education as a practice; nor are they rejecting wholesale the traditional account of liberal education. Yet the suggestion that ‘questions concerning the aims of education should then touch us with a faint sense of embarrassment’ (Standish, 1995, p. 128) adds to the impression that any attempt to pin down and define education in a way that is ‘too formulaic too explicit’ (see Standish, 2012) risks losing something of its possibly ineffable qualities.

In this sense, Standish’s work has affinities with that of philosophers like Dunne and Hogan who emphasize the intrinsic quality of educational practices and relationships. The political is often, in such accounts, implicitly regarded as something to be suspicious of. This is not to say that such accounts are devoid of political or historical analysis. Yet to the extent that politics appears at all in such work, it is either as something ‘external’ from which the practice of education must be protected in order to preserve its integrity or as a ‘system’ which pre-exists any form of educational practice and can be defended or criticized independently of anything we may wish to say about the practice of education.

Padraig Hogan defends this view particularly forcefully, arguing that educational practice needs to ‘emerge from its historic subordination to paternalistic and bureaucratic masters, and to lay claim in an articulate and sure-footed way to its own identity as a human practice’ (Hogan, 2011, p. 30). His recent work consists of an articulation of the ‘inherent purposes’ of this practice and ‘a recognisable family of virtues’ that arise from it (Hogan, 2011). While acknowledging that education is inescapably value-laden, Hogan wants to resist the idea that the values in question must be derived from ‘particular individuals and groups’. ‘Such a conclusion obscures the very possibility that education is a practice in its own right, with its own inherent purposes and ethical commitments. Instead, it defines education from the start as a subordinate practice’ (Hogan, 2011).
From the perspective of this position, accounts like those of John White (1990, 2011), Reiss and White (2013), Levinson (1999), Brighouse (2006, 2010) and Callan (1997), which explicitly defend a view of the kind of education necessary in liberal state, both run the risk of ‘subverting’ education and distorting its internal goods and suggest a dangerous form of closure (Standish, 1995).

As I will suggest below, both these perspectives share a similarly narrow view of the relationship between politics and education. What accounts for this narrowness, however, is not a view of educational aims and practices as ‘subservient’ to ‘extrinsic’ political ones, nor anything ‘formal or procedural’ (Standish, 2007, p. 163), in particular philosophical approaches, but rather the assumption of the state and the institutional framework of state education as the conceptual territory on which all debates about education take place, and a connectedly narrow view about the meaning of and possibilities for social change. These assumptions, I suggest, involve a serious lack of philosophical imagination.

**Politics and the state**

The (capitalist) state is there implicitly in the work of theorists within the analytic tradition from the 1970s, and explicitly in the work of prominent contemporary theorists such as Harry Brighouse, Richard Pring, John White, Patricia White and Christopher Winch. Indeed, one could argue that while this tradition was once centrally concerned with a defence of ‘liberal education’, it is now more accurately described as focused on ‘education in the liberal state’. The conflation of liberal education with the liberal state is sometimes explicitly defended, as in Alan Ryan’s contention that liberal education is ‘the kind of education that sustains a liberal society’ (Ryan, 1998, p. 27). Yet the state itself is rarely argued for by philosophers of education who, like most political philosophers, seem to assume that, however imperfect, it is somehow inevitable.

It is certainly not true that in tacitly assuming the state as the normative framework for their discussion of education, theorists such as those mentioned above are ignoring wider, traditional ‘liberal’ aims to do with pursuing education for its own sake. Nor are such accounts devoid of critical political perspectives. Harry Brighouse (2003, 2010) and Christopher Winch (2000, 2005), for example, have defended accounts of liberal education that require far more interventionist policies of redistribution than those currently operating in most liberal state education systems. Winch’s critical position, which combines a concern for those aspects of educational experience which cannot be reduced to instrumental or
positional goods, with an engagement with the vocational aspects of education and the link between educational achievement and socio-economic outcomes, is most evident in his recent exchanges with James Tooley (see, e.g., Sarangapani and Winch, 2010).

Winch has criticized Tooley for ignoring the social and political implications of private educational provision, as well as for his failure to appreciate the public good nature of education alongside its positional value. Yet while I have a great deal of sympathy for Winch’s view, I want to suggest that positions like this, which assume the (capitalist) state as an inevitable feature of our lives – the worst consequences of which can, perhaps, be ameliorated through educational provision – narrow the horizon of our political imagination.

Tooley’s work is often described as ‘radical’, in that it imagines education without the state. Yet while Tooley (1996, 2000) has made an important contribution to philosophy of education in reminding us that ‘education’ is not equivalent to ‘schooling’ and in questioning the monopoly of state education, he begins, like his opponents, from the assumption that the state is the framework in which we are operating. In Tooley’s market-driven alternative to schools controlled and funded by the state, the capitalist state is still very much there in the background – indeed, it constitutes the very structures and paradigms within which the market system can operate and within which the educational goods that it provides make sense.

Winch argues that re-constructing educational provision along the market-driven lines Tooley suggests will both encourage the kinds of attitudes and individual propensities that will undermine the humanistic elements of the form of liberal education that he wishes to defend and entrench socio-economic gaps, leading to vast inequalities. While I would not disagree with this argument, I do want to reject the implication that there are only two options to choose from: either education provided and controlled by the liberal state, hopefully configured in such a way as to meet at least a minimum requirement of social justice, or educational provision within a private system operating on the logic of free-market capitalism.

Similarly, Harry Brighouse, in arguing against Tooley and other proponents of market or quasi-market reforms or parental choice policies in educational provision, assumes that the basic structure of the capitalist state will remain the same; all we can do is ameliorate its worst injustices. The main quarrel between him and Tooley is that, given this structure, Tooley does not think that the socio-economic disparities produced by differential educational opportunities will be any worse under a market-driven system than they are in a state-controlled system.
While Brighouse is careful to acknowledge that trying to equalize educational opportunity alone will not resolve the deficit of social justice, he, like most philosophers of education, takes the normative and practical framework of the state as a given and suggests that the role for political philosophers is to propose and critically analyse policies with the aim of bringing it closer to the Rawlsian model of a truly liberal, just state. By focusing on the fact that ‘[i]t is unfair, then, if some get a worse education than others because, through no fault of their own, this puts them at a disadvantage in the competition for these unequally distributed goods’ (Brighouse, 2010, p. 27), Brighouse diverts attention from the idea that the capitalist state is characterized by competition for unequally distributed rewards, with educational attainment causally linked to such rewards.

Likewise, John White, whose recent work focuses on the notion of well-being as an aim of education, assumes the state framework. His very focus on the question of ‘what schools are for’, rather than what education is for, is indicative of this assumption. His account is also perhaps the most clear-cut example of the kind of ‘neatness’ that Standish worries about; its discursive form is indeed one in which the philosophical task is to ‘begin with overarching aims, then fill them out in greater specificity’ (Reiss and White, 2013, p. 1). While White is only too aware of the socio-economic context of human flourishing and has emphasised throughout his work that ‘basic needs have to be met’ (Reiss and White, 2013, p. 6) before one can even talk of well-being, his account does not start from a serious enquiry into what kind of social and political arrangements are most likely to secure these goods but rather assumes the arrangements we have in place, albeit with a fairly critical view of their inadequacy. The state, here, is a given; our task is merely to delineate its ‘proper role’ (Reiss and White, 2013, p. 48) and limits in determining the aims of schools. Thus in arguing that schools ‘have a contribution to make in encouraging young people to […] be sensible in managing money’ (Reiss and White, 2013, p. 6), White fails to acknowledge the ways in which this very argument assumes the capitalist state structure as a given. Similar assumptions can be found in the work of Brighouse who, in arguing that we should ‘use schooling to enable children to interact with the economy in ways that facilitate their flourishing in their leisure time’ (Brighouse, 2006, p. 41), assumes ‘the economy’ as a background constraint on what schools are and what they can and should do, rather than seeing it itself as part of a malleable socio-political structure than can and should be reconceptualized and challenged. Brighouse, like White, has focused on the idea of education for human flourishing in his recent work, yet he does not seem to regard it even worth explaining how such an idea can slide unproblematically into the claim
that ‘this means four central ideals that should inform the curriculum and ethos of schooling’ (Brighouse, 2006, p. 131), without justifying the framework of the state and state schooling.

So even theorists who acknowledge, with Reiss and White (2013, p. 48), that the question of what education is for ‘is essentially a political issue’ assume the state as the unquestioned backdrop against which all contemporary philosophical debates about education take place. In doing so, they essentially reduce ‘the political’ to a discussion of policy.

It is worth pointing out that this is no less true of accounts like Hogan’s which explicitly reject the idea that education can have political aims. Thus when Hogan refers to ‘the wide diversity of practices – from early childhood education to adult education to postgraduate research seminars – that education as a practice in its own right includes’ (Hogan, 2011, p. 35), he is, in this very delineation, already assuming something like a state education system. I believe a similar assumption is operating in work by philosophers sympathetic to post-structuralist approaches. Thus one finds repeated references to ‘the system’ in the work of philosophers who have developed an eloquent critique of ‘managerialist assumptions’ (Blake et al., 1998, Hogan and Smith, 2003) and of what Richard Smith (2002) describes as ‘the instrumentalism, the techno-rationalism that runs through education at all levels’. Yet the absence of any reference to the state in such work suggests a failure to seriously consider the ways in which it may be, in fact, features of the state itself that are bound up with the problems these theorists identify in their critique.

Both accounts that implicitly assume the state in arguing for educational practice to be freed from politics and accounts that explicitly defend the state out of a belief that it is the best guarantor of social justice show a serious lack of political and philosophical imagination. All of the theorists discussed above are, to be sure, critical, whether in their determination not to allow education to be harnessed to neoliberal agendas and to worsen socio-economic disparities; or out of a concern not to allow schools, teachers and pupils to be dominated by the language of instrumental rationality. Yet in assuming the (capitalist) state as the backdrop against which this critical view of education takes place, rather than as the very thing that needs to be constantly acted against, they undermine the force of their own critique.

How many philosophers have dared to go further than the warning that ‘[e]xcessive positional advantage conferred by education may lead to outcomes that are harmful both to individuals and society through the production of excessive relative inequalities of income’ (Sarangapani and Winch, 2010, p. 501)
and to imagine a social world in which the very structures which give rise to ‘positional advantage’ have ceased to be relevant? How many have dared to imagine not just a world where poor or working-class children’s educational opportunities would not be restricted by their parental background, but in which there was no poverty and where society was not characterized by hierarchical divisions of class?

Brighouse states frankly that ‘to achieve a fully just society […] would require substantially more radical reform’ (Brighouse, 2010, p. 65) than that which he is advocating, and admits that he sees ‘no great prospects for such reform’ (Brighouse, 2010). I want, in what follows, to explore what it would mean to take seriously, as anarchism does, the possibility of a truly equal and free society, organized non-hierarchically on the basis of cooperation, solidarity and mutual aid and to consider how the anarchist position also encourages a very different view of what radical social change actually means.

Yet in starting from such a radical idea, are we not already falling victim to the kind of trap that Standish warns us of: the temptation that if we can only work out what the perfect society would look like, we can then map out what kind of education we need to get us there, and work out how to ‘deliver’ it? An understanding of the anarchist view, as I will elaborate below, suggests that one can take seriously the point that education is bound up with political questions about the kind of social world we want, without falling into the trap described by Standish. The choice is not between defending the integrity of educational practice or allowing our educational thinking to become hostage to a kind of rational planning that runs the risk of subverting such practices by seeing them as subservient to political or economic ends. The anarchist position, I will argue, offers us an imaginative, critical and motivating vision of a good society, without proposing a programme of revolutionary social change that can be worked out in advance, or a total overthrow of the existing system. In so doing, it suggests a very different perspective on the relationship between education and social change.

**Education as social self-liberation**

Many readers will no doubt balk at the idea of beginning our work as philosophers of education from such a ‘utopian’ vision. It is important, then, to pause for a moment to consider the different meanings and uses of the term ‘utopian’. Saul Newman has described how, in the contemporary political landscape, dominated
by implicit or explicit references to the ‘inevitability’ of capitalism, free-markets and neoliberal assumptions, ‘the word utopia has a precise ideological function: it operates as a way of stigmatising alternative political and economic visions as, at best, unrealistic and naive, and, at worst, dangerous’ (Newman, 2009, p. 209). There is, in fact, an interesting history of derogatory use of the term ‘utopian’ towards anarchism, although the precise content of the charge has varied depending on who was making it. I have discussed elsewhere (Suissa, 2006) how both the charge that anarchists have a naively optimistic account of human nature, thus rendering their position ‘impractical’, and the conflation (famously found in Popper and Berlin) of the term ‘utopian’ with the idea of a static state of perfection or a form of totalitarianism can be rejected on the basis of a rigorous understanding of anarchist theory (see also Morland, 1997).

What I want to emphasise for the current discussion, though, are two points that are particularly pertinent to the educational questions under consideration. Firstly, the key point that the anarchist utopia does not consist of a blueprint for the future society; and secondly, the sense – so urgent and necessary in the current climate of ‘no alternative’ – in which utopian thinking, and the anarchist utopia in general – can fill the important positive function noted by so many theorists of utopia, namely that of ‘generating constructive and dynamic critical thought’ (Goodwin and Taylor, 1982, p. 27), and thereby ‘relativising the present’ (Bauman, 1976, p. 13). As Newman puts it, at a time when ‘the very idea of utopia has been discredited’, introducing a utopian dimension to political discussion and action can bring ‘a kind of radical heterogeneity and disruptive opening into the economic, social, political and ideological constellation that goes by the name of global capitalism’ (Newman, 2009, p. 208).

Taking on board these points, we can begin to see how anarchism suggests an understanding of the relationship between education and social change that sheds new light on the themes and tensions discussed above, and thus cannot be simply rejected as the kind of unrealistic ‘more radical reform’ that Brighouse refers to. For crucially, the kind of social transformation that anarchists envisage is one in which spheres of social action are gradually freed of relations of domination, a process which can go on within and alongside the existing structures of the state – as captured in the phrase ‘building the new society in the shell of the old’. Thus anarchism, as Colin Ward explains, is ‘not about strategies for revolution’; rather, ‘far from being a speculative vision of a future society, it is a description of a mode of human organization, rooted in the experience of everyday life, which operates side by side with, and in spite of, the dominant authoritarian trends of our society’ (Ward, 1973, p.18).
The modes of human organization that Ward documented and engaged with ranged from housing, allotments, use of urban space and education. All these arenas constituted spaces in which individuals working collectively could enact anarchism as ‘an act of social self-determination’ (Ward, in Wilbert and White, 2011, p. 261). So rather than see education – and schools – as either a process of preparing children for life in society as we know it, an inevitable reproduction of existing ideological structures, or a means to improving and strengthening liberal institutions through the nurturing of certain intellectual qualities or civic virtues, anarchism invites us to see educational activity as a site of social transformation. It is here that the key anarchist idea of prefigurative practice comes in, for it is central to the anarchist view that the means for creating the alternative, stateless society be commensurate with the ends; ‘a transformative social movement must necessarily anticipate the ways and means of the hoped-for new society’ (Tokar, in Gordon, 2009, p. 269).

On the anarchist view, as we do not and cannot know the form of the ideal society, it is essential to enable the free interplay of human imagination and experimentation as far as possible. This insistence, though, should not lead to the common misperception that anarchism means chaos or disorder. In fact, as Morris points out (2005, p. 8), ‘[anarchism] means the exact opposite of this. It means a society based on order. Anarchy means not chaos, or a lack of organisation, but a society based on the autonomy of the individual, on co-operation, one without rulers or coercive authority’. Likewise, it is misleading to see anarchism as focused simplistically on the abolition of the state. Yet while nuanced understandings of the operation of power, oppression and the symbiotic relationship between state power and capitalism can arguably be found in early anarchist thinkers like Kropotkin (see Morris, 2004), it is nevertheless true that the many new social movements that constitute the contemporary anarchist scene place particular emphasis on ‘the generalization of the target of anarchist resistance from the state and capitalism to all forms of domination in society’ (Gordon, 2009, p. 262). But, as Gordon argues, this resistance clearly does not lead to the positing of ‘the idea of an end to “all” forms of domination’ – indeed, such an idea would be nonsensical as ‘we simply cannot think such a state of affairs since we do not possess the full list of features that should be absent from it’ (Gordon, 2009, pp. 264–265).

In light of such conceptual arguments, one can appreciate how, as Gordon puts it, ‘diversity itself has ascended to the status of a core value in contemporary anarchism’ (Gordon, 2009, p. 266). Yet in many ways, this idea echoes the thought of earlier anarchist thinkers like Ward, especially concerning the
demand for diversity in education. If we are truly to allow educational spaces to become spaces for prefigurative practice, it is essential that we give teachers, children, parents and educational theorists the freedom to engage creatively and experimentally with such spaces. As Ward says, ‘experiment is the oxygen of education’ (in Wilbert and White, 2011, p. 238).

On this view, educational activities become not just an important arena for prefigurative practice but, connectedly, a form of direct action. As Gordon notes, while direct action is often associated with actions undertaken in a ‘preventative or destructive’ approach, it also has a constructive sense central to the anarchist project whereby individuals, acting together, ‘directly pursue not only the prevention of injustices, but also the creation of alternative social relations free of hierarchy and domination’ (Gordon, 2009, p. 269).

Anarchism’s utopianism, then, consists of an imaginative critique of the present, without imposing a static vision of the utopian future or a blueprint for how to achieve it. Crucially, the anarchist perspective on social change suggests a radically different view of the relationship between education and social change from that of philosophers of education concerned to emphasize the way in which our educational thinking must go beyond existing arrangements. Thus Bridges, for example, argues that ‘[w]e cannot really conceive of education without reference to some selection of the human qualities we want to cultivate and of the kind of social world we expect or perhaps want our pupils to occupy’ – and that this requires ‘an inescapable responsibility to invoke some normative conception of the human qualities and the social world we see as desirable’ (Bridges, 2008, p. 466). But the anarchist view challenges this account both by positing a radically different view of ‘the kind of social world we want our pupils to occupy’ from that of the state and by insisting at the same time that the way to achieve this is not by working out in advance which human qualities are necessary to bring about and sustain it and nurturing them through education but by imagining and enacting this social world here and now in our social relationships – of which education is one.

What this suggests is, in fact, a reconceptualization of the social. The fixation on the state (see Miltrany, in Sylvan, 1993, p. 215) and its logic which, as I have argued above, characterizes both those philosophical positions on education which reject the political as a contaminating factor and those which emphasize the political aspects of education, gives rise to a narrow view of the political. It is the state, in fact, which is associated with what Martin Buber referred to as ‘the political principle’ and which he distinguished from the social principle. Whereas the political principle ‘is seen in power, authority and dominion,’
the social principle is seen in ‘families, groups, unions, cooperative bodies and communities’ (Ward, in Wilbert and White, 2011, p. 268). While it seems naive to conceive of families and communities as devoid of issues of power and authority, nevertheless there is an important insight here, I think, in that it is the monopolizing of power by the state which weakens society conceived of as a network of spontaneous human self-organization. It is this same insight behind Gustav Landauer’s famous remark that ‘the state is not something which can be destroyed by a revolution, but it is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently’ (in Ward, 1991, p. 85).

The above discussion, in suggesting that we rethink the sense in which education is a social practice, may seem to be not that different from accounts by philosophers of education like Dunne and Hogan. Yet education, understood in the way I have discussed, cannot be a practice with its own ‘internal goods’ any more than ‘society’ is a practice with its own internal goods. We cannot, then, talk of education ‘without aims’; nor can we articulate a set of aims derived from a fully worked-out model of ‘the good society’. Any such model, without the built-in requirement of constant human experimentation, would be a dangerous abstraction that itself would undermine the possibilities for human freedom that it is intended to bring about. Yet concerns that thinking about the quality of educational practices in light of normative ethical ideas about the good society would somehow contaminate education, or that such normative ethical ideals go hand in hand with a dangerous form of closure are, in light of the above account, ill-conceived. A suspicion of closure and perfectibility should not lead us to abandoning the project of thinking about education as part of a normative, ethical project for transforming our life as individuals and as a society. For as Ward points out, ‘The concept of a free society may be an abstraction, but that of a freer society is not’ (in White, 2011, p. 97).

Interestingly, Blake et al., (1998), in developing the idea that educational institutions need ‘to be released from the performativity…that has come to dominate them’ (p. 189) make the point that there is no clear-cut prescriptive answer as to how to do this; the idea of a blueprint is, they say, ‘at odds with’ their very arguments, influenced as they are by post-structuralist thinkers, and they emphasize the need for more ‘human scale’ control (Blake et al., 1998). Their analysis could perhaps have been enriched by a serious consideration of anarchist thought, which, contrary to their claims about ‘established traditions of progressive or radical theory’ that they reject as not being ‘dominant forces in the present educational scene’ (Blake et al., 1998, p. 186), does not in fact hold an
idealistic view of the social subject. For the anarchist position does not subscribe to an essentialist or metaphysical conception of human nature. Kropotkin, for example, was as scathing in his critique of Rousseau’s notion of the benign, pre-social individual as he was in his rejection of the Hobbesian competitive, asocial individual. As Brian Morris points out, ‘Marx, Bakunin and Kropotkin all critiqued – indeed ridiculed – these “abstract” conceptions of the human person long before Lacan and the poststructuralists’ (Morris, 2009, p. 15)¹

Joseph Dunne has discussed the way in which not just ‘practical subjects but traditional academic subjects, can benefit from a conception of education more focused on the idea of a practice. He defends the idea that it is, in the case of any subject, ‘an ongoing practice that students need to be introduced to – a practice that embodies its own ways of conducting enquiry, asking fruitful questions, imagining or empathising with characters or situations, devising plausible hypotheses or interesting interpretations, sifting and weighing evidence, making creative connections or shifts of perspective […]’ (Dunne, 2005, p. 156). Similarly, Hogan (2010, 2011) articulates and defends ‘the virtues of teaching and learning’. But while I would not want to reject these rich accounts of teaching and learning, I would add that the practice of education always takes place in a social space which is itself reflective of and embodies particular modes of organization and forms of interpersonal relationships; there is no escaping the question of how these relationships are constituted and what qualities they embody; those of domination, hierarchy and competitiveness, or those of commensality, mutual aid and spontaneity?

Theorists like Wilfred Carr are concerned with the way education has come to be seen ‘less as a “practice” and more as a “system”’ that had to be organised, managed and controlled so as to make it responsive to the political and economic demands of the modern industrial state’ (Carr, 2005, p. 41). Yet Carr’s historical account notwithstanding, it would be a mistake, in the process of trying to reclaim this sense of education as a practice, to jettison the sense of the practice of education as being inextricably bound up with social and political ideas and values, whether those of the industrial nation state or those of a very different conception of social life.

Going back to Buber’s distinction between the political and the social, an anarchist philosophy of education not only transcends the dichotomy between ‘intrinsic and extrinsic aims of education’ (a dichotomy that has become something of an orthodoxy within the discipline), but can contribute to a theoretical and practical reclamation of and reaffirmation of the social. The state fixation which characterizes so much work in political philosophy and
philosophy of education has the effect not only, as I argued above, of seriously limiting our philosophical imagination, but also of squeezing out the social in the sense that Buber and Ward talk about it.

This point is developed by Bargu as follows:

From the perspective offered by traditions of mutuality, the crisis of modernity lies less in the invasion of the political by the social than in the flattening out of the social by the hegemonic construction of the autonomy of the political and the progressive destruction of the social by the incursion of a capitalist market whose primary form of competitive and individualist action has been detrimental to communal practices and relations. (Bargu, 2013, p. 37)

For the social anarchist, the problem facing humans today is not, as Arendt would have it, ‘the rise of the social and its invasion of the political’ but rather the ‘progressive constriction of the social by the juridical conception of the political based on rights and liberties, on the one hand, and by the commercial relations of private exchange in the market on the other’ (Bargu, 2013, p. 50).

Imagining a self-governing anarchist society free from relations of domination means, then, imagining a radical reconfiguration of the present, but also committing ourselves to enacting this reconfiguration in countless diverse and possibly small ways, embodying the kind of prefigurative practice where ‘subsistence and mutual aid, justice and fellowship are elements that we must seek in order to nourish, both literally and metaphorically, the new community’ (Bargu, 2013).

Objections

It will be objected that, in the current political climate, to open up the possibility of siding with proponents of free educational experimentation outside the state system is a dangerous abandonment of the political terrain and a betrayal of the struggle for social justice, and will play into the hands of neoliberal reformers.

To this I would respond that to frame the debate as if one had to choose between a blanket defence of state education and an endorsement of neo-liberal, market-led forms of private educational provision is both to ignore the historical context of state education and to misrepresent the critical role of philosophy.

Educational philosophers on the political left are almost universally united against current proposals for ‘free schools’. Yet as the history of working-class initiatives in cooperative education, free schools and experiments in cooperative
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living reminds us, the alternative to a state monopoly on education is not just free-market individualism or for-profit schools. Indeed, the tendency to polarize debates on issues like welfare and education can be seen as symptomatic of the ideological anti-utopian stance described above. We need to revisit and re-examine the history of these debates as part of an attempt to reclaim a more critical, emancipatory position. Carissa Honeywell (2011) has offered just such a contribution in her fascinating analysis of British social policy debates, drawing on the work of anarchist thinkers such as Ward, who describes how the political left in Britain ‘invested all its fund of social inventiveness in the idea of the state, so that its own traditions of self-help and mutual aid were stifled for lack of ideological oxygen’ (Ward, in Wilbert and White, 2011, p. 272). Revisiting these debates seems particularly urgent at a time when the traditional values of the socialist left are so much under attack. As Ward remarked bitterly in 2000, ‘The socialist ideal was rewritten as a world in which everyone was entitled to everything, but where nobody except the providers had any actual say about anything. We have been learning for years, in the anti-welfare backlash, what a very vulnerable utopia that was’ (Carissa Honeywell, 2011, p. 273).

Philosophers, sociologists and historians of education can contribute to the project of reclaiming notions like ‘community’, ‘freedom’ and ‘fairness’ from the right and challenging contemporary ideological positions by articulating and documenting alternative educational ideas and experiments. Some philosophers of education have in fact been doing just that; yet even these theorists often overlook the anarchist position. Fielding and Moss, for example, in their book Radical Education and the Common School (Fielding and Moss, 2011), explore and defend the pedagogical practice of radical educational experimenters such as Alex Bloom. Of course the book’s title implies a tacit defence of the state (where, while the need for radical democratic education is rigorously defended, the need for state education is not). Yet even so, given that the notion of prefigurative practice features so centrally in their analysis, it is remarkable that the anarchist tradition, arguably the tradition most associated with this idea, and the most fruitful source of well-developed and rich accounts of its theoretical and practical implications, receives not even a passing mention.

Fielding and Moss, however, at least do an important job in reminding us that it is not state education as such that is a project worth defending, but only state education insofar as it instantiates human and social values such as justice, freedom and equality. This position is in fact implicit in accounts like those of Winch and Brighouse, who, in defending state education against attacks from right-wing libertarian and neoliberal positions, are simply arguing that, given
the political system we have, the unfair positional advantage conferred by education is *more likely* to be produced by the private sector.

As discussed above, framing the discussion as if there are only two options – universal compulsory state schooling which, while far from perfect, is the best guarantor of a minimal standard of universal educational provision and the best protection against parents’ ability to exploit their unequal economic resources to confer educational advantage on their children – or a private market in educational provision, shuts down the possibility of imagining and allowing schools and other educational experiments where the utopian idea of a radically different society could be enacted freely through the kind of transfigurative practice described above. The point I want to make here is that we do not have to choose between either daring to imagine and to prefigure a society radically different from the kind we have now, or trying to ensure that, given the kind of society we live in, educational provision is not shaped by policies that adversely affect certain groups and privilege others. We can do both. Indeed, as Chomsky reminds us,

> In today’s world, I think, the goals of a committed anarchist should be to defend some state institutions from the attack against them, while trying at the same time to pry them open to more meaningful public participation – and ultimately, to dismantle them in a much more free society, if the appropriate circumstances can be achieved. (Chomsky, 1996, p. 75)

It is important to note, though, that in the same way as worries about the excesses of neo-liberalism and capitalism should not lead political theorists concerned with social justice into blindly defending state education, nor should anarchists assume that all ‘free schools’ are necessarily better than those provided by the state. The anarchist commitment to prefigurative practice goes hand in hand with the insight of contemporary anarchists that ‘resistance to all forms of domination in society moves its notions of social transformation beyond their previous formulation as the abolition of institutions to the redefinition of social patterns in all spheres of life, institutional or otherwise’ (Gordon, 2009, p. 263), thus making sense of the fact that many anarchist educators work within the state system (see Haworth, 2012). But equally importantly, one has to pay careful attention to the political context in which possibilities for ‘freeing’ education from the state are being proposed.

Buber’s reference to ‘the political surplus’ of the state over society and the suggestion that we need to recover a richer notion of the social are reminiscent of Nikolas Rose’s account of how, in neoliberal discourse, ‘the unified space of
the social is re-configured, and the abjected are relocated, in both imagination and strategy, in “marginalized spaces” [...] (Rose, 1996, p. 347). I have argued that an anarchist perspective demands that we reclaim and enact a multiplicity and plurality of spaces for ‘the social’, redefining – and possibly reclaiming – in doing so, the very notion of the social and associated notions like community. How, where and to what extent this can be done in the current political climate is an open question. Certainly the current UK Coalition government’s policy on free schools and academies is very far removed from any truly social, grass-roots initiatives, and seems rather more like what Rose has described as another form of politically centralized and hegemonic control by the state of spaces once thought of as ‘social’. The individuals within such spaces and their very configuration are also, of course, subject to what Rose calls ‘government by audit’ (Rose, 1996, p. 351) – in this case, educational forms of audit such as standardized testing and inspection regimes – which ‘hold out the promise – however specious – of new distantiated forms of control between political centres of decision and the autonomized loci – schools, hospitals, firms, – who now have the responsibility for the government of health, wealth and happiness’ (Rose, 1996).

Most ‘free schools’ in Britain today are indeed very different from the original free schools of the sixties and seventies, as Charkin (2011) reminds us. But nor should we be under the illusion that there was a golden age of ‘free schools’ in which such projects were immune to the kinds of entrenched privileges and social hierarchies which contemporary critics warn of. Jonathan Kozol, a leading member of the 1970s free school movement, talked scathingly, as early as 1972, of people who go out ‘into the mountains of Vermont’ to start ‘an isolated upper-class rural free school for the children of the white and rich’ while still profiting from the consequences of the deeply unequal and racialized power relations that characterize US society (Kozol, 1972, pp. 5–12). Free schools, he says, ‘cannot with sanity, or with candor or with truth, endeavor to exist within a moral vacuum’ (Kozol, 1972, p. 10). Yet this is not to say that there were not then, or now, and that one cannot imagine, genuinely free schools that engage with these issues of power, through a form of prefigurative practice, while at the same time perhaps exhibiting the ‘virtues of teaching and learning’ that philosophers such as Hogan have described. Indeed the history of radical educational experiments is full of examples of such schools (see Avrich, 2006, Gribble, 1998, Shotton, 1993, Smith, 1983). We should not, then, reject all free-schools outright simply because they do not fit in with a theoretical model of Rawlsian liberalism.
In defending Ward’s particular brand of anarchism against Bookchin’s claim about the ‘unbridgeable chasm’ between ‘life-style anarchism’ and ‘social anarchism’, Stuart White reminds us that a ‘good deal of Ward’s work is less concerned with mapping the possible future than with celebrating what people can and do experience here and now’ (White, 2011, p. 98). Perhaps philosophers of education, as part of the project to reclaim and articulate a truly critical position, should do a bit less mapping and a bit more celebrating. It may be difficult and sometimes frustrating trying to negotiate the tensions described by Chomsky, but acknowledging them will make our discipline both more lively and more politically engaged than pretending that we have resolved them. ‘There is a certain kind of revolutionary courage’, Kozol insists (1972, p. 72) ‘in fighting for a new world and still helping men [sic] to live without ordeal in the one that they are stuck with’. I am not so arrogant (or deluded) as to presume that being a salaried academic philosopher requires this kind of courage; but surely it is part of our role as philosophers to explore and articulate different conceptual and practical possibilities from the ones dominating our political and academic discourse. By such philosophical work, alongside a commitment to genuine educational experimentation, we can multiply ‘the political and also the social and imaginary ties people are subjected to’ (Bottici, 2013, p. 18) and thereby engage in a kind of utopianism of the present. For

utopianism is above all about the present […] The most utopian of utopianisms is also the most practical one. […] It does not propose any ‘metaphysics of presence’ that posits an unmediated essential reality that somehow reveals to us its full being. Rather it is a radical empiricism of presence that allows what is present to present itself, to give itself as a miraculous gift. (Clark, 2009, p. 20)

My concern is that in our anxiety to shield education from the worst excesses of the language, logic and oppressive practices of managerialism, instrumental rationality, or free-market capitalism, we will forget that it is not just our education system, but our society that needs changing. And it is just possible that such change may come about not through a moment of revolutionary rupture, or through a scientifically worked-out programme of reform, but by allowing educational spaces to become sites for prefigurative practice. The task for philosophers of education, then, is to imagine what such spaces might look like; to articulate the values and ideas that they embody; to celebrate and engage with them, and to defend their possibility, while ever vigilant of their dangers.
Notes

1 In fact the anarchist position described here may have affinities with the kind of Emersonian perfectionism which Standish, drawing on Cavell, discusses in his work and contrasts with ‘ideas of the realisable perfectibility of human kind’ (Blake et al., 2000, p. 153).

References


Part Three

Religion
Martin Buber (1878–1965), the well-known Jewish philosopher and theologian, is considered to be one of the greatest thinkers on education of the twentieth century. He was born in Vienna to an Orthodox Jewish family and spent most of his early life with his grandfather, who was a prominent scholar of Midrash (Rabbinic dialogue with the Torah, the Old Testament), in Lvov, the capital city of Galicia (today’s Ukraine). He was awarded a doctorate by the University of Vienna in 1904, for a thesis on Christian mysticism during the Renaissance and Reformation, and worked at the University of Frankfurt until 1933 (he resigned from his position when the Nazis came to power and all Jews were excluded from the educational system). He was also part of the original committee that sought to set up the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and was involved very early on with the Zionist movement, continuously advocating dialogue with the Arabs in Palestine and proposing the foundation of a bi-national state, where both communities would share power once the British Mandate ended in Palestine.

Buber wrote his major work, *I and Thou (Ich und Du)*, between 1919 and 1922, and published it in 1923. It is a major philosophical-theological work that deals with the most profound issues of what it is to be human and of human relations. Buber’s views as presented in this text have served as the basis for his views on education, something he developed further in texts such as *Education* (also known as *An Address to the Third International Educational Conference*, which was delivered at Heidelberg in 1925) and *The Education of Character* (also known as *An Address to the National Conference of Palestinian Teachers*, which was delivered at Tel Aviv on 1939); that said, it is also important to note that Buber’s views in *I and Thou* have been applied by others to various fields, such as environmental ethics (cf. Friskics, 2001, Tallmadge, 1981).
This chapter is divided into two distinct parts. First, it provides the reader with a standard philosophical reading of Buber’s concepts of I-Thou and I-It and revisits these concepts under the light of the Hasidic roots of Buber’s thought while demonstrating the connections of these readings to the field of education. Second, this chapter will argue that the main implication of Buber’s views for education is that ‘education is inclusive per se’ and that ‘educational systems must be as inclusive as possible’.

Philosophical reading

When one peruses the secondary literature on Buber’s views on I and Thou, a philosophical reading soon comes to the fore. This reading of Buber’s views is founded on the premise that Buber was critical of Western philosophy and searched for that which he called a ‘philosophical anthropology’. There is much supporting evidence for this reading as Buber himself referred to ‘his own “philosophizing” as “essentially anthropological”’ (Schillp (1967, p. 693) cited in Murphy (1988, p. 41)). Buber complained that Western philosophy (with the exceptions of the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, Saint Augustine, Pascal and existentialist philosophers) failed to formulate and tackle fundamental questions, preferring to focus on particular philosophical problems and becoming increasingly detached from the human being and human experience. For Buber, any philosophical enquiry has to deal with issues such as ‘what is the human being?’ and ‘how does the human being relate to the world?’. Thus, Buber was interested in understanding the human condition and its relation to reality – this is what is fundamental for philosophy, and something that places Buber within the existentialist philosophical school alongside the likes of Kierkegaard and Sartre (cf. Murphy, 1988, pp. 41–63).

According to this reading, in I and Thou Buber establishes a typology describing the kinds of human relations into which a human being can enter. For Buber, human beings

i. are relational beings;
ii. are always in a relation with either other human beings, or the world, or God;
iii. possess a two-fold attitude towards other human beings, the world or God, which is indicated by the basic words I-It (Ich-Es) and I-Thou (Ich-Du).¹

Before considering the basic words in detail, it is important to note here that the idea that human beings are relational beings is not particular to Buber and was
well established in the German philosophical tradition since Kant's publication of the three *Critiques*, where he argued strongly and convincingly about the importance of the relational aspect of the human being for the solution of epistemological, ethical and aesthetical problems (and this understanding was further developed by the post-Kantian idealists, namely Fichte, Schelling and Hegel); however, Kant's critical philosophy remained too compartmentalized and focused on particular problems to understand the importance of those fundamental questions that are key to a true 'philosophical anthropology'. In ‘What is Man?’ (1938), Buber (1938; 1961e, p. 135) says:

Kant was the first to understand the anthropological question critically, in such a way that an answer was given to Pascal's real concern. This answer – though it was not directed metaphysically to the being of man but epistemologically to his attitude to the world – grasped the fundamental problems. What sort of a world is it, which man knows? How can man, as he is, in his altered reality, know at all? How does man stand in the world he knows in this way – what is it to him and what is he to it?

Buber, as a German-speaker, philosopher and theologian, was well versed in the German philosophical tradition and latched onto its relational theme and elaborated on it with great skill while conceiving the **basic words** I-Thou and I-It. The **basic words** are a 'linguistic construct created by Buber as a way of pointing the quality of the experience that this combination of words seeks to connote' (Avnon, 1998, p. 39; *my emphasis*), so that I-It and I-Thou are read as 'unities' indicating one's state of Being and attitude towards the **Other**, the **World** and **God**. This means that there is no I relating to a Thou or to an It; rather, what exists is a kind of relation encapsulated by the unification of these words. Avnon (1998, p. 40) comments insightfully that 'one may summarize this point by suggesting that the difference between the I-You and the I-It relation to being is embedded in the hyphen'. The hyphen of I-Thou indicates the kind of relation that is inclusive to the Other, while the hyphen of the I-It points to the sort of relation that is not inclusive to the Other, that in fact separates the Other. As such, these **basic words** are pivotal for a proper understanding of Buber's thought and consequently of his views on education. Let me now explain these **basic words** in further detail.

The I-Thou relation is an encounter of equals who recognize each other as such and it represents an **inclusive** reality between individuals. Buber argues that the I-Thou relation lacks structure and content because infinity and universality are at the basis of the relation. This is so, as when human
beings encounter one another through this mode of being, an infinite number of meaningful and dynamic situations may take place in that which Buber calls the ‘Between’. Thus, it is important to note that any sort of preconception, expectation or systematization about the Other prevents the I-Thou relation from arising (cf. Olsen, 2004, p. 17, Theunissen, 1984) because they work as a ‘veil’, a barrier to being inclusive towards the Other. Within I-Thou relations, the ‘I’ is not sensed as enclosed and singular but is present, open to and inclusive towards the Other (cf. Avnon, 1998, p. 39). Despite the fact that it is difficult to characterize this kind of relation, Buber argues that it is real and perceivable, and examples of I-Thou relations in our day-to-day life are those of two lovers, two friends, a teacher and a student.

Contrariwise, in the I-It relation a being confronts another being, objectifies it and in so doing separates itself from the Other. This is in direct contrast with I-Thou relations because the “I” of I-It relations indicates a separation of self from what it encounters’ and “[b]y emphasising difference, the “I” of I-It experiences a sensation of apparent singularity – of being alive by virtue of being unique; of being unique by accentuating difference; of being different as a welcome separation from the other present in the situation; of having a psychological distance (“I”) that gives rise to a sense of being special in opposition to what is’ (Avnon, 1998, p. 39). Thus, when one engages in I-It relations one separates oneself from the Other and gains a sense of being different, special and arguably superior at the same time.

Buber understood that human existence consists of an oscillation between I-Thou and I-It relations and that the I-Thou experiences are rather few and far between. It is also important to emphasize that he rejects any sort of sharp dualism between the I-Thou and I-It relation. That is, for Buber there is always an inter-play between the I-Thou and the I-It rather than an either–or relation between these foundational concepts. I-Thou relations will always slip into I-It relations because I-Thou relations are too intense and we live in a worldly reality, requiring to use people to fulfil our basic needs; but I-It relations have always the potential of becoming an I-Thou relation, if we remain on the watch, open and inclusive of the Other. I draw the reader’s attention to the fact that this oscillation is very significant for it is the source of transformation; that is, through every I-Thou encounter, the I is transformed and this affects the I’s outlook of the I-It relation and of future I-Thou encounters. Putnam (2008, p. 67) notes that ‘the idea is that if one achieves that mode of being in the world, however briefly… then ideally, that mode of being… will transform one’s life even when one is back in the “It world”’. 
Theological reading (or Hassidic reading)

The above reading of Buber’s thought is so widespread in the secondary literature that arguably it has now become ‘standard’. However, there is also a different reading of Buber’s thought based on its Hasidic roots (cf. Avnon, 1998, Friedman, 2002, Weinstein, 1975, Yosef, 1985). The Hasidic influence on Buber’s thought is something worth noting because, as Mendes-Flohr (1986, p. 118) notes:

In Buber’s gracefully written and elegantly produced books [Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nachman (1906) and Die Legende des Baal Schem (1908)], the Hasid, for so long an emblem of putatively backward, uncouth Ostjuden, was no longer an object of disdain and ridicule … Buber disclosed a remarkable spiritual universe of mystical profundity. He rendered Hasidism respectable … by integrating this distinctive expression of Jewish spirituality into the general discourse and idiom of the fin-de-siècle…. By virtue of Buber’s inspired presentation, Hasidism – and the millennial Jewish mystical tradition from whence it emerged – was deemed relevant to the concerns of the educated individual [my brackets].

Hasidism is a popular religious movement within Judaism that emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century in Eastern Europe. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries it spread to other regions, notably Palestine and the United States. It has a focus on communal life and charismatic leadership as well as on ‘ecstasy’, ‘mass enthusiasm’ and close-knit group cohesion (cf. Hasidism, 2007). The founder of this movement was Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer (1700–1760), more commonly known as the Baal Shem Tov (i.e. Master of the Good Name of God in Hebrew). Friedman (2002, p. 18) notes that originally he was ‘a simple teacher, then later a magic healer’, who ‘finally gathered about him a group of disciples dedicated to a life of mystic fervour, joy, and love’, and ‘[r]eacting against the tendency of traditional Rabbinism toward strict legalism and arid intellectualism’, exalting ‘simplicity and devotion above mere scholarship’. For Buber, the Baal Shem Tov was an exemplary figure, who created the conditions for a historical response for the demands of the hour, for the problems faced by the Jewish community at the time, without creating a new religion and a departure from Judaism; moreover, the Baal Shem Tov contrasted with Jesus, whom Buber also considered to be an exemplary individual and whose badly timed and ‘premature emergence’ caused his followers to break away from Judaism (cf. Avnon, 1998, pp. 102–118).
It is arguable that some of the most important texts on this aspect of Buber’s thought are his *Tales of the Hasidim*, where he compiled various Hasidic stories disseminating moral and theological ideas, and his *Hasidism and the Modern Man* and *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, where he characterized the movement and proposed that it led to the popularization of the Kabbalah (i.e. Jewish mysticism); hence, his involvement with Hassidism was quite substantial. It is also noteworthy here that he acknowledges the influence of this movement on his own thought in ‘What is Man?’, published in Between Man and Man (1947; 1961c). Buber (1938; 1961e, p. 224) says:

> Since 1900 I had first been under the influence of German mysticism from Meister Eckhart to Angelus Silesius, according to which primal ground of Being, the nameless, impersonal Godhead, comes to birth in the human soul; then I had been under the influence of the later Kabbala and of Hasidism, according to which man has the power to unite the God who is over the world with his shekinah dwelling in the world [my emphasis].

As Buber’s own thought was influenced by Hasidism, it is also arguable that it was inspired by Kabbalistic influences, such as Rabbi Isaac Luria’s teachings (i.e. Lurianic Kabbalah). One very evident Hasidic and Kabbalistic aspect, which can be identified in the background of Buber’s thought, is the incorporation of the idea that shards (i.e. ‘sparks’) of the divine remain contained in the material world and that *rightful deeds* (i.e. *Tikkun Olam* in Hebrew or ‘repair of the world’) by the pious will help in releasing this divine energy (cf. Silberstein, 1989, pp. 46–48) – and it is to this aspect that I now turn my attention.

To comprehend the notion from the previously quoted passage that the human being ‘has the power to unite God who is over the world with his shekinah dwelling in the world’, one must first attain an understanding of the Hasidic conception of creation, which is connected to the Kabbalistic notion of the divine ‘shards’ or ‘sparks’. On commenting on this aspect of Buber’s thought, Wodehouse (1945, p. 29) writes:

> The glory of God, said the Chassists, was poured out in the beginning over weak vessels that broke and could not hold it; but every fragment still retains a spark of that divinity, and the Presence of God goes into exile with these sparks, and man co-operates with it to bring them back into manifestation and into reunion with the one Light from which they came.

Hasidism understands that all genuine relations converge into the Eternal, and hence whenever human beings *genuinely* relate to one another, and to other entities, they relate to God – it is this aspect of Hasidism that greatly influenced
Buber. For Buber, allowing I-Thou relations to arise, that is, addressing the Other as a Thou, represents also an encounter with the eternal Thou (i.e. God), and that is why he says, ‘In each Thou we address the eternal Thou’ (Buber, 2004, p. 14).

This understanding turns I-Thou relations into the key to a religious life and religion, as establishing I-Thou relations in our daily lives brings sanctity to our daily tasks and routine (cf. Silberstein, 1989, p. 210). In Le Hassidisme et l'homme d'Occident, Buber (1957, np) acknowledges this point and the great contribution of the Baal Shem Tov, and of Hasidism, when he says:

Le trait le plus important du Hassidisme est aujourd'hui comme autrefois la tendance énergique, et se manifestant aussi bien dans l'existence personnelle que dans celle de la communauté, de vaincre de plus en plus la séparation fondamentale entre le sacré et le profane.  

For Buber, every time we allow I-Thou relations to arise in our daily lives, every time we address the Other as a Thou, we cease to be alone because we allow the ‘spark’ of the Eternal that resides in us to connect with the ‘spark’ of the Eternal that is in the Other. As such and according to the theological reading of the basic words, I-Thou relations do not consist merely in an encounter within an inclusive reality between individuals as the philosophical reading would have; rather, I-Thou relations are more than this, gaining a spiritual aspect through the ‘uncovering and connecting of the divine sparks’. Hence engaging with the Other through I-It relations means to fail to uncover and connect with the ‘divine spark’ as well as to engage with the eternal-Thou, and the implications of this for the individual will become clear below.

This ‘divine spark’ is better characterized by referring to the Hasidic concept of shekhinah (i.e. divine presence). In Hasidism and the Modern Man, Buber (1958, p. 37) elaborates on this when he says that ‘the sparks which fell down from the primal creation into the covering shells and were transformed into stones, plants, and animals, they all ascend to their source through the consecration of the pious [Hasid means pious in Hebrew] who works on them in holiness, uses them in holiness, consumes them in holiness’ [my brackets]; and Buber (1958, p. 103) elaborates further by commenting that ‘the sparks are to be found everywhere. They are suspended in things as in sealed-off springs; they stoop in the creatures as in walled-up caves, they inhale darkness and they exhale dread; they wait.’ The Hasidic movement understands that we are responsible for finding, for drawing forth, for re-connecting with the sparks, and each and every
entity must be approached with the intent of uncovering the spark and merging it with our own. However, sometimes the sparks become too hidden from us because of our own ignorance and/or choices and this creates a thick veil that enshrines them; as such our challenge is to escape from our own debilitating conditions and to seek to uncover these sparks (cf. Blenkinsop, 2004, p. 80). This means that as human beings this is part of our being, and consequently an individual who fails to do so, who continually engages with the Other through I-It relations, is an individual who is denying his own essence.

Furthermore, the failure to establish ‘a dialogical between’ leads one to experience an ‘existential guilt’, which prompts one to seek ‘reconciliation with oneself and with the world’. This is described by Buber in ‘A Conversion’, a subsection of his Dialogue, when he says:

What happened was no more than that one forenoon, after a morning of ‘religious’ enthusiasm, I had a visit from an unknown young man, without being there in spirit. I certainly did not fail to let the meeting be friendly, I did not treat him any more remissly than all his contemporaries who were in the habit of seeking me out about this time of the day as an oracle that is ready to listen to reason… Later, I learned that he had come to me not casually, but borne by destiny, not for a chat but for a decision. He had come to me, he had come in this hour. What do we expect when we are in despair and yet go to a man? Surely a presence by means of which we are told that nevertheless there is meaning.

Buber (1929; 1961d, pp. 13–14; my emphasis)

The failure to establish dialogue led Buber to feel guilty, and this changed him because he felt the need to remind himself constantly of the importance of I-Thou relations, of establishing dialogue, entering into inclusive relations, connecting with the ‘sparks’. What is important here is that the I is not just transformed by every I-Thou encounter; it is also transformed by the I’s realization that it failed to establish a dialogue with the Other, and that it has missed an opportunity to connect the divine shard within it to the spark in the Other.

These two readings, the philosophical and the theological, might be seen as complementary to, rather than competing with, each other. This is so because as Avnon (1998, p. 17) notes, ‘Buber was a servant of two voices, of two masters. One voice sought to participate in the ordinary discourse – philosophical, literary, political and scholarly – prevailing in his time. That voice was grounded in the texts of the day and addressed contemporary philosophical and political concerns… Yet there was an additional, latent voice in the background.’ The latent voice is the Hasidic voice, which was a source of much inspiration to
Buber and represents a sort of hidden dialogue, something concealed under the surface of his writings.

**Implications for education: Inclusion**

This leads me to the implications of Buber's thought for the field of education. What are these implications? Let me first deal with the philosophical reading of Buber's views for education before turning to the theological interpretation of the basic words, I-Thou and I-It.

Buber understands that both I-Thou and I-It relations play a role in education; however, he argues that dialogue should be at its centre. As a consequence of this, he was very critical of both teacher-centred and student-centred approaches to education, which were being practised in Germany in the early part of the twentieth century. In his 'Address on Education' (1925; 1961a), which builds on I and Thou (1923), Buber criticizes the teacher-centred approach for it gives too much weight to the role of the teacher, and he understands that this makes it difficult for I-Thou relations to arise. Within the teacher-centred approach, the teacher and students become trapped into I-It relations, in which the teacher provides students with facts and information; that is, the teacher funnels information into students and does not encourage their creativity. Buber also criticizes the student-centred approach for focusing too much on the role of the student, and he understands that this approach makes it difficult for I-Thou relations to arise as the student lacks proper guidance from the teacher and is left to pump his education out of his own subjective interests or needs within a given environment.

For Buber, dialogical education is one that places appropriate weight on the roles of both teacher and student, drawing in from both I-Thou and I-It relations. The role of the teacher is to set the curriculum, the framework, to provide the value platform for the student, which provides information and starting points for discussion – this is based on I-It relations; but this does not mean that the student's interests, creativity and needs are overlooked as the student develops these within the framework set by the teacher, and through discussions topics and elements of the course are constantly re-evaluated – this is based on I-Thou relations. Such an approach is now established in modern education which might indicate Buber's great influence on its theory and practice (Hilliard, 1973).

Another implication of Buber's defence of dialogical education and of his understanding of I-Thou relations and the attitude of inclusion implied by it is
that the teacher must accept whoever presents themselves to him or her; that is, it is a fact that the teacher does not choose who is to be present and educated in his or her classroom. But this form of inclusion does not mean that the teacher must accept students as they are; rather, ‘teacher must accept students as they can be and wrestle with them openly and compassionately to enable them to grow in an ethical sense’ (Watras, 1986, p. 16). This means that the educator can only educate if able to build a relation based on inclusion, on true dialogue with students, which can only come to the fore if the student trusts the educator, if the student feels accepted. Cohen (1979, p. 87) notes that any attempt to impose an authoritative form of education, which restrains the child’s expressive and creative faculties, will ‘only bring the child to a state of resignation or drive him into rebellion’; this is the kind of education that remains within the realm of I-It relations and as such seeks to separate teacher from student by placing the teacher in a ‘position’ based on difference, superiority and uniqueness. Moreover, accepting students as they can be also implies that the student ‘must take up the challenge of her/his becoming’ and this ‘not because we have made her/him do so;’ that is, the student must take ownership of her/his education and turn towards the relationship and experience the educator has made available to her/him – and this raises challenges to our current practices (Blenkinsop, 2005, p. 293), which are, arguably, based on too much ‘scaffolding’ and ‘spoon feeding.’

But it is not just the teacher–student relation that needs to be inclusive, which must fall within I-Thou relations, as the student–student relation must also fall within this category. Culturally we learn a great deal from other people who have different interests and experiences from our own. Arnstine (2000, pp. 236–237) notes that ‘the inclusiveness criterion for the formation of groups supports multicultural education . . . , for it includes . . . equally important kinds of human diversity that are very important to the quality of the lives and learning of the young . . . heterosexually disposed youth can learn from those who are homosexually inclined. Economically fortunate children can learn from the disadvantaged . . . People who are able to learn from those who are disabled.’ This demonstrates that it is by recognizing others as invaluable to one’s own human development, one also recognizes them as individuals striving to live their humanity fully and truthfully, and this leads one to ascribe a greater meaning and depth to their lives. It is arguable that when students experience this, they become more inclusive of one another as they gain a better understanding of life in community and of humanity itself (cf. Laverty, 2007, p. 130). Thus, through bringing a wide range of students from the most varied backgrounds and walks of life together, as in most universities, and allowing them to learn from each other
and to share experiences, it is possible to encourage I-Thou relations to arise, and inclusive attitudes to take hold, even if this takes time and commitment from all participants (Morgan and Guilherme, 2014, pp. 91–104). Noddings (1994, p. 116) comments on this point: ‘Insistence on respect and loving regard leaves us open to influence; we are pledged to learning and exploring together … this is preparation for a moral life of openness, friendliness, trust and caring. It is preparation that takes time.’ It can be argued that the more inclusive education is, the more it will promote the positive aspects of the human being and of community (e.g. understanding of oneself and of the Other; pursuing a peaceful co-existence). Thus, I would suggest that education at all levels (i.e. formal, non-formal or informal), for both children and adults, should embrace inclusion as much as possible if these positive aspects are to take hold and flourish.

The danger of not pursuing inclusion in education becomes obvious when we consider that it is only through I-Thou relations (i.e. inclusion) that we are able to ‘put a face’ to the Other and recognize ‘the validity of another person’s views’ (cf. Watras, 1986, p. 15), and in doing so the potential for objectifying the Other dissipates. It is arguable that this puts a stop to, or it at least hinders, the objectification of the Other, which makes it difficult for prejudices, preconceptions and racism to take a grip. In turn, this prevents the potential for conflict between individuals and communities to arise, and when conflict is already in place it provides individuals and communities with a chance to resolve it. This is an extremely important implication of Buber’s philosophy given the potential positive implications for human society.

Through my discussion thus far, it becomes quite evident that dialogical education, based on inclusion as conceived by Buber, is always the education of character. In fact, in his ‘Education of Character’, Buber (1939; 1961b, p. 146) expresses education as

>a step beyond all the dividedness of individualism and collectivism…genuine education of character is genuine education for community…he who knows inner unity, the inner most life of which is mystery, learns to honour the mystery in all its forms.

Buber was aware of the implications of his thought for social and political development (as well as for spiritual well-being, which will be discussed later). The previously mentioned inclusive attitude between teacher–student and student–student is the keystone of what Buber calls a dialogical community. Guilherme and Morgan (2009, pp. 570–571) argue that such a dialogical community is for Buber a third way between absolute individualism (I without
Thous) and collectivism (Thous without an I). This is so because in such a community individuals hold an inclusive attitude towards the Other, while constantly engaging creatively and critically with the Other. Buber believed that this improves the quality of life for each of the members of the community, as well as encourages the continuation of the community as it increases social cohesion, sustains cultural creativity and dissipates the potential for conflict.

This shows that Buber was concerned about the need to differentiate between dialogical education and propaganda and indoctrination. The propagandist and the indoctrinator impose opinion and attitudes on Others; the educator, to the contrary, nourishes the Other’s mind and recognizes it as unique and autonomous. I quote:

[education is] a true, deep and persistent influence…teaching is not propaganda and must not be allowed to become such. What is needed is instruction, expression of feeling and thought, expression which is forthright and consequential, spontaneous and untendentious. What is needed is critical and responsible knowledge and articulation thereof, and nothing else. One who seeks to gain influence through an act which is in lieu of responsible articulation of critical knowledge, corrupts not only the act and his soul, but will fail to achieve what he sought, even though what he will achieve will bear resemblance to what he sought to achieve. I have said ‘truth’ and I say it again: by truth I mean human truth, truth given to human beings and this truth is based on emancipation from the matrix called tendentiousness.5

Friedman (2002, p. 213) and Blenkinsop (2004, p. 86) conclude that the propagandist is concerned not with the Other’s development per se but only in exploiting the Other so as to fulfil and to expand the propagandist agenda; the educator, to the contrary, recognizes students as individuals with unique existential needs and tasks. The propagandist has no respect for pupils; the educator does. The propagandist always works within the I-It framework and as such holds an attitude of separation towards students, and encourages the separation of Others by them in turn, which invariably leads to conflict and to commit evil acts. The educator has always I-Thou relations in his mind and, in so doing, encourages an attitude of acceptance and of the inclusion of the Other, which advances ethical attitudes, defusing conflict between individuals and communities. Hence, dialogical education ‘aims to develop certain propensities in the student: it aims particularly to promote a responsible exercise of freedom and the continuing authentication of all intentions and deeds in the moment of their occurrence’ (Murphy, 1988, p. 146), and I would add that this has to be done in an ethical manner.
The above seems to be the direct consequence of the philosophical reading of Buber’s views, and thus it is fair to ask here: What are the implications of the theological reading for education?

For Buber, the *zaddik* and *hasid*, rabbi and follower in a Hasidic community, are a pivotal example of teacher–student and student–student relationship. Boff (2009, p. 39) states that ‘the Hasid is the person who lives intensely the duty to love God, who cultivates a great intimacy with him, who is sensitive to his intentions, which are expressed by the law as a living manifestation of his will. The pious person completely inserts himself or herself in the spiritual tradition of the people through a religious practice within the family, through taking part in the holy festivals, and through the weekly attendance of the synagogue’; the *hasid* (i.e. *pious* in Hebrew) becomes a *zaddic* (i.e. *just* in Hebrew) when he ‘becomes a beacon of the community, educates the younger ones by example, conquers through acting righteously, and garners the trust of the rest of the community and thus becomes a reference for the collectivity’.6

Avnon (1998, p. 165) commented on this aspect of Buber’s philosophy by noting:

The dialogue between the *zaddik* and the Hasid, sealed by the common aspiration to realize higher levels of being, grants Buber’s image of the *zaddik* an intrinsically social dimension. The dialogue among the members of the community is dialectically intertwined with the individual member’s dialogue with Elohim. To unveil the deeper self, to come closer to one’s being, one needs to enter into meaningful, purposeful, human relationships. To be capable of entering such human relationships, one needs an affinity to the greater reality represented by the idea of God. By serving as a living example of the way to conduct reciprocal relationships in the various circles of the community, Buber’s *zaddik* exemplifies the paradigmatic conduct of one at the center of a community of persons committed to the fulfilment of this human need [i.e. *Hasids*].

This strong and profound connection between the *zaddik* and the *hasid* is established through inclusive relations, I-Thou relations (cf. Yosef, 1985, pp. 20–25), which is something discussed by Buber in the *Tales of the Hasidism*, where he says that ‘one of the principles of Hasidism is that the Zaddik and the people are dependent on one another … The teacher helps his disciples find themselves, and in hours of desolation the disciples help their teacher find himself again’ (Buber, 1975, p. 8; my emphasis). The dynamic flow from teacher to student, from student to teacher, and between students is telling and demonstrates the level of inclusiveness incorporated by Hasidic communities, and why Buber saw them as prime examples for dialogical education and communities. It could
be contended here that such levels of inclusion are not always easy to achieve; and this is perhaps true specially given the current framework of educational systems and the ‘learnification’ that has been implemented (cf. Biesta 2013), which focus on ‘achievements’ and considers ‘relations’ a desirable non-essential by-product. Despite this, teacher and students should strive for inclusion if ‘education worthy of the name’ (Buber 1947, p. 132) is to be achieved.

It is interesting to note here that in the Hebrew language the verb to teach *Lelamed* (לַלְמָדָה) and to learn *Lilemod* (לִלְמֹדָה) share the same root (*shoresh*), the letters *LMD* (לַמְדָה), which are the basis for the conjugation of these verbs in all tenses, demonstrating a closeness in the understanding of ‘what it is to teach’ and ‘what it is to learn’. Hence, the basic idea behind these verbs was closely inter-related in the mindset of ancient Hebrew speakers, and arguably in that of modern Hebrew speakers also. The aforementioned inter-dependent relation between the *zaddik* and the *hasid*, teacher and student, seems to mirror the idea of closeness portrayed by these two Hebrew verbs; this means that teaching-and-learning is not something unidirection happening only from teacher to student, but bidirectional happening also from student to teacher. The teacher also learns from the student; the act of teaching creates feedback loops from students that need to be considered and addressed by the teacher.

A direct consequence of the theological reading of Buber’s views is that the teacher should not only provide students with information about reality and encourage in them critical thinking but should also encourage them to perfect the world; that is, the teacher provides students with the insight that their deeds exist in the world, but that the world also exists in their deeds (cf. Gordon, 1978, pp. 88–89). This is so because students must become aware of the idea that human beings must ‘seek and connect with the divine shards or sparks’, and failing to do so somehow diminishes us as humans (whether this is done overtly or not is a different question that cannot be answered here for matters of space). This gives education a spiritual tinge that is often overlooked by educators, and which, arguably, turns it into a more meaningful experience to both teachers and students. The idea of ‘perfecting the world’ is extremely important in Judaism and it is conveyed by the concept *tikkun olam* (literally, ‘world repair’), which stands for the physical, social and spiritual improvement of the world. In Jewish circles it is now associated with actions such as charity (*tzedakah*) and kindness (*gemilut hasadim*) and other programmes connected with social issues; it can also be associated with the *Kabbalah* due to its connection with the ‘shards’ or ‘sparks’ of the divine, assuming a mystical meaning. Buber was certainly aware of it as it is a key concept in Judaism.
Final thoughts

The philosophical reading of Buber’s thought when connected to education provides us with a strong argument in favour of different levels and kinds of inclusion. The theological reading further enriches this by providing a spiritual dimension to both inclusion and education. Moreover, Buber’s understanding that the the zaddik and hasid relation ‘could serve as an example of the dialogue principle in education’ because ‘the three components of this dialogue – contact, trust and envelopment [i.e. inclusion] are present in Hassidism’ (my brackets) and because ‘the Zaddik and his followers live together and he teaches them, through his entire being, as a living example’ (Yosef, 1985, p. 24) was not defended just in theory but also in practice.

At first glance, and because of the strong focus of Buber’s views on the importance of dialogical relationships for education, it might appears that he is asking educators to give up the idea that education is about certain pre-established suppositions about the human being, about how we learn, what makes us happy, which currently work as a compass for educational systems. However, I believe that this is not the case. Buber seems to demonstrate that if educators understand themselves to be more than mere agents of socialisation, then they must understand the crucial importance of relationships and of the encounter with the Other. This does not mean that they are empty hands because Buber put this into practice both in Germany, when the Nazis came to power in 1933 when the Jewish community found itself excluded from the state educational system, and also in Israel, after the War of Independence (1948) in 1949 when the newly found state had to cope with the influx of immigrants who had survived the terrors of the Nazi Concentration and Extermination Camps along with those fleeing pogroms in Arab countries (cf. Morgan and Guilherme, 2014, pp. 71–90). In both occasions Buber set up important and innovative educational ventures, defending the role of education as a fundamental aspect for the formation and renewal of community. He encouraged teachers to live with their students and to pursue a pedagogical approach largely based on the study of texts through reading and critical discussions – it was expected that this would give rise to a community and ultimately encourage individuals to live in and form communities. Hence, these educational ventures and pedagogical approaches were fundamentally founded on the inclusion of the Other – the very cornerstone of community formation – as well as on connecting with the ultimate Other, the eternal Thou.
Notes

1 It is important to draw attention to the German word *Du*, which is present in the original German title as well as in the foundational concept *Ich-Du*. Walter Kauffman in his important and modern translation of the work points out that *Du* is the German personal pronoun one uses to address friends or family, people with whom one has a close relationship. *Du* is the informal personal pronoun and this is in contrast with *Sie* which is the personal pronoun used to address people one is not familiar with or that one does not have a close relationship or that is used as a sign of respect (e.g. to elders). This distinction is present in many languages (e.g. French: *Tu* and *Vous*); however, it has been lost in English. The English archaic personal *Thou*, which was the equivalent of *Du*, has lost its informal connotation in modern times, and as such it does not capture the idea of informality present in Buber’s text. Perhaps, *Du* is better translated in English as *you*, which is something Kauffman actually does in his translation – he only kept the original *Thou* of the title (cf. Buber, 1972). That said, I have opted to keep *Thou* throughout the text so to follow the conventional terminology of the secondary literature.

2 Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534–1472), commonly known as Ha’Ari (the Lion), was born in Jerusalem and is considered a major figure of modern Kabbalah, and in the establishment of the Kabbalistic School of Safed (i.e. Safed is a town in Northern Israel).

3 This manuscript was found in the Buber Archives, Jewish National and University Library, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Its archival number is ARC. MS. VAR. 350.04.23a and it was originally published as ‘Le Hassidisme et l’homme d’Occident’, in *Melanges de Philosophie et de Literature*, Paris: PUF, 1957.

4 Veck (2013) provides an interesting discussion focusing on Buber’s thought and the issue of Special Educational Needs (SEN). He argues that Buber’s conception of *inclusion* is a valuable corrective to the technical approach thus far taken by special education policy and theory, which turns relationships between educators and the young into a demarcated area characterized by pre-established and categorized needs. Veck (2013: 627) concluded that ‘if such acts [i.e. acts of inclusion] were to inform our understanding of relationships in education, then our vision for an education and society that is inclusive might diverge from a distant terrain, accessible only through the exercising of specialist skill and technical mastery, and return us to “the Kingdom that is hidden in our midst, there between us” (Buber, 2004, p. 90)’ [*my brackets*].

In Meetings, Buber (1969, p. 39) wrote of the relation of the zaddic and the hasid while reflecting on his childhood experiences by saying: “I could compare on the one side with the head man of the province whose power rested on nothing but habitual compulsion; on the other with the rabbi, who was an honest and God-fearing man, but an employee of the ‘directorship of the cult’. Here, however, was another, an incomparable; here was, debased yet uninjured, the living double kernel of humanity: genuine community and genuine leadership. The place of the rebbe, in its showy splendor, repelled me. The prayer house of the Hasidim with its enraptured worshippers seemed strange to me. But when I saw the rebbe striding through the rows of the waiting, I felt, ‘leader’, and when I saw the Hasidim dance with the ‘Torah, I felt ‘community’. At the time there rose in me a presentiment of the fact that common reverence and common joy of soul are the foundation of genuine human community.”

Biesta (2008) makes this same point with respect to Levinas.

References


In schools within England and Wales, spirituality is required to be evident within all lesson planning and delivery. It should also be recognized within whole school community life (Ofsted, 2013, pp. 15–18). Mirroring the second aim of the National Curriculum which states that schools should ‘aim to promote pupil’s spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and prepare all pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life’ (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1999, p. 11), these four aspects of learning, often referred to together using the initials ‘SMSC’, have once again come to the fore in recommendations from government and the national standards agency, Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills). While there is no discrete curriculum area we might call ‘spirituality’ and existing separately from religious education, it is nevertheless a dimension pervading all aspects of school life that holds some meaning for children and is intrinsic to who they are.

As a nebulous concept, spirituality is not easy to define or measure; indeed, any definition might be perceived as antithetical to the essence of what spirituality might be (Priestley, 1996). Certainly, within literature pertaining to the spirituality of children and young people a range of views are presented (Watson, 2000, pp. 96–99). However, in 2004, guidelines were provided by Ofsted, which summarizes spiritual development as

the development of the non-material element of a human being which animates and sustains us and, depending on our point of view, either ends or continues in some form when we die. It is about the development of a sense of identity, self-worth, personal insight, meaning and purpose. It is about the development of a pupil’s ‘spirit’. Some people may call it the development of a pupil’s ‘soul’; others as the development of ‘personality’ or ‘character’. (Ofsted, 2004, p. 12)

In the absence of a theoretical underpinning, one questions the philosophical starting point for these guidelines. What is clear however is that spirituality
is located outside of any exclusively religious domain and is identified as an aspect of being human. While the acceptance of what might be represented as ‘religious’ in education is under discussion (Watson, 2010, pp. 5–6), issues of knowledge and truth here pertain to children’s own beliefs drawn from their personal lives. In the light of this, the Ofsted document promotes teaching methods which, for example, value pupils’ questions to provide space for their own thoughts, ideas and concerns; enable pupils to make connections between aspects of their learning; encourage pupils to relate their learning to a wider frame of reference, for example, asking ‘why’, ‘how’ and ‘where’, as well as ‘what’ (Webster, 2004, p. 14).

This Osfted material is resonant of a debate spanning fifteen years or so, in which Clive Erricker, whose scepticism refuses to acknowledge absolute truth, has sought the liberation of spirituality from religion (2007, pp. 55–56; p. 58), arguing against scholars such as Andrew Wright who believe that without ultimate truth and divine revelation, spiritual education remains rootless (1998, p. 39). This dualistic positing sets the scene for the problematic which this chapter is to address.

Although having no official influence over Ofsted, the values of the global children’s spirituality movement established in 2000 (www.childrenspirituality.org) by Erricker are resonant. This movement’s belief in human spirituality (de Souza, 2013) and inductive teaching methods inspires an educational paradigm which recognizes the child at the centre of the learning experience (de Souza, 2010, p. 34) and engages in exploration and existential questioning (Webster, 2004, pp. 10–11) in a space designed to allow for enquiry and personal growth (Miller, 2000, pp. 3–4). I have termed this the ‘experiential paradigm’ based on Adams, Hyde and Woolley’s assertion that spiritual education involves reflection on experiences and the meanings gained from them (2008, pp. 38–39). At a time when the frameworks for teaching and assessment are so tight and children are expected to acquire non-negotiable skills and knowledge, the inclusion of an open-ended aspect to learning is timely.

In this chapter I describe further the values of the experiential paradigm before locating these ideas within a Heideggerian framework for a philosophical underpinning. But I also raise points for critique. Although I am a member of this movement, I argue against dualism, highlighting the difficulties of placing the personal over the universal and the possible over the certain in its epistemology. I propose that humanistic meaning placed in negation to meanings gained from religious traditions is illusory; based on a fear of error it may well be itself an error. Also I believe that as an educational paradigm, it is inadequate in itself.
Observing dualism as the result of negation and separation, I propose that it is a critical conversation with, and not a divorce from, religious traditions that is required for a challenging and life-giving process of education.

Discussion

Advocates of the ‘experiential paradigm’ consider children as spiritual entities in their own right. A commonly held view is that spirituality is both universal and innate: ‘an ontological reality’ (Adams et al., 2008, p. 14). It follows that spirituality is part of a child's being, embedded within lived human experience. For example, Hay and Nye argue that spirituality is an ‘ever present aspect of being human’ (2006, p. 134), and Hyde concurs, stating that ‘there is reason to examine spirituality as an ontological reality for human beings’ (2008, p. 29). It is also accepted that human beings have the capacity to experience a transcendent dimension within the everyday occurrences of life (Berger, 1969, p. 70; Hay and Nye, 2006, p. 60).

Influential authors in this field are David Hay (2006) and Tobin Hart (2003), who both provide empirical data to propose that as self and spirit are ontologically linked, epistemological authority subsequently lies with children. For Hart, spiritual learning begins with children's experiences from their ‘secret spiritual worlds’, rather than influenced by anything external (2003, p. 173); for this reason, the objectivity and influence of religious teaching for him is at odds with the development of an authentic self.

This position then is suspicious of any objective reality presented as truth. It is held that knowledge is partial; therefore nothing absolute can be totally known. It is temporary, as understanding gained by children is the truth of ‘now’. It is contingent; therefore when perceiving what knowledge and truth mean, context will play a determining role. It is mediated; therefore absolute truth (such as a notion of ‘God’) cannot be known in a pure form. It is localized; therefore the form and certainty of religious metanarratives are traded for a truth founded on subjective knowledge already located in human consciousness.

While advocates such as Wright have confidence in the truth of their religious (Christian) beliefs and tradition, in this paradigm such assurance is treated with caution. Hay identifies religious knowledge as a culturally constructed illusion (2006, p. 25), while Hart suggests that to manipulate children’s meaning-making into that acceptable as the ‘truth’ of any tradition is to do violence to the children’s views themselves (2003, p. 178). This is perceived as an infringement on their
rights. This view is most fervently advocated by Erricker and Erricker who place epistemological certainty under the microscope and throw into question the reliability of any reality represented by objective truth and form. They incite error on the part of those attempting to present such truth. Asserting that knowledge is always mediated, they claim it cannot be accepted as true truth (1996, p. 187) and write ‘the only authentic criteria against which the truth claims embedded in language should be tested is that of reality itself’ (2000, p. 46). They allege that spiritual education based on religious values has a ‘deleterious ontological effect’ on children (2000, p. 75).

The personalized meaning-making of their pedagogy negates the perceived epistemological hegemony of the dogmas, doctrines and rules of religion and places children at the centre of all enquiry. Free from the proclamation of truth claims or the requirement to accept agreed values and beliefs, it is the children's mode of discovery that motivates each to uncover subjective understandings and insights into their place in this world. They construct their own image of the other one might call ‘God’, creating meanings based on their own perceptions and located within their own cultural (Erricker and Erricker, 1996, p. 187) or private worlds (Adams, 2010, pp. 123–127).

These meanings in turn influence children’s personal values (Hyde, 2010, p. 94). Such values inspire decision-making based on an ethical and moral code which is established from the ‘reality’ of each individual’s life and not in response to contingent influencers. Furthermore, this has an impact on the child’s decision-making. Adams et al. (2008, p. 48) suggest that a sense of being acknowledges the authentic self rather than the role played out through expected behaviours. Similarly, Jane Erricker argues that children should be ‘given the opportunity to identify and continue to construct and change their own moral stances on existential issues. They should work out for themselves how they should behave and why they should behave in that way’ (2000, p. 159).

In a Heideggerian sense these authors resist the child falling from his or her authentic self. Being suspicious of socially pre-determined modes of conduct and being, they aim to retain children’s ontological validity when making meaning and value judgements to avoid situations where their innate spirituality is contaminated by the seen and unseen authority figures in their lives. The children individually are the beginning and end of their questions of identity and existence. The self is the director of the trajectory of the authentic self and of the values held therein.

A pedagogical path away from the epistemological problem veers towards methods such as existential questioning. Webster, an advocate of this approach,
asserts that meaning-making will have more significance when the individual has made it on his or her own. He does not negate the idea of a transcendent other or deity, but he argues that meanings found in relationship with this phenomenon are a risk when presented objectively. Without any absolute certainty of truth, meaning-making must be true to the authentic self (2004, pp. 15–16).

Other scholars promote affective teaching and learning methods which again place children in the centre and draw on their inner life, senses and emotions. Noting that as the etymology of ‘education’ is ‘to bring forth what is present’ (Miller, 2000, p. vii), the teacher is at most a facilitator while the educational objective is to supersede epistemological mastery to assist children in constructing their own worldviews. Through strategies such as ‘spiritual questing’ (Hyde, 2008, p. 138), children ‘gain ownership of their beliefs by self construction rather than imposed dogma’ (Erricker and Erricker, 2000, p. 159). The arts, silence, iconography and physicality are all considered conduits for affective spiritual learning, and Miller outlines how visualization, storytelling and creative writing are examples of how a child’s inner life might be developed (2000, p. 49; pp. 56–58). He suggests that by bringing ‘soul’ into the educational process, children can face the big questions of life and help ‘bring vitality and a deeper sense of purpose and meaning to classrooms’ (2000, pp. 9–10).

Having drawn on a statement regarding spirituality in an influential Ofsted document and acknowledged its resonance with the views of authors within an experiential paradigm, it has been identified that the child is considered both the beginning and end of all spiritual development and that education involves the primacy of an authentic self in learning, value formation and meaning-making. This view is posited against a spiritual education based on religious values or those who teach for certainty. I observe here a correlation with Heidegger’s thinking and my reading of literature from the experiential paradigm, through a Heideggerian lens has brought to light similarities regarding the underlying assumptions of both the paradigm and the philosophy. In the next section then I will locate the material presented so far in a philosophical framework, drawing on Heidegger’s potentiality-for-Being as its foundation.

Heidegger

As I have explored this paradigm, no detailed study has been brought to light which marries themes from Heidegger’s philosophy with aspects of experiential spiritual education. Rather, fleeting references are interjected in a handful
of articles and texts to reinforce the author's own intentions. For example, Champagne notes Dasein as the spiritual dimension of the child (2003, p. 45) and as an elemental quality disclosed before the 'discursive intellect' kicks in (Hay and Nye, 2006, p. 134); therefore, it is antithetical to systematic educational processes (Westermann and Newby, 1996, p. 48). Here I offer a slightly more nuanced philosophical perspective on the themes of spiritual education, mainly in the light of *Being and Time* (1962).

The primacy of the self in spiritual education is key and I suggest that Heidegger speaks to this through his philosophy of Being. Because for him, the Being of an entity is the primordial phenomenon, it belongs to that made manifest in appearance (1962, pp. 51–55). Being is essence, that is 'as it is', which is the a priori condition (1962, pp. 32–33) for the possibility of existence. This primordial state of Being, which is Being-in-the-world, is that which my colleagues note as ontological and consequently the platform for truth which is in-itself. But Dasein is more than this. Essence is already included in Dasein, which is described as the manner of Being which man possesses in its possibility, or potentiality-for-Being. It has a character all of its own and provides the condition for the possibility of all ontologies; thus it is pre-ontological and concerned with the constant advancement of Dasein. In this way, truth from Being will not be understood until the truth of the possibility of Being is acknowledged. The truth of Being is that in which Dasein has potentiality-for-Being thrown into its own possibility of existenz, ahead of itself in care (1962, p. 274).

Dasein is a manner of Being which has Being. It has a relationship with Being such that it understands itself in terms of Being-in-the-world as its basic state and the potentiality of what it might become. As Being, it is an issue for Being (1962, p. 274). Thus, it is both prior to and ahead of itself. Existenz (1962, p. 32) is not Being in its actuality but the designation of Being given to Dasein (1962, p. 67). It is the possibility of the truth of its Being in existence (1978, p. 227). Therefore 'I' as an entity must be recognized as exhibiting phenomenally the kind of Being which Dasein possesses in its possibility and interpreted existentially as the Being of Dasein and not as 'my' true self. It follows that the projected self which is encountered in the world of relation is not any actual representation of Dasein and should not be interpreted as reality. Appearance announces through something that is not itself (1962, p. 51).

Through disclosure however, Dasein is brought to the fore in a clearing of Being. In such a disclosure, clearing breaks down the disguises which prevent Dasein from being its own possibility and sweeps away any concealments
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(such as mediation or contingency) in order to draw on its pre-ontological way of interpreting Being (1962, p. 167). In this way a child’s spiritual talk might be considered the more true representation of what he or she is feeling or has experienced, religiously or otherwise. Heidegger writes:

[T]he existential analytic of Dasein. . . . must seek for one of the most far reaching and most primordial possibilities of disclosure—one that lies in Dasein itself. The way of disclosure in which Dasein brings itself before itself must be such that in it Dasein becomes accessible as simplified in a certain manner. (1962, p. 226)

This dictates that phenomenology and other methods of enquiry are therefore more authentic as that which is seen issues from their own selves (1962, p. 58). The aim of enquiry is to lay bare the horizon for the interpretation of the meaning of Being (1962, p. 36):

If the interpretation of Dasein’s Being is to become primordial as a foundation for working out the basic question of ontology, then it must first have brought to light existentially the Being of Dasein in its possibilities of authenticity and totality.(1962, p. 276)

The self is viewed in its totality: ‘in itself’. This is posited as separate from the contingent ‘I’ which is influenced by mediation within thought consciousness. The cleared Being is immersed in Being, which the child sustains in his or her relation with Dasein in care (1978, p. 225). Enquiry and its interpretation eradicate external influences; instead, Heidegger directs his thinking to the a priori state of Being which is present before thought and leaves it there. Responding to education today, there is no room for facts, information or non-negotiable skills: instead enquiry is about recognizing the potentiality of each child in their Dasein and drawing on this for primal meaning-making. Meaningmaking is that of possibility not actuality, and it is interpreted existentially from the clearing of a Being which is in its essence, as it is.

The existential analytic of Heidegger also asks as to the meaning of the Being of the inquirer (1962, p. 27). The Being of the inquirer in his or her search for meaning is already made available within his or her primordial Being. The child then is the beginning and end of all existential searching; that is, Being exists before one comes to an understanding or knowledge of the self as Being. This searching is considered an authentic expression of potentiality-for-Being.

This is posited in contrast to the inauthentic self which exists factically and therefore fallen from its primordial state of Being (1962, pp. 219–224). As identified earlier, spiritual educators fear inauthenticity and aim to prevent children from falling into such a state. For example, Chickering et al. assert that
the gaining of authentic beliefs and values be ‘rooted in our prior experiences and conceptions’ (2006, p. 10) to evade falling into the error of the contingent biases and assumptions of the institutions or ideologies named by Heidegger as the ‘they’ (1962, pp. 164–165). Spiritual journeying (Hyde, 2008, p. 129), existential questioning (Webster, 2004, pp. 9–10) and other such methods instead allow children to inquire and search, free from the constraints of universal authority. As pure Dasein will always be in a state of Becoming, aspiring not to the truth of the present but to the truth of the ‘not yet’ (1962, p. 307), children will continue to be shaped and formed as time and experience direct, directed not by the ‘they’ or masterful teachers but from their own potentiality-for-Being.

Critique

Having focused on the expression of spiritual education which seems to be coming from our government’s inspectorate and highlighting the problematic of dualistic positing, I now come to the point where I introduce speculative philosophy into the discussion. My task is to critique this problematic before exploring a solution. Although Heidegger’s *Being and Time* announced the end of the tradition of systematic philosophy and whilst being the system Heidegger sought to overturn, Hegel’s philosophy does speak to the current discussion. As Gillian Rose states that her essay *Hegel Contra Sociology* ‘attempts to retrieve Hegelian speculative experience for social theory’ (1981, p. 1), I will also undertake my critique of the experiential paradigm through a Hegelian lens drawing on Rose and Nigel Tubbs’s commentaries as well as the primary sources.

The first aspect concerns liberation. In Hegel’s illustration, natural consciousness (or the universal) is described as a master from whom his slave seeks to become free (1977, p. 123). Recognizing his dependence on the master for his identity and truth, and as its negativity, the slave views this truth as an illusion and eschews any relationship with it. In a life-and-death struggle for the recognition of his own self-consciousness, he supersedes his master so that he might understand himself in his totality (1977, p. 123). He strives to become an independent consciousness. The slave might be represented by Erricker et al. whose evasion of objective truth claims seeks to gain a personal spiritual identity and ascertain the validity of their own position.

However, by attempting liberation, the slave’s positing actually prevents him from becoming known as self-consciousness in its totality. Freedom is also illusory. Tubbs writes, ‘it is an illusion to be natural or in-itself’ (2000, p. 57).
Hegel maintains that the master/slave relationship is actually intersubjective, which means that each only exists in his association with the other. The truth of the natural consciousness comes in his dependence on the slave. He needs the negativity of himself in order to establish his position. Equally, the slave without the master, although pursuing (in Heideggerian terms) possibility and authenticity, is free to become whoever he chooses in his own identity. But without the overarching framework of truth provided by the master, his liberation may well lead to his own demise. Rose writes, ‘freedom cannot be conceived if opposed to necessity – this is the illusion of freedom to the relations or lack of identity which it reveals’ (1981, p. 57).

Or it might follow that the slave in his freed state also becomes a master. The truth of the slave is that he is ‘not’ an independent consciousness but in becoming free from the oppression of the master to his own essentiality, he becomes a lord himself. His own dogmas are formed from the deconstruction of inherited dogmas. Hegel writes: ‘It procures for itself the certainty of its own freedom and thereby raises it to truth’ (1977, p. 124). This truth is equally illusory but the truth of its own illusion is not recognized.

Tubbs notes that as long as illusions are not recognized, they will only continue to repeat their domination (2000, p. 53). I doubt that Erricker and colleagues consider their liberationist position as lordship and their view of meaning-making drawn from children’s own views as dogma. But if we are to suggest that liberation from mastery brings about spirituality ‘in-itself’, the creation of another form of mastery becomes evident and the illusion of this position as essential truth is perpetuated.

Hegel’s dialectic thus inspires the need to gain a critical view of the illusion of both notions of truth and allows educators as Tubbs suggests, to recognize the illusion of the illusion (2000, p. 50). Both master and slave are contradictions of the same consciousness. Although dualistic, they exist side by side in a relationship of struggle. Consciousness sits uncomfortably with contradiction as Erricker might sit uncomfortably next to Wright. But the contradiction is within itself (1977, pp. 126–138), as two Janus-faced representations of the same consciousness (Tubbs, 2005, p. 113). Therefore, each should be acknowledged as a reflection of the other’s truth (1977, p. 113).

Truth in its totality results not from freedom but from the recognition of the illusion of freedom. While contingency highlights the illusion of objective truth, the primacy of the self is similarly illusory when it does not recognize itself in the other. I suggest that when one negates perceived illusory truth without the recognition of his or her own illusory state, a precarious path is
tread. In that case, both Erricker and Wright should become critically aware of the hegemony of both positions and look not to a compromise but to a position which recognizes the personal in the universal and vice versa.

The second point concerns error. Although illusion is not a Hegelian word, in the *Phenomenology* he does use the word ‘error’. He suggests that this fear of error is actually the fear of truth itself (1977, p. 47). Reminiscent again of Erricker’s position, Rose describes how a ‘state of nature’ which is absolute is considered by some to be an abstraction. She writes that advocates consider that ‘social relations are contingent and transitory: a fiction of the basic truth of man’s condition’ (1981, p. 52). She continues that for those who hold this view, a ‘state of nature’ based on the relative life instead will ‘abolish the evils of such a situation’ (1981, p. 52). But Rose through Hegel attacks this separation and posits this latter view as a prejudice and an absolute itself ‘for which empiricism knows no absolute’ (1981, p. 53).

Sadly, we do see today extremist responses to some dogmas and we might quite rightly perceive these as error; but I also suggest that open-ended, self-proclamatory truths drawn from what is understood as possibility are also dangerous. The avoidance of perceived error might be as destructive as the error incited in the first place. When anything is possible, the possible can become anything.

While possibility is presented as allowing learning to evolve and grow from within, I wonder where the contingency which checks against unethical behaviour sits. For children who need boundaries, will possibility not lead to negative short-term effects such as behaviour on the playground or longer-term effects of mental and physical health? When morals are a choice and a personal narrative inspires meaning-making, is it too strong to suggest that this might inspire a kind of spiritual anarchy? Tubbs illustrates this by drawing on Heidegger’s own contingent political position in war-time Germany (2005, p. 137), and while this is as an extreme instance of unchecked potentiality-for-Being, it presents a caution for those favouring an education based on possibility.

Having located the critique in a Hegelian framework, I now come to the place where his thinking becomes formative. As it has been identified that the truth of self and other is in their relation, the discussion now turns to an assessment of the middle space *between* the two partners. It is in this space that education can begin its search for spiritual truth. I propose that learning *through* the dualistic relationship is the truth of spiritual pedagogy and this is the place where meaningful learning begins.
A Philosophical Assessment of Spiritual Education

The broken middle

Gillian Rose uses the term ‘the broken middle’ to describe the middle space in which dualisms are held in creative tension for learning. In the introduction to her work of the same name, she reinforces Hegel’s distrust of duality, boldly suggesting that ‘anti-utopia and anarchy turns into triumphant ecclesiology’ (1992, p. viii). Instead, she claims that that which separates the two cannot actually be overcome: the broken middle explores the truth within and between each one (1992, p. xiv). I will explore this in more detail in the light of the three themes raised in the critique and suggest how speculative philosophy speaks to the issues of freedom, error and possibility for a paradigm of spiritual education which results from learning the truth of itself as learning (Tubbsm, 2008, p. 4).

As Hegel states in Logic, truth is not in the in-itself but in the middle term between the finite self in consciousness and objectivity (1975, p. 276). Truth lies in the unity in which the two are one (1975, p. 244). Rose describes this in terms of a philosophical situation in the neo-Kantian tradition. Arguing in Hegel Contra Sociology that dualistic thinking is an epistemological trap (1981, p. 42) and through an exploration of the dichotomies of the values of the positions of Durkheim and Weber respectively, she claims that the divergences actually ‘rest on an identical framework.’ (1981, p. 1). She also later argues that the church and the state although contradictory are the same (1981, p. 49).

This is difficult to fathom and just as difficult to put into practice. But Rose suggests that if dichotomies are seen as relations (as in that of the master and slave), both sides might exist in unity without being unified (1981, pp. 54–55). Tubbs explains that, as such, teachers need not choose one approach over another. They can find themselves in the broken middle of the relationship between them (2005, p. 12): in a space where the contradictions of the universal and personal find a place to meet. The middle is not a comfortable place to be and the dialectical relationship which involves contradiction is not an easy one; nevertheless, I propose that spiritual teachers neither negate the idea of authentic self nor separate the individual from the wider collective experience brought about by religion and tradition.

To put this into practice, children can be allowed to interpret the Bible and other sacred texts in the light of their own subjective experiences, making their own responses through the tradition. For example, using role play, creative responses to a guided meditation or creative writing, they can present their own understanding of the stories of Moses or Rama and Sita, tackling the issues presented by these characters empathetically. They can handle these personal
meanings alongside those ‘handed down’ to them, like a hot potato, juggling between the two, creating a space for debate and the opportunity to think more creatively about what the story can mean for today. They can be given the opportunity to describe their own image of ‘God’ or transcendent other in their own terms or to challenge those presented to them. They can take part in learning experiences about the teachings of Jesus or other religious leaders, with permission to explore what these teachings mean for them and ensuring that their own perspective is brought to the learning process in relationship with the tradition.

When the teacher retains the tension which exists between two positions in the broken middle, each is recognized as illusory (or error) within the illusion of misrecognition. Rose suggests that for truth to become an issue for subjective consciousness, it must take an interest in its object and find itself in contradiction with itself. With this comes the recognition of the illusion of the illusion. Tubbs suggests that it is in the recognition of the illusion where spiritual learning begins; therefore truth is that which results from learning the error of itself in itself, and this recognition is learning (2008, p. 4). Having identified contingency and mediation as the concealments from which the authentic Being of Heidegger is cleared, and as elements which deny truth its universality, the speculative experience embraces rather than shuns them for learning. Located in the broken middle, contingency brings history into a relationship with the child’s immediate experience and religious tradition into a creative tension with the culture in which he or she lives.

Again in practical terms, children ‘in the middle’ can learn creatively about ethics and morality. Through graffiti, rapping, poster-making and other means of expression, they can explore who the influencers on their lives are; they can assess what is good or bad and think about how they come to understand moral behaviour. Drawing on, for example, the Ten Commandments, they can explore ‘why’ such principles are good or bad and critically engage with the principles of sacred texts in the light of their own questions. Allowing for contingency provides the opportunity for children to be critical in order to establish new, creative and organic ideas about themselves and others in the light of their personal experiences.

The final point concerns possibility. In Hegel Contra Sociology, Rose brings us back to Heidegger who is referenced in terms of the neo-Kantian paradigm that Hegel sought to address. Here Dasein is noted as a pre-condition of life: ‘the a priori of a new ontology’ (1981, p. 23). She describes the condition of the possibility of experience as the condition of the meaning of experience. This is
resonant with the suggestion made earlier that the child is both the beginning and end of all learning and enquiry, and Rose describes this as a Kantian hermeneutic circle. But she claims that the circle has no result (1981, p. 23). Its meaning lacks identity when the self only relates back to self. She argues that rather than projects (which might include the educational) justifying their own validity or rights, they should acknowledge instead epistemological circularity which embraces contingency for a ‘different way’ of examining knowledge (1981, p. 23). This cycle involves the negation (or loss) of the self to contingency and mediation, but in its return to self, finds negation negated for the truth of spiritual learning.

Rose cites the dialectic of Hegel and Kierkegaard’s writings as an example of loss and return, worked out through *The Broken Middle*. In this text she treats the contradictory ideas as a relation and looks for the truth of each in the unity of the broken middle. This mirrors a theme in *Fear and Trembling*, in which the circularity of the dialectical relationship is illustrated in the loss and return to self of its protagonist. In this text, Kierkegaard explores the story of Abraham as a knight of faith who in anguish and despair suspends the ethical in order to lose himself in an absolute relation to the absolute (1985, p. 62). He does this in a leap of faith. The leap leads to infiniteness which neither loses nor overcomes the finite. The resonance here is clear. The self is lost through negation, but this does not lead to an abandoning to the absolute but to the relation with the absolute. After the leap comes a return. In his return to self, the knight of faith is brought back to the ethical for his own truth. This is the dialectical relationship, illustrated as a double movement of leap and return (1985, p. 57).

Rose writes that the existence of the middle implies that the ethical is not overcome but suspended (1992, p. 154). The action of the leap of faith is described as a danger: the leap and the return are a double danger which indicates the truth of the relationship between self and other. But Rose actually notes this as being the only undangerous position, being the only one that ‘does not liberate from one dominion’ (1992, p. 159). The middle is the only way to avoid spiritual introversion.

Finally, in practice, I suggest that teachers always keep learning in check. For Heidegger, learning is always a process of becoming that only finds its end in death (1962, p. 307). This to me is too vague. Learning, however exploratory and creative, must always make a return. In this case, when children engage personally with a scriptural text and allow their own meanings to take shape, their re-reading of the original text again is made in a different light. A meaning made without a return can mean anything. A meaning made with a return
allows the text to remain the text ‘as it is’ but has more value for the child. When exploring morals and ethics, children have the space to question and explore for themselves the values by which they and others live. But morals explored that do not make a return can simply lapse into hedonism. A return to tradition, the state and religious values in the light of the children’s own existential enquiry encourages children not to be suspicious of authority and to understand more fully the reasons for rules. It also allows them to critically engage with other influencers and consider what aspects of popular culture are moral, ethical and to be trusted.

Conclusion

In the light of this discussion, I draw on Nigel Tubbs for conclusions. He provides advice for teachers that is equally relevant to those responsible for spiritual development in schools. Asserting that the concept of the broken middle is a twenty-first-century expression of the suspension of the ethical (2000, p. 57), he suggests how teachers might embrace this idea in order to avoid the problematic of dualistic positing as described in this chapter. First, he suggests that teachers should be aware of the gap and the dilemma posed between any positions. Teachers should recognize but not evade the struggle or unrest caused by the broken middle. They should also guard against illusion and accept that truth learns its own truth as contradiction and mediation (2000, p. 56). He also argues that contingency forms the substance of speculative enquiry (2005, p. 12).

He writes: ‘If (the teacher) recognizes her doubts to be the necessary negation of her identity, her power, authority, and teaches from within this experience, then she is master and servant, or a philosophical teacher’ (2005, p. 146). Similarly, from my perspective, if the teacher of spiritual education retains the tension which exists between Being as possibility or as an entity, sees the truth of the subjective and objective as contractions of the same totality, and views meaning-making as a creative tension between both individual and traditional parties, each recognizing the illusion of the illusion of themselves in themselves, and teaching from within the middle, then he or she is also a philosophical teacher.

Finally, a quote from Hegel sums these conclusions up. He writes that education can ‘learn from this impossibility of resolution is its own truth, a truth known in and as the form and content of the contradictory conjunction of abstraction and mediation. It is the truth within the relation of contingency
to itself’ (2005, p. 157). The middle is not a comfortable place to be and the dialectical relationship which involves contradiction is not an easy one. The task of recognizing each in the other might involve a painful and uncomfortable manoeuvre, but I do believe that the learning experience will be more meaningful and have greater impact for children and young people in the United Kingdom.

References


For many people theology might seem irrelevant, perhaps a distraction, or even worse, a rival for educators. Notions such as revelation and holiness, practices such as prayer and worship, combined with a reverential attitude towards sacred texts and tradition, appear alien to the kinds of learning and education required today, instead of being envisaged as providing openings to alterity and as an engagement with a bigger picture of reality than that offered in contemporary education and through diverse media for communication. This chapter suggests ways in which theological perspectives can enrich understanding of central aspects of educational endeavour. Who we are as teachers and learners (the centrality of personhood and relationality); what we might teach and learn (content and types of rationality); how we might learn (methods and virtues); why we learn and teach (purpose and motivation) – our understanding of each of these could potentially be deepened and expanded through a dialogue with theological insights. Education is founded on an appreciation of anthropology, of relationships and of rationalities. Theology has something to contribute to each of these areas. As examples, I propose three areas for creative encounter, where theology can serve as a beneficial partner for educators, rather than as a hostile intruder: first, vulnerability; second, prayer as context for learning; and third, revelation.

My focus in this chapter is not on Christian education or on how Christians should use theology in their educational work. This is not an exercise in theology; nor am I advocating any one particular theological tradition from among the diversity manifested by Christian bodies. Instead, I make a tentative, very selective and incomplete proposal that educators, as part of equipping themselves to address their tasks, might benefit from considering theology as a source of possible insights. Such insights could be as valuable as those from other disciplines. Traditionally, educators have been encouraged to learn from
philosophy and sociology, psychology and human development. They can also learn much from history, politics and literature. Those more interested in educational leadership and administration than in pedagogy, pastoral care or curriculum will find relevant insights from management studies and organizational analysis (see Heclo, 2008). Theology, however, is scarcely ever considered as a potential partner for educators. Although I will draw only on Christian theology here, there is every reason to expect that the theology stemming from other faith traditions will also have pertinent insights of value, from which educators can benefit, ones which both parallel and reinforce the points made in this chapter, as well as those offering contrasting insights. There are five sections in the chapter. In the first section I explain why it could appear counter-intuitive to think that theology might contribute anything worth taking into account by educators. Here I acknowledge negative expectations of theology together with past abuses by theologians and extremes to be avoided. Then, in the second section, I comment on the overlap of interests between education and theology, articulate my understanding of the nature and scope of theology and indicate some ways that it might have relevance for educators. Sections three to five illustrate the three themes named in the previous paragraph, around which a theological perspective might be claimed to have possible relevance for educators: vulnerability, prayer and revelation.

**Expectations of theology**

Theology is viewed with suspicion by some academics. Richard Dawkins refers to four kinds of discourse offered by theologians who make claims on behalf of religion. These are explanation, exhortation, inspiration and consolation.¹ In his view, and this would be shared by a significant number of scholars from different disciplines, all four are unwarranted in terms of evidence, lack rationality, are spurious, even dangerous because they lead people to base their lives on fantasy rather than reality. Furthermore, past abuses of theology can cause people to write off entirely its potential for offering a positive contribution to the growth of knowledge or, more specifically for this chapter, to thinking about education. Too often theologians have been come across as backward-looking, too confident in their assertions, insufficiently attentive to the methodologies of other forms of knowledge, confining rather than liberating in their effects on those who accept their findings, so focused on the path to heaven that they neglect earthly realities and too subservient to authorities (Bible, church, tradition) to display
serious critical thinking and imagination. Even the virtues espoused by some theologians seem to offer little of value to education. As an illustration of this point, Aaron Ghiloni asks:

[W]hat can obedience, silence, humility and yearning contribute to educational theory and practice? All four values could be interpreted negatively: obedience may be seen as a sign of indoctrination; silence may be seen as the exclusion of one’s voice; humility may be seen as a sign of weakness and docility; imaginative yearning may be seen as impractical and fanciful. (Ghiloni, 2012, p. 145)

Despite these possible defects, however, Ghiloni proceeds to argue that theology can also be understood as inherently and centrally educational in nature. In a similar way to Ghiloni, I hope to show that theology can be a valuable partner for educators.

Those unfamiliar with theology might be tempted to think that theology is an esoteric form of thought that speaks of topics that seem completely outside the normal experiences of our shared life, of interest only to the specially pious, and making knowledge claims about another dimension and a Being that are both inaccessible to rational investigation and having little bearing on daily decisions and the realities of nature that people have to negotiate. In contrast, a common understanding of theologians, with regard to the nature and scope of theology, as articulated by Thomas Aquinas, is that it offers an account of all things in the light of God. Seen in this way, theology is not restricted to speaking of supernatural objects as removed from our natural world but attempts to appreciate how all things cohere and find their proper place within the whole, this whole being understood in the light of God. In this perspective, as John Webster observes, ‘all sorts of cultural activities – making shelter and food, commerce, drama, arts of speech and speculation – are disclosive once they are “read” within the comprehensive context of creatureliness’ (Webster, 2011, p. 51) and as a participation in and response to God’s initiative.

There is always the danger that, because of this huge scope (all things in the light of God), theology might suffer from one or other of two extremes: either being so attentive to the divine source and goal of all things that the dimensions and workings of natural living are obscured, over-shadowed and insufficiently appreciated, or being so concerned to connect in a relevant way to our natural concerns and operations and to draw our knowledge from these that the divine is interpreted solely in light of the forms of experience and reasoning that derive from these natural activities and concerns. David Jasper labels these dangers respectively as ‘hypertheism’ and ‘overhumanization’.
Hypertheism denotes a conviction that locates all human life and experience within a vision of God to the endangerment of responsible support for and recognition of the rich diversity of human life while overhumanization denotes the exclusive triumph of human power in the shaping of our reality, which brings about, sooner or later, an inevitable foreshortening and over-definition of aims in materialist, economic or absolutist myopias. (Jasper, 2011, p. 65)

The problem with each of these extremes, in Jasper’s view, is that they fail to develop ‘a proper sense of the integrity of life, which is lived neither exclusively on the horizontal plane of the purely secular, not the vertical plane of the obsessively religious, but in a rich and complex mutual acknowledgement of both in the pursuit of all human flourishing’.

When applied to educational practice and to the study of education, one working out of an unbalanced emphasis on the divine or vertical dimension might be neglect of the human or horizontal aspects of development and learning. One working out of an unbalanced emphasis on the horizontal and human aspects might be a failure to attend properly to the divine, thereby closing down prematurely the possibility of being open to a more expansive understanding of the sources of knowledge and transformation available. My assumptions here are, first, that neither theology nor the other disciplines should be considered subordinate one to the other; second, that there should be dialogue between them (at university); and third, in educational practice at all levels openness to what a theological perspective might offer teachers and learners should be fostered, without this implying that the theological perspective must be adopted or embraced. As a recent collection of essays (about university education) suggests, though unfortunately without reference to education as field of study in its own right, dialogue between theology and other disciplines can facilitate the bringing together of consideration of ‘the intelligibility of creation, purpose, grace, human flourishing, truth seeking, coherence and convergence of explanation, participation and representation, imagination and culture’ (Crisp et al., 2012, p. 11).

Newman hints at the tensions between different kinds of knowledge when he distinguishes scientific from poetic knowledge.

The aim of science is to get hold of things, to grasp them, to handle them, to comprehend them; that is, to master them, or to be superior to them.…. Its mission is to destroy ignorance, doubt, surmise, suspense, illusions, fears, deceits…. The poetical… demands, as its primary condition, that we should not put ourselves above the objects in which it resides, but at their feet; that we should feel them to be above and beyond us, that we should look up to them,
and that, instead of fancying that we can comprehend them, we should take for granted that we are comprehended by them ourselves. ... Poetry does not address the reason, but the imagination and the affections; it leads to admiration, enthusiasm, devotion, love. (Newman, 2001, pp. 387–388)

Poetic knowledge, whether or not it is envisaged as closely related to a theological perspective or a spiritual outlook, switches the focus away from conceiving learners as being prepared through education to be consumers and producers and goes beyond an emphasis on mastery via scientific and technological competence by nurturing an expansion of the capacity to receive and to appreciate. Alongside religious sensibilities, according to Adam English, it facilitates seeing every person as ‘shot through with physicality and mystery, immanence and transcendence, finitude and immortality, sin and grace’ (English, 2007, p. 49). Such an outlook is central to an approach to education considered by Coleridge as ‘the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterize our humanity’ (Coleridge, 1972, pp. 33–34).

**Theology’s potential as partner for educators**

Educators always hold in view simultaneously two notions of reality that rarely coincide. First, they seek to equip people for the world as it currently is. At different times this has meant education has been intended to serve the needs of hunters, farmers, fighters and religious disciples; it has also been intended to prepare people to be manufacturers and providers of various kinds of services and goods in society. Second, educators, at least implicitly, hold in view some picture of the world as they think it should be, in light of some over-arching vision or set of principles and ideals. Theology has something to say about both of these, each in light of the other. That is, a theological perspective comments in diagnostic fashion about the human condition as it currently appears to be, claiming that this diagnosis is illuminated by the prospect of a different expression of human personhood, one that can be achieved with divine assistance and on the pattern of a divine exemplar; at the same time, a theological perspective envisages the remedy it prescribes for human flourishing as one that directly addresses current shortcomings and that closely engages with current needs.

Theology offers a way of ‘reading’ reality, to enable those who dwell in a theological *habitus* to understand the world they encounter, to interpret it, to make sense of it and to appreciate it, in order to help them to participate in God’s work in it more appropriately. If they are to do justice to the potentially
huge scope of their work, theologians need to draw upon insights from other
disciplines; they cannot comment usefully about the human condition by
ignoring or by seeking to dictate to other disciplines how they should investigate
the aspects of reality that each puts under scrutiny. If educators wish to promote
human flourishing, then they can find valuable insights into the human
condition in many disciplines, for example, in sociology, biology, psychology
and economics. My claim is that they can also learn from theology. The case for
suggesting that theology might be a useful partner for educators is weakened by
the fact that often in the past theology has been abused by some of its exponents,
being insufficiently respectful of the methods of other approaches to knowledge
and inadequately attentive to the findings derived from these. Such *hubris*
unsurprisingly leads to suspicion about theological claims. Often theology
has seemed to comment merely extrinsically *on* the world, lacking intrinsic
connection to it. I believe its task is less about bringing God in, as if from the
outside, as finding God already at work within the world, and suggesting ways
to participate in that divine work.

Theology is an intellectual endeavour carried out from the inside of a
faith tradition, a reflection on the grounding, coherence and implications of
the faith experience of religious communities. What is being suggested here
is not that educators should do theology. This cannot be expected of people
who are not insiders, who do not share the faith and who do not participate in
its living tradition. What is being proposed is that educators could profitably
consider theological insights, from the outside, as it were, for the light they
might cast on aspects of education. Examining theological insights, from this
external perspective, will very likely be an activity that is less comprehensive in
coverage, less penetrating in depth and less efficacious in potential for personal
transformation than it could be if done as an insider who accompanied such
examination by living a religious life. However, even such a limited examination
can still be suggestive of insights into the human condition, the personal
context for learning and the nature of knowledge by expanding the range
of considerations to be taken into account by educators. The use of theology I
am thinking of here might be called a theology of the threshold, the vestibule,
the forecourt, the entrance hall, the gatehouse or the atrium. It gets close to
and learns from theology, without necessarily adopting the religious life and
community experience on which theology reflects and which theology seeks
to nurture.

Theology is about our relationship to the whole, to what we consider
ultimate. If spirituality is revealed in what people give their energies and time
to, theology reflects on and tries to make sense of the central goals of human intentionality, the God or gods they pursue, and it explores how this God or these gods relate to the whole and how individuals fit into the whole and relate to God or the gods. The Czech psychotherapist and theologian Tomáš Halík comments interestingly on this point. ‘People did not worship gods; what they worshipped became their god or gods. Thus the word “god” did not originally denote any special “supernatural being”, but it had a status similar to that of the word “treasure”…. in its original use the word “god” or “gods” did not denote beings, things, or objects, but a relationship’ (Halík, 2012, p. 113). Theology might play a role, alongside other disciplines, in identifying and unmasking the idols that are served or the gods that are pursued in contemporary educational policies and priorities.

I shall assume that transformative learning depends on learners being surprised and exposed, interrupted and shaken, and that these are necessary prerequisites if learning is to reorient their lives and give them a glimpse of a fuller way of being. This entails a degree of vulnerability and a sense of inadequacy in the face of experience as a preliminary to opening oneself to the possibility of a more abundant life. Thus I will devote the following section to a brief exploration of vulnerability and how theology might enhance our understanding of this feature of our experience. Theology finds its sources in and takes its shape from personal prayer and corporate worship. Central to all major Christian traditions is the importance of prayer for true perception and right living. In the practice of prayer, human dependency, desire, duty and direction all come together and cohere. In prayer there is an unending dance between receptivity and self-donation. Hence in the fourth section I consider prayer as a context for learning. Theology also relies heavily on an understanding of revelation as a guide to the knowledge which is of most significance for human flourishing. Therefore, in the final section I indicate some of the ways that an understanding of revelation might expand the appreciation of teachers and learners of the potential sources of knowledge available to them, with a view to help them to avoid closing down their options too early.

Vulnerability

As a counterbalance to emphases in education on agency, competencies, strengths, skills, autonomy and rationality, I suggest that teachers, students preparing to be teachers and those who facilitate reflection on education in initial
teacher formation or in continuing professional development might benefit from taking into account other aspects of human experience, for example, limitation, weakness, vulnerability, dependency, receptivity and relationships. I focus on vulnerability here as a way of opening up for attention these dimensions of our condition. Vulnerability is integral to the process of learning (just as it is for discipleship). When we open ourselves up to learn there is always the risk that we will experience deep discomfort, that we will feel anxious and confused, disoriented and incompetent. I treat the sense of vulnerability as an intelligent as well as emotional response to the limitations we experience. Each of us is limited by inheritance and endowment, so that the repertoire of gifts that is available to us to develop is restricted, rather being entirely open-ended. We are also limited by the environment in which we grow up and the influences we are subject to. Thus, the opportunities available to us vary considerably, from person to person, in ways beyond our control. We are limited too by our choices, by how we exercise our freedom. As some doors open, because of the steps we take and the direction in which we move, so other paths remain untaken and we find that they now seem no longer as accessible to us as once they might have been. In fact, if we reflect on our choices, we can experience internal divisions and incoherence, a constant and seemingly unbridgeable chasm between our ideals and our actions, a feature of humanity described poignantly by St Paul in his Letter to the Romans 7: 15–24, where he speaks of not doing what he wants but the opposite and of encountering conflict between intention and practice.

Vulnerability accompanies any reliance we might place on goods that do not last, that cannot be made secure. From a theological, as well as more generally from an ethical perspective, our reliance on goods can be misdirected. Those who trust in or aim for wealth, popularity, comfort, independence, power, reputation and career advancement are likely to disappointed in the long run. Theologians, along with secular moral thinkers, direct our attention instead to the importance, for human well-being, of integrity, fidelity, forgiveness, love, patience, compassion, service and gratitude. Where theologians may differ from secular moral thinkers in their advocacy of these qualities is that they are likely to stress the central role played by worship as a context for developing an appropriate interpretation of virtues as responses to and a participation in the activity of God; they are also likely to privilege, as an exemplar for humankind to emulate and identify with, the person of Jesus Christ.

Curriculum is often directed at developing mastery in a range of competencies. Students are encouraged to break through all barriers that hold them back and to learn how to get on in the world, to be a winner, to achieve
success. While necessary, this is incomplete, for a major dimension of human life is the experience of limitation or finiteness and the associated sense of vulnerability (and perhaps frustration). Education should also assist learners to recognize, interpret and cope with such limitation and vulnerability. Losing as well as winning is part of life, for ourselves and our fellow human beings, and reflection on this should form part of educational experience. Education should, in addition to equipping people for success, develop the capacity to cope with losing and, in so doing, nurture the capacity to respond sensitively to others who suffer set-backs or who are vulnerable. Educators should be conscious that their priorities and emphases, the allocation of their energies and their deployment of reward systems in schools and universities, might be misinterpreted by some learners as valuing so highly independence and control, achievement and success, as to neglect also developing a capacity for recognizing and responding sensitively to people who are apparently failing, unpopular, dependent or impoverished. Teachers and students should be encouraged to be hospitable to vulnerability, in themselves and in others.

The philosopher John F. Crosby, in a book that probes the dimensions of human personhood, devotes a chapter to finitude (Crosby, 1996). He points out (pp. 248–252) that only part of the plenitude of personhood is realized in each person. To put this differently, we find ourselves suspended between potentiality and actuality (pp. 257–260); there is always something within us that remains unfulfilled or not fully realized. We also experience our finiteness in relation to time (pp. 253–256), for the past cannot be held onto and the future cannot be controlled. In his analysis, furthermore, we discover a discrepancy between being and consciousness (pp. 257–260), since full self-knowledge escapes us. In facilitating the growth of self-knowledge among students and in encouraging them to have hope for the future, teachers should also help them to take into account the limitations and vulnerability that are inescapably part of human life.

Crosby’s analysis on finitude is a rare foray into aspects of limitation and vulnerability in philosophical analyses of the human condition. An exception here is MacIntyre’s examination of vulnerability and dependency as central to human experience (MacIntyre, 1999). MacIntyre’s focus on vulnerability and dependence, however, is with a view to showing why human beings need the virtues. His concern is less to do with exploring the parameters of vulnerability and appreciating their existential ‘weight’ than it is to indicate the implications of taking vulnerability and dependency, as basic features of human life, into account when developing an adequate rationale for and approach to the virtues.
Theologians too have tended to neglect many aspects of vulnerability (with the major exception of the attention they have given to the workings of sin). In their analyses of what constitutes the image of God in human beings – the theological topic that explores most deeply the nature of human personhood – they have tended to emphasize most often such features as rationality, free will and conscience.

In contrast to such emphases, the therapist Molly Haslam, who has substantial experience of working with individuals with a variety of disabilities, including those with profound intellectual disabilities, draws on her experience to argue that traditional theological approaches to identifying what is integral to the notion of *imago Dei* in human beings end up by lacking inclusivity and thereby rule out as less than human a significant minority of people. Her central thesis is that although those with profound intellectual disabilities cannot display what are normally considered important features of personhood, for example, rationality, the exercise of choice or the ability to communicate in language or symbols, they do, however, display an ability ‘to participate in mutually responsive relationships – to respond to the world around them and to evoke a response from others’ (Haslam, 2012, p. 57). ‘What defines human being is not located internal, or external, to the self but rather is located in the human-to-human relationship and in the relationship of human beings to God’ (p. 14). It is in relationships of mutual responsiveness, she argues, that we find our humanity; the temptation to limit what we recognize as a response to the use of language or symbols should be resisted. She shows that individuals with profound intellectual disabilities ‘still express themselves in a variety of ways through body motion, sound, changes in body temperature and behavioural state’ (p. 42).

Her analysis of human personhood in relational terms builds not only on her lengthy experience as a physical therapist but also on her reading of the work of Martin Buber, especially his book *I and Thou* (Buber, 1958). For Buber, our humanity is called forth when we meet another in a relationship that is mutually responsive, immediate and where the other person is encountered as a whole – not in the sense that we have comprehensive knowledge of him or her, but in the sense that we meet them as they are without this being because of any particular feature or isolatable characteristic or capacity which they display. Something is called forth on both sides of such an encounter, even if their respective contributions are asymmetric.

Although it is unlikely that most teachers will find themselves working with those with profound intellectual disabilities, nevertheless, Haslam’s theological
reflection on vulnerability and relationships that are mutually responsive provides a salutary reminder that we should approach those we seek to educate with an attentive, respectful and inclusive openness, avoid judging them by inappropriate yardsticks and seek to engage them as whole persons rather than merely at the cognitive level. Although the development of this kind of sensitivity does not depend on theology being brought to bear, since such sensitivity can evidently be fully developed without reference to theology, I believe that a theological perspective on vulnerability, limitation and finitude can offer valuable additional conceptual and motivational resources that both assist in the interpretation of what is stake in a situation and reinforce the capacity to act according to this interpretation.

Prayer and learning

What claims might theologians make for prayer as a context for enriching learning? Prayer can assist people in their relentless struggle against distraction from what matters most. It can sharpen their focus and facilitate their willingness to free themselves from encumbrances that prevent them from developing further or even from starting afresh. It can break through the distorting lens of the compromises and projections and the ways we conspire to live by surface appearances rather than in accordance with realities in their depths. It can expose attempts at self-delusion. It can bring into view our connectedness to the whole. In prayer one is not in control of the agenda but opens oneself to the agenda of Another. Daily life is the site for the working out and the practical expression of our devotion and desire, but prayer provides a context for seeing more truly our disfigured relationships, our self-defeating strategies, our blindness to the needs of others, our capitulation to unworthy pressures, our readiness to accept hollowness rather than wholeness at the centre of life. Prayer nurtures gratitude and reverence, perseverance and compassion, honesty and hope, patience and humility. It can encourage us to slow down, to step away from the constant effort to ‘manage’ situations and people, to give space to others, especially to our students; it invites us to acknowledge mystery in ourselves, in our students, in the world. It can nurture a willingness to avoid always relying on control, technique and power. If in the context of prayer we can grow in self-knowledge and humility, and thereby recognize how easy it is to interpret the words and actions of others through the distorting lens of our own fears and needs, and if conscious that we stand before One who knows us intimately and from whom
we cannot pretend, we come to admit that we have sometimes acted towards others in ways that protect or promote our own interests rather than theirs, we may become empowered to approach others in a way that is more liberating and life-enhancing for them. Again, I am not claiming that such honesty, willingness to change and reversal of selfish orientations depend on one having a theological perspective, merely that a theological perspective, built upon the practice of prayer, can be a valuable prompt to such features in our character and behaviour.

It may already be apparent how such qualities can enhance both the breadth and the depth of the diverse kinds of learning that education can foster. Prayer has the potential to add to, to deepen and to help us to see in a different light the kinds of knowledge already being developed in other ways in education. Such knowledge might be about oneself, other people, the human condition or the world around us. In prayer, Christians believe, one can learn who we are and who we are related to, because we are related to God. In the processes of prayer our perceptions and passions can be healed and purified, recontextualized and reframed, reoriented and reformed, reinvigorated and redirected. In its stillness and silence, our ‘hearing’ of self, other people and situations can be sharpened and made more acute and discerning, allowing us to sift the more from the less important. Making room for the sacred helps us to become de-centred from putting self first and simultaneously opens up space for others within our attention and emotional repertoire. This cannot be irrelevant for any educational endeavour that seeks to promote human flourishing. Many of the key verbs used in worship and prayer seem to have a bearing on education. In his study of worship, Christopher Irvine picks out some of its central verbs as change, conform, form, fashion, partake, reflect, renew, restore, reveal, strengthen, transform (Irvine, 2005, p. 72). To this list one might add other verbs that are often integral to the activity of worship: read, receive, relinquish and respond – all of which are relevant to the tasks of learning.

Prayer and engagement with the world feed into each other. There is a mutual, reciprocally interactive relationship between them.

We will understand or realize authentic prayer only as we commit ourselves to an attentive, affectionate, and responsible engagement with the world. … We need the instruction that follows from our practical commitments and care, that builds upon our availability to the world’s dynamism and grace. Without this deep commitment, we will remain adrift, insulated from the very action of divine life that would inspire and correct our intentions and desires. (Wirzba, 2005, pp. 95–96)
According to this view, prayer needs the contact with and friction aroused by work in the world around us. In turn, our work in, with and on the world – for which education seeks to equip us – needs to be informed by a proper appreciation of the respective role played by each part within it and a respect and reverence for particularity and the whole; and here prayer can contribute to this appreciation, respect and reverence since it places each person, creature or situation in its broadest context, in a shared dependence on and relationship with the One who creates, sustains, renews and brings all to fruition, if they are open to receive. This work must be understood expansively, as the production of anything; as examples of the breadth of work to be included here, Wirzba suggests the following: ‘breakfast, friendships, gardens, tables, solidarity, community institutions’ because such work ‘serves as our most direct (though by no means linear) entry into the ways of grace and so call forth our capacity to express gratitude and demonstrate care’ (Wirzba, p. 97).

Prayer can foster a range of religious affections or capacities that might assist us in reading and responding to the world. Hotz and Mathews (2006, p. 8) refer to the following as examples: awe, humility, gratitude, a sense of direction, a sense of rightness, a sense of well-being, contrition, a sense of mutuality and interdependence, a sense of obligation, delight, self-sacrificial love and hope.

When we refer to a religious affection, we mean a deep abiding feature of the human personality that grounds and orients us in all that we know, do, and feel. The religious affections form our fundamental disposition and attunement to the world around us. … [They] constitute in us a kind of readiness to experience the world in certain kinds of ways. (Hotz et al., 2006, p. 9)

These authors see these religious affections as all being interrelated, with each one flowing into and out of the others. For them worship plays a central role in the development, nurture, integration and orientation of such affections or capacities.

Worship evokes particular religious affections. … it also shapes them individually and orders them by establishing relationships between the affections that assure that they comprise a coherent constellation rather than merely an aggregation. Worship gives us the opportunity to express these well-ordered affections. Worship sustains our religious affections. Finally, worship directs our religious affections toward God in such a way that we are brought into fitting relationships with other creatures. (p. 73)

Although they have in mind particularly the corporate worship of faith communities, their points also apply to personal prayer. While many educators
and many students may not belong to a faith community, nor have any wish to
do so, I suggest that the kinds of qualities and perceptions that can be fostered by
prayer deserve some consideration by them, not least in terms of offering ways
to ‘read’ and respond to the world that would augment those currently being
developed in schools, colleges and universities.

Revelation

Revelation is a contested idea, with regard to its source, nature, scope and effects;
also contested is its relation to the rest of our knowledge and how it might be
recognized and verified. Different models of revelation have been used among
Christian theologians. Principally these have been the following: revelation as
propositional statements, as historical acts, as inner experience, as transcendent
and transforming presence and as new awareness. Revelation is considered by
believers to be something that comes to us unbidden, unexpected, as gift, not
as the outcome of our searching or the exercise of our reasoning (though not
by-passing, contradicting or denying reason). Revelation is viewed as God’s
initiative, offering humankind intimacy with God and calling forth a response
in faith. Avery Dulles, in a thorough analysis of the diverse models of revelation
in play among Christians, has summarized competing definitions as follows:

– Revelation is divinely authoritative doctrine inerrantly proposed as God’s
  word by the Bible or by official church teaching.
– Revelation is the manifestation of God’s saving power by his great deeds in
  history.
– Revelation is the self-manifestation of God by his intimate presence in the
  depths of the human spirit.
– Revelation is God’s address to those whom he encounters with his word in
  Scripture and Christian proclamation.
– Revelation is a breakthrough to a higher level of consciousness as humanity is
drawn to a fuller participation in the divine creativity. (Dulles, 1983, p. 115)

My concern here is not to comment on the respective merits and defects of
these models; instead it is to indicate the potential bearing of the notion of
revelation on our understanding of education and learning. After claiming
that a proper understanding of revelation, far from demanding the complete
passivity of learners and an overriding of personal freedom, instead requires
of them the full engagement of all their critical faculties and releases them into
a much deeper kind of freedom than is usually allowed for, I pick out three
potentially valuable prompts for educators, drawn from the notion of revelation: first, the connection between identity and being known; second, an awareness of inhabiting an ultimate environment; and third, a stress on the necessary role of unlearning or letting go of familiar categories of interpretation of experience.

In a study of the connection between divine revelation and human learning, David Heywood treats revelation as ‘a process of learning in which the learner is open to God’ (Heywood, 2004, p. 9). He goes to great pains to argue that revelation should not be treated as closing down questions, requiring passivity or denying the active role of recipients. As he suggests, there is a danger that the faith process involved in appropriating revelation can become the ‘receiving of a cultural hand-me-down and not the wrestling with Jacob’s angel that leads to authentic commitment’ (p. 172). And he stresses that ‘God’s gift of new identity’, part of what is received within the acceptance of revelation, ‘is not an “identikit”’ (p. 177). That is, it does not crush or override our unique individuality; it does not prescribe for us a life-script that prevents significant creativity on our part in the way we seek to build a path for ourselves or to contribute to the world; in conforming us more closely to the image of God, revelation does not render us clones; it releases us into real freedom.

Heywood approaches the topic of revelation by a focus not on the content on revelation – what is communicated, nor on who gives it – but on the receiver. His claim is that ‘to recognize how revelation might be received supplies the key to recognizing the way in which it might be given’ (Heywood, p. 118). He sees close connections between revelation and self-knowledge, openness to the transcendent and a sense of our ultimate environment, within which we can ‘place’ our experiences and all that we encounter. As for self-knowledge, it is this that ‘prepares us to know God, yet without knowing God a clear knowledge of ourselves is impossible’ (p. 115). Heywood’s argument (over-abbreviated here) proceeds thus:

We could only come to a true knowledge of the people we really are in relation with a person who actually knew… (L)earning about the world and the growth of identity go hand in hand… (L)earning about God in revelation must involve a consequent change in identity… (T)he search for identity is the key which opens people to revelation…. We shall discover that revelation flows from a relationship with the person who knows the answer [to the question “who am I?”]. (p. 96)

Whether or not this line of argument is regarded as cogent, educators might at least ponder on whether or not their efforts succeed in assisting learners to
develop self-knowledge and they might consider Heywood’s point that such self-knowledge is not gained purely by introspection but in the process of encounter with others (and, if Heywood is right, with God), others who see aspects of ourselves which we are unwilling to acknowledge or to which we can remain blind. We come to know ourselves in the light of how we find ourselves to be known. Revelation invites us to envisage ourselves being known more deeply and comprehensively by God than in any other relationship.

As for the notion of inhabiting an ultimate environment, the psychologist and religious thinker James Fowler claims that ‘[o]ur images of the ultimate environment determine the way we arrange the scenery and grasp the plot in our life’s plays’ (Fowler, 1981, p. 29). Not only do individuals live within the context of an ultimate environment; so too do communities and cultures. Our sense, whether implicit or explicit, of being within an ultimate environment ‘locates’ us within our universe and helps us to find significance in our relationships, endeavours and commitments and provides a foundation for our sense of identity. One of the functions of revelation is to give us the capacity to recognize our ultimate environment. This environment might be quite different from and much richer than the one that is conveyed to us through pressures to secure levels of educational achievement prescribed by government or to pursue the material goods marketed by merchants.

Heywood argues that revelation is conveyed through the normal processes of human learning, assimilation and accommodation. Thus ‘previous experience … or cultural inheritance’ will affect the reception and assimilation of revelation, but, in turn, ‘these categories are themselves transformed by the implications of revelation’ (Heywood, p. 166). Human interpretation and ingenuity are not bypassed or superfluous when touched by divine revelation.

Theologian and educator Aaron Ghiloni echoes this view that there are close parallels between the ways that revelation ‘works’ and the operations of human learning when he comments:

Doctrines of revelation that place the initiative completely on God’s side leaving humans wholly passive are more like “divine rote” than divine pedagogy, more like indoctrination than experimental inquiry…. To argue for human learning is not to argue for the elimination of divine teaching; to promote activity is not to demote passivity. [But] divine teaching without human learning is not revelation. (Ghiloni, 2012, pp. 168–169)

Ghiloni identifies three aspects of Rowan Williams’ writing on revelation as being fertile for educators: revelation as active learning, as generative disruption
Williams, however, not only stresses the importance of human agency in receiving revelation; he also emphasizes the divine initiative, for, with revelation, something is happening to humans: ‘a strange gift, an odd interruption, a foolish surprise, an uncontrolled passion, an unavoidable call’ (Ghiloni, p. 197). Ghiloni quotes Williams on revelation as breaking ‘existing frames of reference’. ‘The “generative” event is one which breaks open and extends possible ways of being human’ (Ghiloni, p. 198).

Puzzlement plays an important role here. Humans cannot adequately grasp revelation or explain it satisfactorily; it eludes all our attempts to describe or interpret it with any finality; there always remains more to be said, more to be understood, more to be internalized. Such puzzlement acts as stimulus and it forces individuals and faith communities to engage in life-long exploration of revelation (Ghiloni, p. 199). Ghiloni also usefully retrieves another insight on revelation from Williams: it requires a constant process of unlearning before learning, stripping away, a putting off the old self in order that a new self may be born (Ghiloni, p. 199). In addition to revelation requiring on our side active learning, and as well as experiencing it as disruptive of who we are in a way that is fertile, Ghiloni finds parallels between philosopher of education John Dewey and Rowan Williams in the way that both stress the need for a reconstruction of experience. For each of these prolific thinkers, such reconstruction of experience sought not to repeat the past (unfortunately too often a temptation of those who consider themselves defenders of revelation) but to use it as equipment for interpreting and addressing present experience. For both, ‘Reconstruction is creative, forming something new and useful’ (Ghiloni, p. 201).

The understanding of revelation in both Heywood and Ghiloni opens the way to worthwhile dialogue between educators and theologians and shows that at least some understandings of revelation are compatible with learning as understood by secular thinkers. First, openness to the possibility of revelation as a source of knowledge might prompt reflection on the connections between personal identity and being known by someone who sees us in our totality, rather than partially. Second, some familiarity with the notion of revelation can turn our attention to and facilitate a sense of inhabiting an ultimate environment that includes but transcends the immediate world of our everyday encounters and transactions. Third, openness to the possibility of revelation might encourage learners to allow for disruption to their existing frames of reference and bring home to them the need to be willing to let go (conceptually) whatever might tempt them too smoothly to assimilate knowledge according to already settled
patterns and categories of interpretation rather than allow for these to be radically reconstructed by new insights and experience.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have invited educators to consider theology as a potential partner, along with, not instead of, other disciplines, in order to cast light on aspects of teaching and learning. Both in the initial period of pre-service training of teachers, as they seek to establish an overall picture of, or framework for, the kind of human endeavour they are preparing to engage in, and again in periods of reflection during ongoing professional development or as part of higher studies, when they can take account of growing experience as an educator, there can be some benefit in considering theological perspectives. The themes considered in this chapter – vulnerability, prayer and revelation – could deepen the appreciation and enhance the sensitivity of educators with regard to, respectively, the human condition, the qualities or capacities worth nurturing in learners and the sources of knowledge.

Notes

1 Dawkins, from a talk he gave in 2007, as quoted by Richard Holloway, Honest Doubt series, BBC Radio 4, 18 June 2012.
2 For two historical studies of holistic approaches to education that display sympathy for a religious perspective, see parallels between this and poetic knowledge and which recommend an integration of poetic, spiritual and scientific knowledge in aid of the promotion of wisdom, see Olson (1995) and Taylor (1998).

References


Essential Features of a Catholic Philosophy of Education

David Torevell

In 1996, while serving their Muslim neighbours, seven Cistercian monks\(^1\) of the monastery of Tibhirine were kidnapped and brutally murdered by terrorists. Xavier Beauvois’ film *Des Hommes et des Dieux* (Of Gods and Men, 2010) not only captures their exemplary martyrdom but also invites those who see it to reflect on the choice which confronted the monks at that time – whether to leave the monastery altogether and abandon their vocation or to remain and endure the unknown consequences. To flee or to stay. The bitter ordeal and the final decision they take as a community in Christ directly parallels the words of scripture they have imbibed, the liturgy they have embodied and the vow of stability they have undertaken as professed contemplatives (Kiser, 2002).

This chapter highlights why the film is important for understanding constituent aspects of a philosophy of Catholic education and why I consider it to be a resource of immeasurable richness and beauty. Teachers working in Catholic schools, and beyond, have here a moving story based on the tortuous but redemptive drama of the Christian life itself. As such, it is rooted in the paschal mystery of Christ and its intrinsic association with the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist. It is a film, therefore, which positions itself at the very heart of Catholic theology, identity and education. It should not be overlooked.

The Cistercian community at Tibhirine in Algeria faced a difficult dilemma in the mid-nineties when an extreme Islamist terrorist group began to murder foreigners in the vicinity of their monastery. What was going to be their response, both individually and collectively, to this situation? They had been assisting their Muslim brothers and sisters by acts of charity for many years and had come to recognize that their community’s vocation was to live among the poor who needed their physical and spiritual sustenance.\(^2\) But the extraordinary circumstances they were now faced with compelled them to investigate anew
the meaning of the life they have pledged themselves to by following the Rule of St. Benedict. They were well aware that, at baptism, their own bodies had been incorporated into the death and resurrection of Christ and that monastic life was a continuous call to *conversio* until death, when the white garment which had been wrapped around their bodies at birth would be used again to wrap their bodies in death. Such ongoing conversion demanded ascetical practices, periods of suffering and time (Huerre, 1994). But they were now confronted to live out that paschal mystery in very different circumstances to the one to which they were accustomed. It seemed that their newly clothed identity as baptized Christians and as solemnly professed monks beckoned them to something else: to put into practice what they had learned about powerless vulnerability to the terrors of a fallen world, just as their Saviour had. And to partly redeem the world by this submission.

‘New creature’: A philosophy of baptismal incorporation

The monastic life would have rehearsed them – to some degree – to face this ordeal, but this does not mean that accepting the full significance of their baptismal incorporation was an easy one – far from it. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton writes that the monastic life directly encourages an awakening to a kind of death to the exterior life and that it is a difficult learning process encompassing huge risks of faith: ‘we will dread his coming in proportion as we have identified with this exterior self and attached to it. But when we understand the dialectic of life and death we will learn to take the risks implied by faith, to make the choices that deliver us from our routine self and open to us the door of a new being, a new reality’ (Ford, 2009). The alternative to taking such risks is to live the life of a prisoner to conventional ideas and to one’s own desires. Freedom only comes through accepting ‘an unfamiliar truth’ and a ‘supernatural desire’. The baptized must let go of the familiar and consent to what is new and unknown: ‘I must learn to “leave myself” in order to find myself by yielding to the love of God’, he writes. Their lives as monks were already a public and radical consent to this ‘newness’, to the embrace of an alternative understanding, to dying in order to live. But the threat of Islamic terrorism was to become their greatest testing of this consent.

Monks are aware that all Christ is by nature, they can become by grace. But they also realize that this growth in deification, which they so earnestly desire, is at jeopardy if they fail to live up to the promises they made at baptism. As
Collins writes, ‘the intimate relationship with God into which baptism grants admittance entails recognizing a staggering truth clearly taught in the New Testament and reiterated by Christians throughout the centuries…: all that Christ is by nature we invited to become by grace’ (2010, p. 226). Crucially, a dynamic of radical internalization is necessary if the pattern of Christ’s life is to embed itself into the heart and to be instantiated in their everyday actions: ‘Monastic spirituality with its various disciplines aims to help believers do just that: to keep alive the constant memory of God (*memoria Dei*) by focusing one’s whole existence on his presence in the heart’ (Collins, 2010, p. 226). A Catholic philosophy of education is rooted in this kind of pragmatic anthropology – charitable and loving actions come about as the fruit of *conversio*.

Clearly then, the sacrament of baptism has enormous repercussions for ontology, self-understandings and daily living (Radcliffe, 2012). Since the baptized are made and encouraged to stand outside the self, the Christian life is always an adventure into living an ecstatic life (*ekstasis* in Greek), of being taken outside and forgetting oneself, since the person to whom the baptized devote their lives is not themselves but Christ and his body, the Church. When one leaves the old body behind and endorses a ‘new’ one, the self becomes gradually deified. This is primarily enhanced through prayer, grace, the sacraments and acts of love (Pope Benedict XVI, 2005). The ‘new’ body also learns to re-situate itself to a larger body, the Church, of which Christ is the head: ‘Baptism is never, therefore, a private act, but is always a public proclamation of the beginnings of a Christian life rooted in the Word…and made real in the body through the sacramental life of the Church, a series of events which are enacted from birth to death’ (Torevell, 2011, p. 30).

This beginning and ongoing formation of a ‘new creature’ is of paramount significance for it claims that such newness is nothing other than the experience of being an adopted son or daughter of God (2. Cor. 5:7; Pt. 1.4.), whereby their bodies become a temple of the Holy Spirit (Catechism, 1994, p. 1265). This signifies that the baptized have been marked by Christ to live according to His teachings, and since they are incorporated into His body, they no longer belong to themselves and their own concerns but to Christ who died and rose (1 Cor. 6:19; 2 Cor. 5:15). Thus, the Christian life after baptism becomes an ongoing performance of witness to Christ. The baptized are consumed by the first performance of the biblical rite which releases a new but demanding life which gradually conforms itself to Christ. Just as Christ abandoned Himself to the waters of baptism on the banks of the river Jordan (although he had no need of this) so, too, Christians commit themselves to the waters of new life. But this
first baptismal abandonment signifies other abandonments which will follow, maybe even to the cross: As Collins puts it, Christ’s ‘obedient descent into the waters in solidarity with sinners is a mystery in the strictest sense, a symbolic act charged with the grace of spiritual energy, by means of which Christ manifests his passage from death to an endless life’ (2010, p. 221). It signifies and involves a descent into the waters of death, having undergone capture into the hands of the violent.

All those involved through baptism in Catholic education will have to face similar if not such dauntingly intensive experiences of estrangement that the community at Tabhirine endured. All Christians’ intimate, adoptive relationships with Christ are a source of consolation at such times, but they are also the fulcrum around which those experiences rest. More hopefully, they entail the mystical identification with all the baptized which removes any sense that the self is isolated or abandoned, since their bodies are handed over to the one Body. No Catholic pupil is ever alone. S/he is trained to recognize and delight in this one body, where all barriers of race, cultures, class and gender are dissolved. This extends to those outside the Christian body, since nothing that is truly human fails to find an echo in the hearts of Christians who ‘cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history’ (Flannery, 1992, pp. 903–904). Once the gift has been received and recognized, then gratitude is its most natural response; the Christian life is always one of thankfulness and praise, never abandonment. But we shall see later that sometimes agonizing feelings of abandonment are paradoxically the path to a recognition of this truth.

The opening paragraph of The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988) reiterates this crucial aspect of baptismal newness: ‘Catholic education tries to guide the adolescents in such a way that personality development goes hand in hand with the development of the “new creature” that each one has become through baptism’ (para 1). This is one of the hallmarks of the distinctiveness of Catholic schools and governs its philosophy of education in relation to the personal development of each student (Morris, 2012). It is why Catholic schools and colleges insist that one of their criteria for admission is baptism. There is already a different ontology for the one who enters the school’s gates after baptism. The challenge is to foster that ontology over time. This difference continues to be formed and shaped by the liturgical and especially sacramental life of the Church: ‘The performance of baptismal liturgy was the drama of the beginnings of a new life, a performance which would be repeated through the receiving of the sacraments throughout life, especially the Eucharist’ (Torevell, 2011, p. 29). As early as 1943, Maritain was
arguing that Catholic education was about shaping the person’s disposition and that it must resist attempts to place young people in a one-dimensional universe where the only yardstick is practical utility and the only value is economic and technological progress (Maritain, 1943). All this is true, but such shaping within a new transcendental horizon means recognizing that the paschal mystery transcends all times ‘while being made present in them all’ (Catechism, 1994, p. 1085).

During the Middle Ages, and to a large extent still today, three sources were used by monks for the protection and enhancement of this ‘new creation’: scripture, the patristic tradition and classical literature (Leclercq, 1982, p. 71). Reading (unlike modern practices) involved a bodily and performative exercise which was part of a wider enactment of liturgy. Its meditatio element consisted in applying oneself attentively to this practice with total memorization and the repeated mastication of the scriptural words were invariably couched in a lexicon of spiritual nutrition, including eating, chewing and digesting. It was a corporeal act, affecting the en-souled body. Such mastication of the text was able to release its fullest flavour. Accumulating knowledge discursively was never a largely cognitive practice but an embodied experience of prayerfully savouring the Word, the source of all life. Not about mastering, but of inwardly absorbing the words, monks became attuned to beauty and symbolism and transformed by listening with ‘the ear of the heart’ (Caldecott, 2009, pp. 39–49; Cook, 2013, pp. 7–12). It consisted in a passive openness to the fruits which the text might yield with patient attention. Foster admits that this entails learning to tune into a different level of the text’s meaning than is normally associated with critical reading which resulted in a feeling of transformative rest (Foster, 2007, p. 4).

All this is associated with a contemplative and intimate approach to reading and flows naturally from a philosophy of Catholic education which acknowledges all life and knowledge as gift, what Ward terms an ‘ontological scandal’ since it ‘concerns God’s uncreated power to call something into being from nothing, bring flesh from bread. The scandal is the gift of being itself – that something should be rather than not be – which the transformative Word of God announces’ (2000, p. 89). Pace Ward, Griffiths’ insights into the foundations of Christian learning encourage us to recognize that such creation ex nihilo entails believing that everything created is good. Knowledge of that goodness through learning is therefore a blessed thing to do and is recommended by the Church (Griffiths, 2011, p. 106). To know something, therefore, is to know something of what God has made. It is ‘to become intimate with it; and since to become intimate with a good is itself a good, the conclusion is unavoidable and delightful in itself, that
all knowledge and all thinking are goods’ (Griffiths, 2011, pp. 106–107). This is an exercise of gratitude for the gift of goodness given in the created order. The heart expands as a result (Torevell, 2009, p. 26). Prayer, then, is the wise thing to do before studying, since it reminds the one who studies that their understanding does not come from themselves but from God, the source of all wisdom. Beauvois cleverly positions a shot of the monks in silent reading in their library directly after a scene of them praying and chanting in the chapel; reading is another form of prayer. It demands a humble act of leaving oneself, of moving away from the trappings of self-consciousness and narcissism, enabling a process of ekstasis to take place. It is why the intellectual life can be so beautiful and transformative. Students in Catholic schools, colleges and universities should be encouraged to learn in this manner, for it is associated with a distinctive Christian philosophy of gift.  

A philosophy of living powerlessly

In accepting and drawing from the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, the baptized are able to withstand and bear any ‘defeat’ by those who would profess otherwise. It equips them to understand the weaknesses of others, even those who instigate violence: ‘Recognizing our own weaknesses, I accept those of others. I can bear them, make them mine, in imitation of Christ,’ speaks Brother Christian. It might not be too adventurous to suggest here that in this recognition of their own and others’ weaknesses, they learn to forgive those who will eventually wrong them, just as Christ forgave those who crucified Him before he died. The Christian paradox, of course, at the heart of the gospel and the film is that such apparent weakness is not weakness at all but rather its opposite – courage: ‘The apostle’s weakness is like Christ’s. It is neither resignation nor passivity. It requires beaucoup de courage and incites one to defend truth and justice.’ The latest statement by the Congregation for Catholic Education, Educating Together in Catholic Schools: A Shared Mission Between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful (2008), makes exactly this point about powerlessness in relation to the notion of communion: Catholic education is ‘not given for the purpose of gaining power but as an aid towards fuller understanding of and communion with people, with events and with things’ (2008: para 39). The word ‘communion’ is important here, implying a deep bonding of humanity resulting from one’s communion with Christ. What the monks seek and attempt to live out is this communion with others, where
all barriers are broken down. That is why they care for their enemies and why Brother Christian prays over the dead body of Ali Fayattia, one of the terrorist leaders, much to the disgust of the government authorities. Jamison sums it up nicely: ‘communion in the Catholic school leads to a deeper communion with God and with the world’ (2013, p. 12).

This inculcation into liturgical agency is framed within cyclical time, not metronomic time, which is subject to the law of measure and finitude. The body learns to adjust itself to a new way of living outside temporal time-space coordinates. Death is experienced not as the end of linear time and as annihilation but as part of a personal and cosmic drama, where death gives way to a different form of life. The eschatological learning and desire for the heavenly Jerusalem is never far from the monks’ finite existence, since it is the framework that the liturgy they encounter each day and hour endorses (Leclercq, 1982, pp. 53–70). This prayerful submission to this repetitive cycle echoes the body’s gradual and intimate engagement with the quotidian challenges of dying to the self and repeating that dying until the end of time. The Christ-child, the minute he is born, is the child who is destined, from all eternity, to die a tortuous death and to take on Himself the sins of the world and then to rise in glory. A Catholic philosophy of education takes seriously this eschatological framework and students are entitled to be introduced to this ‘new’ way of being in the world, for it will most certainly determine the manner in which they live their lives (Griffiths, 2013). The preparation for death has always been a hallmark of Catholic education and is not a dark fascination for the end of things. As Haldane suggests, ‘It is not morbid to think often of mortality when the point of doing so is to reflect back on one’s present condition … . It is within this context that a catholic philosophy of education should be developed’ (1999, p. 192).

The cadences and rhythms of the liturgy, including the undulations of poetic form within sacred scripture, penetrate the folds of the body with their ‘virtually endless modulations’ (Fodor, 2004, Burton-Christie, 1993) assisting participants to attune to the resonances of Christ’s passion, death and resurrection. It is a formation released by entering systolic time which is a characteristic of heavenly time (Griffiths, 2013).

For the duration of the film, Beauvois cuts back to the chapel scenes on a regular basis, as the film’s frequent shots of the monks’ worship – in particular their chanting in front of the paschal candle, the altar of sacrifice and the crucifix – highlight the liturgical cycle to which they conform their own bodies as one body in Christ. To be born anew each day is to allow oneself – through prayer – to enter into this mutual exchange, by receiving the life of Christ. This entails a
Christian anthropology which is theandric – that is, it involves a divine–human exchange most clearly expressed by St. Augustine’s homily to neophytes on Easter day, when he encourages them to wake up and celebrate the exchanges of life offered by Christ in exchange for his own death: ‘I receive death from you: receive from me life. Wake up: see what I give, what I receive’ (quoted in Leachman, 2009, p. 175). Christ has given his body for the world, but it requires an antiphonal giving from those baptized, patterned on His own life and giving. The monks’ response to their oppressors is a desire to imitate Christ whom they encounter in the liturgy and absorb into their own flesh at the Eucharist. Their actions gradually become the actions of the One whom they adore and eat, whom they imitate, whom they love and praise around the altar of sacrifice. In gathering there as one body, the monks prepare themselves for those times when they too will be called to replicate in their own lives the love of Him, whom they worship. The film traces this bitter trail which they take. The constant echoing of the road to Golgotha endures throughout the film. There is no easy imitation of submission. Theirs, like Christ’s, is an agonizing one, of excruciating self-doubt and resistance, demanding nothing less than the relinquishing of their own wills to the Father’s.

This obedient submission is what the feast of Christmas calls attention to, encompassing what liturgical agency involves. The agonizing question of Carlo Caretto, ‘Why is faith so bitter?’ is partly answered by the Biblical birth narrative which proclaims that relationships in Christ are never built on power or prestige but on a fragile powerlessness where innocence is often desiccated. What the film so genuinely represents is the struggle the monks endure in relation to this incarnational theology. Eventually, painfully, *Je reste* (I stay) becomes translated into the plural – we stay – and the monks speak and act as one voice and one body. They are certain that they will have to confront the ‘unknown’ and that although their lives would be at risk each day from the violence of the terrorists, it is a risk worth taking, since it is the risk of faith. Although they do not seek martyrdom and did not choose the monastery, as Brother Christophe comments, ‘to commit collective suicide’, their collective decision is at the heart of their faith. They know that the Good Shepherd does not abandon his flock to the wolves, since they have listened to this teaching time and again, year on year. The audience become convinced of this, too, as the camera captures in wide-angle shots the hills and countryside where sheep roam and graze. The monks walk among them, are one with them, shepherd them. By not abandoning their Muslim brothers and sisters, they acknowledge they will not be abandoned by God. Any leaving would simply constitute an unfruitful, non-paschal dying.
Consenting to this type of 'communion' with their fellow monks and Muslim neighbours is rehearsed in the Eucharistic food they share and eat. The camera takes time to focus the audience's attention on the paten and the host (the body of Christ) and the chalice (the blood of Christ). The blood of the victims of the terrorists who have their throats cut and the killing of the monks themselves become associated with the blood of Christ in the Eucharistic liturgy they share each day (Cavanaugh, 1998). The spilling of their blood is therefore never without meaning, since their innocent victimhood becomes at one with the victimhood of Christ. If Girard is right, then this is a cultural and perpetual cycle of violence and is only ever assuaged by the killing of the scapegoat (Girard, 1977, 1986, 1987). They chant their communal identification with the bloodied One they adore: 'Because he is with us in this time of violence/ … Who beckons us from the cross.' His passion is their passion too. They know why they open their lips and why their mouths proclaim His praise, for he is the One of whom they sing, 'He sacrificed Himself, loving to the end.' The title of the film is taken from psalm 81: 'You are gods, sons of the Most High' reminds the audience that although in their baptismal adoption they are 'as gods', they 'shall die like men and fall like princes'.

A philosophy of redemptive abandonment

In light of this claim, it is not surprising that Catholic education will, at times, be about tears. Let me explain why with reference to one of the final scenes before the monks are bullied and frog-marched to their deaths in the forest. After all agreeing that they will stay and after their final talk by Brother Christian, they share their final meal together. Obviously, this is an echo of the Last Supper of Christ with his disciples and in silence the monks drink of the cup of wine which they have all agreed to drink. The audience hear Tchaikovsky's evocative Swan Lake overture as this takes place. As the camera records close-up shots of the monks' faces, one by one, it captures their intense oscillation between joy and sadness, their brotherly love of each other, their Oneness in Christ and their resignation to their destiny, the will of the Father. Tears flow down the cheeks of Brother Christian and Brother Amédée. This shedding of tears is a familiar monastic practice which was termed penthos (compunction) or the 'gift of tears' by some of the earliest monastic communities (Leclercq, 1982). It is associated with the whole of a monk's life which, as I have hinted at earlier, is one devoted to conversio. The experience of penthos came as a result of the direct piercing of the heart by the Biblical text. As one student suggested in a class discussion
about the decision of the monks to stay, ‘[t]here is an unspoken recognition that they must stay and this is confirmed by the readings they have listened to’. The film has revealed already how dependent upon scripture the monks are, so it is not surprising that weeping is shown on screen; it is ‘an expression of one’s utter dependence upon God and in the firm hope that God’s mercy will soon be made manifest’ (Burton-Christie, 1993, p. 187). Such a life entailed both the judgement and mercy of God and a radical dying to the old self, with a commitment to the new. Resisting the temptation (or demon) to flee from the demands of the scriptures was an ever-present struggle for monks, but they also believed that such scriptures possessed an additional power to deliver them from the evil which they encountered in the world and, at times, in their own hearts.

The film prepares the audience for the inevitable death of the monks. They offer the full abdication of their own wills to the Father as a sacrifice of themselves to God. After the example of Christ, who came to do the Father’s will, they are led to serve all their brothers and sisters to the end. If the suffering of Christ is the paradigmatic salvific event to which the monastic community gives allegiance, then there is no option but to centre their own lives around this witness. To avoid this is to move themselves away from the passion of Christ, even as they gather themselves around the altar of sacrifice each day. Here sacred geography comes into play, for the liturgical space they inhabit trains them to instantiate that space in the outside fallen world, the world of mistrust, reprisals and violence. It demands that they witness another ground which is alien to the one upon which power and violence makes its claims. Not to do so is to betray the sacred ground upon which they stand. None of this, of course, is easy. Staying, rather than fleeing the monastery, is the decision they take after agonizing turmoil. Brother Christian’s final talk to his brothers is contextualized within the theology of innocence. This is how they will make sense of their fate. He reminds them that day by day they have learned to embody the Christ-child who was born so absolutely helpless and so threatened from the time of his birth. They must bring the child that they embody to the world and teach it that whoever saves his life will lose it and whoever loses his life will inherit eternal life. This claim is at the heart of any Catholic philosophy of education.

This wrestling is represented in a number of scenes within the film. Brother Christophe tells Brother Christian that he is deeply confused about whether to go or to stay. God has become silent – when he prays, he hears nothing. In his cell, alone, his anguished prayer, ‘Don’t abandon me. Help me’, is heard by his fellow monks; his bitter experience is theirs too (Kennedy, 2013). This is not only an echo of the Gethsemane experience of Christ the night before he died,
when he ‘was deeply grieved and agitated’ (Luke 26: 37), just before the raw acceptance of the will of the Father, but an echo of the cry of desolation uttered by Christ on the cross, ‘Why God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (Mk, 15:34; Mt, 27: 46). This can only be fully appreciated as the other side of the experience of intimacy with Christ begun at baptism and developed throughout monastic life (Collins, 2010, p. 22). The scene then cuts to Brother Christophe kneeling silently before the chapel altar, head down in agonizing prayer. ‘Why is faith so bitter?’ might be the audience’s question. But the camera also catches rays of light emerging from the window to the left of the frame. The scene is one of intense struggle, but hopeful endurance which comes from considering the path he knows he must follow and which has been laid before him at his baptism and throughout his monastic life. There is no other path – what is at stake is his determination and courage to follow it. Other scenes reflect a similar agitation within the abbot himself; even though he encourages the community to stay from the very start, his solitary walk over the hills and beside the lake during the rainstorm is no less bitter than Brother Christophe’s struggle.

Nevertheless, in the midst of this inevitably lonely trail where each monk has to make up his own mind, Beauvois includes memorable shots of brotherly embrace and resolve. When Brother Christophe tells his superior he cannot pray, they finally embrace one another in mutual support; as the deafening noise of the government forces’ helicopter drowns their prayers, they gather together, arm in arm as one body corporately defying the invasion of their chants, when Brother Luc embraces and then kisses the bosom of the crucified Christ in the painting, when Brother Amédée embraces the last surviving monk, after the remainder of the community have been captured and marched to their deaths. These physical and communal acts of brotherly love become the visible expression of their Christian identity. As they walk to their martyrdom in the snowy, bitter landscape, the audience gradually lose sight of their bodies as they fade silently into the mist. The audience grieve for their loss but applaud with admiration on how their baptismal promises have been kept to the very end.

Conclusion

In summary then, Catholic educators have in the film Of Gods and Men a vitally important resource for their students. Its beauty lies first in representing a courageous living out of the paschal mystery in difficult circumstances. In so doing, it draws attention to the ontological change that takes place at baptism
and how those who have been plunged into its waters begin a ‘new’ life devoted to joyful self-sacrifice. Having been handed over to the One who assists them to see and live life as a gift, the monks witness to what a holy and happy life signifies. In the story of the Cistercian monks at Tibhirine therefore, students are given encouragement to imitate such fortitude in their own daily lives, if not to the same agonizing degree. Ultimately, the philosophy rests on the Biblical claim that those who lose their lives for the sake of justice and truth shall find it, and those who gain their life shall lose it. A philosophy of Catholic education starts from this paradoxical teaching and is rooted in the nature of the baptized self and all that demands. There is nothing morbid or pessimistic about such a view, for it offers a redemptive and hopeful understanding of what love means and entails, as well as how death might be conquered.

Second, the film highlights that it is not possible to understand any Catholic philosophy of education without referring to the Church’s liturgy. The acceptance of the redemptive powerlessness which underpins the community’s final decision to remain in the monastery is made sense of through their adoration of the Saviour’s birth, whom they already know never resorted to retaliation or violence and who learned, as they must, to submit to the will of the Father. This is not a philosophy of weakness, but of courage, made possible through grace. Third, a Catholic philosophy of education teaches that there are some things in this life which are worth dying for and that martyrdom still has a role to play in the Christian life. This understanding pierces so deeply the hearts of the monks, because they have become attentively receptive to the Word and strengthened by the Eucharist. Because metronomic time gives way to systolic time so abundantly within the monastery, such a view appears right and proper. My hope is that this demanding but beautiful philosophy of life – so sensitively portrayed on screen by Beauvois – might also appear right and proper to students and the only one ultimately worth following.

Notes

1 The Cistercian Order was formed in 1089 after a group of twenty-one monks and their abbot left their Benedictine monastery in Burgundy to set up a new community in Cîteaux (Latin, *Cisterciem*) unreservedly devoted to simplicity and austerity. Their Order is characterized by a uniformity of strict custom, discipline and architecture. Probably the most famous Cistercian is St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who in letters, sermons and treatises set down the
ideals of the Cistercian founders. In 1892 a further reform was established – the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, popularly known as the Trappists. Thomas Merton belonged to this Order, which became known for its dedication to a highly disciplined form of asceticism and to almost perpetual silence. Today, many Cistercian monasteries still exist and their monks continue to lead a hidden life of contemplation and prayer dedicated to the Rule of St. Benedict. They live a life of solitude and silence. Prayer, reading and work make up their daily routine and undivided attention is given to the liturgy around which their entire existence revolves. Each community is also dedicated in a special manner to the Blessed Virgin Mary who is never far from Cistercian monks’ hearts.

The film is remarkable in its representation of the dialogue and friendship which have been established between the Christian and Muslim communities around Tabirhine. Not only is the chanting of Qur’anic verses harmoniously set side by side with the chanting of Gregorian chant, but the leader of the terrorist group shows deep respect for the festival of Christmas and for the birth of Jesus on his first raid on the monastery, made all the more significant in light of his terrorist activities. Further work needs to be done on the implications of the film for the future of Christian–Muslim encounter.

During the Middle Ages two features dominated a monastery’s literature. The first was centred around compunction whose aim was to foster a desire for God. This was invariably expressed in the language of the spiritual senses, especially taste. Monastic life was one of pre-libation, resulting in a kind of intoxication brought about by the anticipation and foretaste of the heavenly abode in fellowship with the angels. The monastery became a place of waiting and desire for the heavenly city (Leclercq, 1982, p. 56). The other was otium – leisure, which had a very different meaning from the one which is given to it today. For the Greeks, ‘not-leisure’ was the time of everyday work. Christian monasticism developed this idea and thus leisure became associated with a life dedicated to contemplation and the ‘work’ of the liturgy in which one found rest and peace (Pieper, 1998, Cook, 2013, pp. 46–47).

If this Catholic philosophy of education is to be taken seriously, then a corresponding pedagogy is demanded. It needs to be rooted in a contemplative approach where silence and stillness become essential features of the learning environment. See Grace, F. (2011) and my chapter ‘Like a Jar of Wine in Left in a Place for a While … Clear, Settled and Perfumed’ in Schmack, J. Thompson, M, Torevell, D., and Cole, C., 2010. pp. 171–184.

Kennedy’s moving account weaves together her own work as a human rights lawyer with the theme of abandonment and situates them within the Lenten liturgy: ‘To reinforce our belief in human rights, we only have to consider the life and death of Christ – the corrupted intelligence which came from Judas, Christ’s arrest, persecution and torture, the travesty of a trial, the washing of hands by those
in power, the denial of him by his friend, Peter, the fear generated amongst his
disciples by the horrifying events and then the slow, excruciating execution. “Eli,
Eli, lama sabachthani”, “Father, Father, why hast thou forsaken me?” Christ too felt
abandoned’ (2013, p. 17).

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