Rival Conceptions of Practice in Education and Teaching

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Some initial reflections on the theoretical status of philosophy of education suggest that it seems appropriate to regard education and teaching as practices in some sense. Following a distinction between teaching as an institutional and professional role and teaching as a more basic form of moral association, however, some key aspects of this distinction are explored via a contrast between MacIntyrean notions of moral and social practice and more mainstream Aristotelian virtue-ethics concepts of moral character and agency. The paper proceeds to argue that, notwithstanding any and all pressure to regard teaching in institutional and professional contexts as a form of technical or managerial expertise directed to specific social ends, neither teaching nor the moral ends which it more widely serves seem reducible to practices in any such socially defined sense.

THE STATUS OF PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

To begin with, it might be held that the question of the theoretical character of philosophy of education (itself a philosophical one) has much bearing on the status of education as a practice. This might also be approached by asking whether the ‘of’ in philosophy of education is closer to that of ‘leg of lamb’ or to that of ‘servant of Lord Snooty’. Whereas the relationship of leg to lamb is primarily that of part to whole, the servant is not actually part of his master, but instrumental to his needs—and, on the face of it, whereas the ‘of’ in philosophy of mind looks more like the former, that of ‘philosophy of law’ looks more like the latter. This hunch might be upheld in a variety of ways. First, philosophy of mind, like epistemology or ethics, seems focused upon central or indispensable parts of the philosophical whole—such as the mind-body problem itself—without which no study of philosophy could or should be considered complete. Consequently, it is not unusual for studies of philosophy to be completed without any reference to the philosophies of law, science or education—to which it is generally held that philosophers trained in the
more basic disciplines nevertheless might or might not come to apply
themselves at some later date. Again, whereas such objects of discourse as
truth, mind, knowledge and goodness have little coherent identity or
reality apart from such study—for the ontological status of truth, mind,
knowledge and goodness is, as it were, dependent upon this or that
philosophical account of such things—law, science, medicine, and
education may appear to be pre-existing human practices to which
philosophy or other principled forms of understanding may or may not
come to be applied.

Much of this is, to be sure, no more precise than the subject matter
admits—and it will not perhaps bear too much philosophical weight. For
one thing, it might be said that philosophy of psychology sounds less first
order and more applied than philosophy of mind, though there is probably
not much real difference of content between these fields of study: for
another, although philosophy of religion would as so conceived appear
to be more practically applied than philosophical theology, it may also
seem more integral to philosophical study than the latter (insofar as
philosophers may be expected to have looked at questions of the existence
of god or the nature of evil, whether or not they have examined what this
or that theology has had to say on these matters). That said, educational
philosophy appears to fit the profile of an applied rather than fundamental
philosophical discipline fairly well: on the face of it, it seems appropriate
to regard education—or more specifically the enterprise of teaching in
which people have usually engaged to promote education—alongside
religion, science, law, medicine or psychiatry as a pre-theoretical human
practice that is nevertheless of sufficient complexity or sophistication to
warrant philosophical and/or other theoretical forms of attention.

On the other hand, any idea that education is a practice like science, law
and medicine to which one might apply a body of philosophy or theory—
perhaps borrowed from such mainstream studies as ethics, political and
social philosophy, epistemology and so on—is one with which one may
not feel altogether easy. There are, to be sure, familiar dangers in the very
idea of application which past analytical and other philosophers of
education may not always have successfully resisted. One pitfall here, lies
in casting educational philosophy and theory in a foundational or ‘under-
labourer’ role as instrumental to a larger ‘scientific’ or technological
conception of educational practice. Early post-war analytical philosophers
of education may have regarded educational epistemology as clearing the
ground for a ‘rational’ conception of the curriculum in some such way.
Still, there are serious problems about any such conception of educational
epistemology, and the professional value of such reflection may lie more
in its capacity to raise rather than settle awkward questions about the
educational value and status of knowledge and understanding: it could be
no more than a recipe for professional complacency for history teachers to
hold (or be encouraged to hold) that some a priori theory of knowledge
has finally and conclusively demonstrated the educational value of their
subject and precluded any and all further need for serious reflection on
issues about its meaningful teaching.
However, perhaps the most problematic assumption behind the idea that education is a practice in the manner of science, law or medicine to which some independent body of clarificatory philosophy or theory needs to be applied—and hence for any clear view of the theoretical status of educational philosophy and the nature of education and teaching as practices—may be the idea that the education and teaching that philosophers of education see it as their job to investigate are respectively public institutions and professional roles. This is perhaps generally not altogether surprising since most contemporary philosophers of education are professionally employed in educational institutions as teachers of others (who are often enough themselves employed as professional teachers). It is also understandable insofar as education and teaching as institutions and professional roles are clearly of major social, political and economic importance and concern in advanced societies like our own. But we may also need to be reminded—not least for the general health and flourishing of these very roles and institutions—that this is not the only way in which we might think about the place of education and teaching in human affairs, and that such emphases may indeed take us in some rather problematic directions. Indeed, it seems not to have been the way in which the founding father of philosophy Socrates thought about education—or even that of the architects of post-war analytical philosophy of education when they spoke of the ‘intrinsic’ value of education.

At all events, it may be useful to begin by recognising (however we do this) some distinction between education and schooling. Schools are social institutions that occupy space and are appropriately organised and regulated, but education is not in and of itself any such thing and does not need any such institution to take place. It therefore makes perfect sense to speak, as radical educationalists have done (one may disagree with them, but they are not talking obvious nonsense) of schools in which little or no education goes on, or of persons as educated although they have never been to school. But, of course, any such distinction between education and schooling introduces significant ambiguity into talk of teaching. On the one hand, teaching is an episodic activity in which one can engage more or less successfully, for a given period of time, within or outside some institutional context: on the other, it is a socially accountable professional and institutional role which carries certain public institutional duties or responsibilities, and in which individuals engage to earn their living. One reason, I suspect, why it is hard to get a clear view of the nature of teaching as a practice (in the MacIntyrean or any other sense) is because a certain contemporary tendency to construe teaching in the latter sense of social or professional role obscures our vision of the wider non-institutional human and moral significance of both teaching and education.

MACINTYRE ON TEACHING AS A PRACTICE

MacIntyre’s work provides a useful peg upon which to hang discussion of this issue, not only in the light of his more general interest in human
practices and social and professional roles, but also in respect of his apparent denial, in his interview with Joseph Dunne (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002), that education and teaching do qualify as practices in quite the sense of other human practices: in that place, MacIntyre speaks of teaching as not itself a practice but ‘a set of skills and habits put to the service of a variety of practices’ (p. 5). At one level one may have no great trouble seeing what he means by this, and—in replying to Dunne’s objections to this characterisation—MacIntyre seems to think that any disagreement between them may be more apparent than real. Indeed, if all MacIntyre means is that whatever is involved in teaching people to read, multiply, grasp the causes of the pre-war inflation or play tennis is not an epistemic, technical or other enterprise in the same sense as the forms of knowledge and skill that such teaching is concerned to promote, we may readily agree—and there may be some risk of turning a molehill into a mountain in contesting the point. Moreover, by his counter-characterisation of teaching partly in terms of a kind of public role (‘an office that can define a person’s working life’ (p. 7)) Dunne may be drawn too far towards a conception of teaching at some odds with the general spirit of his own work on this topic—and I shall return briefly to this point in due course.

Still, I think that Dunne is also right to smell a rat here—and one might trace the problem through some not well noticed (especially by educational philosophers) features of MacIntyre’s social and moral theory. The root of the trouble is that despite widespread regard (in educational and moral philosophy) for MacIntyre as an Aristotelian (or Aristotelian-Thomist) virtue ethicist, his credentials as such—at any rate in the influential body of work that immediately predates Dependent Rational Animals (1999)—are questionable. It is worth noting here that in his impressive recent work on the moral educational implications of MacIntyre, Daniel Vokey (2001) takes strong issue with the highly intellectual or rationalistic character of MacIntyre’s conception of values and practices. Indeed, I think that Vokey is onto something—and it is also telling in this regard that in a generally sympathetic review (1997) of a work by his distinguished contemporary Charles Taylor, MacIntyre laments Taylor’s Heideggerian reading of the notion of phronesis on the grounds that it overplays the less readily codifiable aspects of practical wisdom. In a recent review for this journal (Carr, 2002) of Vokey’s work, I suggested that the intellectualism of which he complains—which is not just un-Heideggerian but not very Aristotelian (which are not at all the same thing)—may be traced to MacIntyre’s deeper roots in a post-Kantian idealism according to which any experience of the world cannot be other than inherited social construction. As humans cannot learn who they are via direct encounter with some conceptually unmediated reality—since anti-realist constructivism rejects any such reality—such learning inevitably boils down to initiation into culturally conditioned perspectives expressed in socially defined and publicly articulated distinctions and principles.
Hence, for the MacIntyre of After Virtue (1981), moral or any other debate and uncertainty are ultimately defined by and reducible to conflict between rival traditions of reflection, which are resolvable (if at all) only by appeal to considerations of rational coherence and consistency: I do not give up my allegiance to a particular social value, if I do, because it seems to be in error—as tested, say, against some pre-theoretical moral intuition—but because it conflicts with or is shown to be incoherent by the standards of some other moral tradition. But whatever problems about pre-theoretical moral experience might be successfully avoided by such social constructivism, the cure seems little better than the disease. The key difficulty (not completely evaded by a metaphysically implausible as well as politically anti-liberal absolute idealism—to which, to be sure, MacIntyre shows definite leanings) is that such constructivism promises to confine moral agents to the circle of their immediate (or neighbouring) social ideas and values, and it sails close to moral relativism of a sort MacIntyre has been widely held to endorse. Are slavery or public execution only wrong because people have come to regard them as wrong (were these not always actually wrong—even when people did not believe it), or insofar as they represent less rationally coherent perspectives than others?

MORAL PRACTICES AND VIRTUE ETHICS

Whatever the merits or defects of any such viewpoint, it is clearly neither that of Aristotle nor of mainstream virtue ethics. On Aristotle’s view, as the recent MacIntyre of Dependent Rational Animals more clearly recognises, moral responses are less expressions of the general rational values and principles of rival cultural traditions (which the erstwhile MacIntyre tellingly enough defined as ‘arguments extended through time’), more the particular deliverances of ordered sensibility. On this view, moral judgement requires sensitive adaptation of general social or other rules to the needs (here paraphrasing Aristotle, 1925, p. 38) of the right person, at the right time, with the right motive and in the right way—and this is held to entail the cultivation and activation of affective no less than cognitive capacities. First, then, since Aristotle holds that there is no less injustice in treating unequals equally than there is in treating equals unequally, evaluation of the moral needs of others may require us to make exceptions to evaluative principles in appreciation of moral saliences which resist general formulation. Indeed, for Aristotelians, social or other general rules and principles are probably best treated as rough and ready generalisations over the particularities of moral experience—rules of thumb to be sensibly abandoned when rules do not fit cases (though by no means always, of course, since Aristotle rightly regards some forms of conduct as never conducive to human flourishing). But, second, moral responses cannot be exclusively intellectual or cognitive precisely because they are grounded in and brokered through more basic sensible appreciation of the nuances of human association—a view which is

certainly consistent with more realist or naturalist recognition that there are moral rights or wrongs, no matter what people think about the matter, and that it is the task of moral reason to proportion right action to what is truly morally required. In short, we can get it wrong, moral reason is precisely needed to get it right, and what reason has to go on to get it right are the perceptual deliverances of well-ordered affect.

The implications of these deep ethical questions for the issue of whether teaching is a practice, however, are quite profound. First, Aristotle's account of the practical wisdom of *phronesis* is implicated in or constructed upon a distinction between moral and technical practical reason, deliberation or judgement. As Dunne skilfully demonstrates in *Back to the Rough Ground* (1993) this distinction is perhaps not quite so clear-cut as it appears in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (and perhaps the *Eudemian Ethics* takes a more complex view), but the distinction nevertheless grounds a significant difference between technical and moral modes of practical engagement with the world. Thus, although it is only proper to admit that the distinction is more conceptual than practical, and that almost any human activity is likely to have both moral and technical dimensions or implications, there are nevertheless crucial differences between senses of ‘good’ as used to qualify character and skilled performance, and between the ways in which goodness of personhood and goodness of technique are measured and fostered. To be sure, Aristotle holds that both are dependent upon practice, and that practice is in both cases directed to shaping the world to certain ends in accordance with values that agents regard as in these or those respects desirable. But whereas technical agency may be (though by no means always) largely external to any and all personal changes in the agent, moral agency is more of a two-way street: agents themselves are no less objects of change than the world upon which they act—and the effectiveness of moral agency is itself dependent upon such personal transformations of heart and soul.

In short, the key Aristotelian insight consists in recognising that effective moral practice can never be a matter of the entirely impersonal or disengaged application to problems of general principles of the kind canvassed by some modern deontological and cognitive moral developmental theories: to change the world for the better, agents need first and foremost to change themselves in respects that go beyond the internalisation or application of abstract cognitive rules or principles. Moreover, one should recognise that what applies to the rules of cognitive development-alism must also apply to the principles and values of social or cultural construction. Indeed, although educational and other philosophers often seem to have interpreted the constructivism of ‘rival traditions’ moral epistemology as largely a matter of general obedience to the partisan ‘narratives’ of cultural inheritance, there are obvious problems with any such view. One glaring difficulty is that insofar as moral action is more than just servile obedience to convention, such obedience could hardly as such count as genuine moral agency. Another less obvious objection, however, is that even the great narratives of cultural traditions are

invariably attempts to get behind local social conventions to the truth: the stories and parables of great literature and moral and religious inspiration are invariably critical of their own cultures in the name of socioculturally transcendent moral truths—and this, indeed, is the way we distinguish great narratives from (say) shallow nationalistic jingoism.

None of this is to deny the central thesis of the social character of meaning, that our moral judgements are shaped from some given epistemic or cultural perspective, that there cannot be any view from nowhere, and that therefore any judgement is subject to possible correction. Nevertheless, Aristotelian moral responses are those which aim as far as possible to get to the bottom of things, and getting to the moral bottom of things is above all a matter of making myself more honest, courageous, self-controlled, just, caring and so on for other human virtues—in a way that is not seriously evaded by asking ‘whose justice and care?’. (Indeed, it is a mere fallacy to suppose that moral disagreement about whether this or that action or policy is just must entail radical disagreement about who can or cannot count as a just agent.) But is such agent-focused development through cultivation of the virtues a practice in MacIntyre’s sense? There are reasons for supposing that it is not, precisely because of the highly social (or sociologised) if not instrumental account of moral virtues of the MacIntyre of ‘rival traditions’. For MacIntyre, moral virtues are needed primarily as means to the pursuit of private and public goods and goals. They are also practice-promoting-practices to the extent that they need themselves to be learned by practice: I need to be courageous in order to be a good firefighter, but I also need to learn courage through repeated acts of bravery. But on a true virtue-ethical account, no such ‘external’ personal or social agenda need underpin my reasons for aspiring to virtue: indeed, in acquiring the virtues, I am required to submit to a moral authority that is significantly transcendent of particular personal or social agendas. In aspiring to do the morally right thing, for example, Stockmann, in Ibsen’s An Enemy of the People, has to set aside personal and social interests in service to a truth which lies beyond any and all sectional interests. It is in terms of such truth that virtuous agents seek to shape their characters, and it is only in terms of such character formation that we can understand the point that virtue is an end in itself and its own reward.

THE MORAL CORE OF EDUCATION AND TEACHING

Ironically, recognition of Aristotle’s distinction of virtue from theoretical knowledge and technical skills may well drive MacIntyre’s apparent denial that teaching is (in his sense) a practice in the manner of such forms of knowledge and skill. What may worry educational philosophers and theorists at this point, however, is that MacIntyre seems to confirm a common view that there is little more to educational and pedagogical expertise than a few basic organisational skills and executive character traits, and that therefore anyone with half a brain and no special training
might do it. To be sure, this could be what worries Dunne when, uncharacteristically, he strains to represent teaching as an institutional role or ‘office that can define a person’s public life’, and in which one may be held to fail or excel by professional criteria. However, one may well agree with Dunne that teaching is all that he says, without disagreeing with MacIntyre that it is still not much of a practice in the sense that those enterprises or enquiries which teachers are concerned to foster are practices.

Indeed, one key obstacle to so regarding it, as Dunne himself has been a key figure in demonstrating, is the fairly evident failure of latter-day attempts—greatly reinforced by contemporary concerns with professional regulation and accountability—to convert education into a kind of applied science or theory-based techne that casts teachers in the role of classroom technicians, and construes educational effectiveness largely in terms of the cultivation of a range of performatively measurable skills or competences. Although it would be folly to deny that professionally employed teachers do need to acquire some experientially grounded forms of expertise which are not entirely inappropriately regarded as skills, it is also arguable that the skill card has been considerably overplayed in recent political and professional characterisations of teacher development. The present writer has certainly not been alone (see, for example, Hyland, 1994) in arguing that the highly general skills which so often feature in competence models of professional training can only play a fairly small part in the professional work of teachers—given the highly specific nature of the circumstances in which teachers have to work—and it is noteworthy that educational philosophers and theorists have increasingly turned to Aristotle’s idea of phronesis to ground the particularity of the judgements of teachers and other ‘reflective practitioners’. Here, however, it may be potentially no less misleading (and no less technicist) to regard the judgements of Aristotle’s phronesis as the deliverances of more particularised skills—perhaps acquired on the basis of ‘action research’—and a better take on understanding teacher expertise as practical wisdom to recognise that such expertise is not primarily a matter of skill acquisition at all (Carr, 2000, 2001).

Thus, without denying that any theoretical and technical considerations enter into the practice of teachers, or repeating here what I have argued at length elsewhere, it is worth briefly noting some respects in which the expertise of teachers has been professionally misrepresented as skills in competence or other technicist programmes of professional prescription. To begin with, some capacities—those which involve presenting lessons in lively, attractive or interesting ways—are not obviously acquired skills, if they are skills at all, and it may be difficult if not impossible to assist others to such capacities if they are not (already) lively, attractive or interesting people. Again, though organisational abilities are often central to competence models, and one can certainly acquire such traits through practice, it is not clear why—in terms of Aristotle’s contrast between technical and moral qualities—one would have to regard them as skills more than states or attitudes of character. Indeed, although organisational
habits or abilities can conduce to more practically efficient teaching, they are also no less expressive of particular evaluative priorities, and it might be held that too much organisation can sometimes get in the way of good teaching. Above all, when we turn to consider skills of class management, we seem to be squarely in the realms of moral value: here the key point is not so much that teachers may exhibit very different approaches to class discipline grounded in rather different conceptions of positive human association (so that even to characterise discipline in terms of ‘management’ becomes evaluatively problematic), but that questions of class control seem ultimately unsusceptible to empirical resolution in the sort of way that skill-mongers take matters of technical competence to be.

Certainly, given that few questions of schooling, curriculum or pedagogy admit of resolution in any value-free or purely technical way, it is arguable that much contemporary educational research and policy making has generally underestimated the profoundly moral or evaluative character of much if not most teacher reflection, and it is just this essentially moral character of teaching and deliberation that ultimately justifies any conception of it in terms of phronesis and virtue more than techne and skill. The particular point about teacher authority and discipline makes the general point especially well: in order to establish discipline and authority with a class of variously motivated and potentially unruly teenagers, teachers need to acquire or have acquired a range of qualities of personality and character more than any set of ‘off-the peg’ management skills (for even if we want to say that they need both, it is unlikely that the latter are going to be effective in the absence of the former). Thus, good teachers need to have acquired some mettle or firmness of purpose, to exhibit self-control in some degree of patience and control of temper, to weigh fairness to all against concern for the shortcomings and vulnerabilities of particular individuals, to be trustworthy and caring, to possess a fair measure of humility—tempered perhaps by a readiness not to take oneself too seriously—as well as, it goes without saying, the kind of knowledge of and passion and enthusiasm for what is taught that can trigger such interest in others.

But although all of this needs to be acquired by practice in the Aristotelian sense in which phronesis needs to be acquired by practice, relatively little of it may seem to constitute a practice in the MacIntyrean sense of a public project with a socially defined point or purpose. As a teacher, I may recognise a need to be self-controlled and fair, and also that my pupils are more likely to become self-controlled and fair by my good example—but as a good teacher, I will aspire to become self-controlled and fair for its own sake irrespective of any possible benefit to others. Indeed, what is true here of the moral virtues to which good teachers should aspire is true of the intellectual virtues at which they should also aim. Good teachers of quadratic equations may recognise that in order to teach this topic well to others they need to understand it themselves: but the truth is that they are more likely to teach it well to others if they understand and appreciate it for its own sake, rather than as a means to some further end of equipping others with this knowledge. (This point is
also not refuted by the commonplace that there are those who know but cannot teach: the relevant point—easily confirmed by actual observation of classroom teaching—is that an evident lack of knowledge or intrinsic interest on the part of teachers in what they are teaching is a prime cause of poor teaching.) Moreover—and this is surely key to the Aristotelian distinction of moral from technical deliberation—the cultivation of fairness or self-control is not a matter of the application of some theory or the development of a technique, but of the personal ordering of sensibility in the light of proper virtue-ethical evaluation of the circumstances of the particular case. As Aristotle says, this is certainly partly a matter of practice in the light of experience, but he also insists that real moral virtue is a function of interplay and mutual accommodation between reason and affect to the ultimate end of deepened moral perception. Progress in virtue is not just a matter of behaving differently—more steadfastly or resolutely—but, as John McDowell (1998) has argued, of becoming perceptively and affectively attuned to moral aspects of experience that the less morally virtuous cannot even discern. It is a matter of personal change or development on the part of agents, not just of behaviour modification or increase in intellectual knowledge: and such change of heart can be a function of nothing less than coming to see the value of virtue for its own sake.

EDUCATION AND TEACHING AS MORAL PRACTICES

Still, the idea that good teaching is grounded in the cultivation of virtues that virtuous agents will regard as valuable for their own sake may cast doubt on the status of education and teaching as practices in MacIntyre’s more socially (or sociologically) defined sense. Might this not simply amount to a denial that they are practices at all? Indeed, this suggestion could be re-inforced by the above focus on the cultivation of moral virtue as a matter of non-instrumental self-perfection. On the other hand, it is a gross (though not uncommon) misunderstanding of virtue-ethics to suppose that virtuous agents will only be interested in cultivation of their own characters. It is surely false dichotomisation to suppose that, in aiming for the moral self-transcendence or disinterestedness that entails emancipation from any sectional interests, virtuous agents will see no wider benefits in moral self-perfection, or that they will not want to share such benefits with others—not least by assisting the as-yet morally uninitiated to share the personal benefits of virtue. On the contrary, virtuous agents—precisely insofar as they are virtuous—may be expected to be very interested in moral education, or in the promotion of any and all enquiries which might enable the young to see themselves, the world and their relations with others in a more truthful or objective light. In this sense, to be sure, moral education or cultivation of virtue in others would not seem to be a practice in any (erstwhile) MacIntyrean sense: it is not that I want others to play football, and realise that they need certain social and executive virtues of patience, persistence and co-operation in order to
do this effectively—and so I train them in such character traits. It is rather
that I recognise that others can only be better persons as such for
exhibiting such virtues, and appreciate that there is no better route to
helping them to this end than personal exemplification of such virtues in
my own dealings with them.

But insofar as such development of self and others involves the
reflective refining or enhancement of conduct in complex contexts of
human association and agency, there is no reason to deny that it is
nevertheless an important human practice. Indeed, in Aristotelian
perfectionist rather than MacIntyrean sociological terms it would precisely
count as a moral rather than a theoretical or technical practice. But it is in
just this moral sense, I believe, that teaching does need to be regarded as a
practice—since teaching and learning are at heart pre-theoretical and pre-
technical modes of moral association. Thus, without denying that
professional teachers in the public educational institutions of schools
and colleges may face organisational or managerial tasks not con-
fronted by others, such teachers need not have to apply theories or
develop technologies in the manner of other professions—such as perhaps
medicine or civil engineering—in order to teach well. This accounts not
just for the common suspicion that teaching is not just something that
others can do, but for the plain fact that it is something that most other
human beings do frequently do—perhaps rather better in some cases than
some professionals. Indeed, the traits of patience, self-control, other-
regard, sensitivity, intellectual integrity and so on that enable profession-
ally untrained but caring parents to teach their children are very likely to
be more educationally effective than the organisational and management
skills of a time-serving or ‘jobsworth’ professional who is fully conversant
with, and strictly observant of, every detail of official prescription.

More seriously, it may be feared—as a very vocal tradition of
progressive, radical and anti-professional educational thought has been
at (sometimes overstated) pains to show—that the institutional and
bureaucratic apparatus of state schooling, the social and economic
instrumentalisation of education in this or that political interest, and the
dubious theorising and technologising of pedagogy by educational
theorists and policy makers actually conspire to undermine the very
moral heart of truly effective teaching. The contemporary academic and
professional literature of educational theory and policy seems often to be
one long dreary litany of complaints about educational technicism,
political prescription, target-setting, ‘de-professionalisation’, the bending
of schooling to economic goals (and so on) and about concomitant neglect
of children’s actual personal, moral and social flourishing. There is also no
doubt—whatever the case for educational regulation and accountability—
that there is real tension between education and such aspects of schooling,
and it may be just this to which Dunne is concerned to draw our attention
when he speaks (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002, p. 7) of conflict between the
‘internal’ and ‘external’ goods of education or (perhaps more accurately)
schooling. Indeed, if what Dunne has in mind here is the way in which the
educational goods and goals of promoting ‘selfless’ love of truth, justice
and virtue are liable to be undermined or corrupted by ‘educational’ competition for socially defined positional goods, then the insight is an important one. What is less evident is how far Dunne goes in calling into question a social and moral theory in which one may also be hard put to give clear expression to any such distinction: in a moral theory in which all values and virtues are socioculturally defined, it is difficult to see in the name of precisely what one might seek to resist the prevailing currents of society and culture.

EDUCATION, TEACHERS, KNOWLEDGE AND TRUTH

Before many educational philosophers gave up doing respectable philosophy in favour of questionable (mostly continental European) sociology, they were much given to talk of education and teaching as the promotion of a love of knowledge, truth and virtue for its own sake. However, current widespread nervousness about talking in this way is mostly consequent upon bad inferences from the (perfectly sound) thesis of the social character of meaning that would merit little (if any) attention in serious mainstream epistemology (and that would also not take much explaining to reasonably sensible non-philosophers) (see Adler, 2003; also Siegel, 1998). Such fallacies also infect talk of the essential contestability of education (Winch, 2002), and of education having different socially defined purposes or meanings: if education is focused on the pursuit of truth, and truth resists reduction to judgement (as it surely does)—and we are not to countenance the absurdity of a diversity of truth—then the purposes of education, unlike the purposes of training, cannot themselves be diverse. But in that case, education (whatever else goes on, as it might, in schools) cannot be other than directed towards the pursuit of goods and goals—truth, virtue, justice, artistic excellence and so on—that significantly transcend any and all self-interested or sectional agendas. What makes the music of Bach, Darwin’s theory of evolution or the life of Saint Theresa great achievements (if they are) is not sociocultural endorsement—however much such achievements are the products of cultural traditions (for what else, to be sure, would they be)—but their aspiration to standards of musical, scientific and moral achievement that have legitimate claims on the attention of all educated persons irrespective of cultural particularity.

But likewise, before educational theorists and teacher trainers gave up professional education in favour of behavioural science and the aspiration to condition practitioners in (largely fictitious) pre-specified skills and competences, it was at least possible to conceive teaching as a vocation ideally characterised by profound appreciation of the emancipatory benefits of knowledge and virtue, by an other-regarding concern to spread those benefits more widely, and by appreciation of the requirement or obligation to be a good personal example to children and young people. On this former pre-lapsarian view, a good teacher would be someone in possession of a fairly wide-ranging intellectual curiosity—having a
serious interest in and appreciation of the value of one or more fields of human knowledge—who might also be credited with such positive non-technical qualities of human association as liveliness, expressiveness, patience, concern for others, reasonable adult confidence and authority and (perhaps above all) a sense of humour. It is from such qualities as these that the techno-babble of contemporary educational theory has sought to manufacture the communication, management and caring skills (to which one might add vitality and witticism skills) of competence and other models of professional training.

Without labouring points previously made elsewhere (Carr, 2000, 2001), much if not most of this seems so much sophistry and delusion. Few such qualities require theory application in the manner of techniques, or are worth much serious consideration as skills (certainly not compared with piano playing, brain surgery or even fish-gutting). Although teaching may require the mastery of some skill-like procedures—for example, strategies of literacy promotion or learning support—most of these depend more upon glorified common-sense judgement than technical practice. It is fairly obvious, in short, that the majority of such qualities are traits of personality and character including moral and intellectual virtues—and as Aristotle first showed, we expect people to relate differently to their virtues than to their skills. In this regard, one might expect it to be simply part of any received wisdom about teaching that good teachers should be widely knowledgeable, possess unassailable intellectual integrity, desire to engage the curiosity of the young in a lively and interesting way, and aspire to be the kind of moral examples to children that anyone should want to be. From this viewpoint, however, although many if not most of the trainee teachers one may encounter on courses of teacher training are likeable, reliable, honest and decent enough people, one may sometimes have cause to wonder whether this is the way in which many of them would primarily characterise teaching. Certainly, encouraged to regard teaching as a matter of the acquisition of routinised procedures or instrumentalities—for which they often look for precise direction from others—it is far from clear that such teachers are much inclined to conceive their role in terms of intellectual or moral self-transformation.

In this regard, a common problem with student teachers on placement is not that they are deficient in the fastidious planning and organisation of class activities, but that such planning and organisation often falls short because trainees show little grasp either of the educational interest or value of a given subject matter, or—worse still—of any need for such interest on their own part. Lessons on history, literature or RE may be planned and executed in the absence of any authentic personal engagement with what is taught. Indeed, in a climate in which students are encouraged to construe knowing how to teach as the acquisition of scientific research-validated skills, few seem to grasp the significance for good teaching of a personal education precisely grounded in a wide reading of the best that their own rich cultural inheritance has to offer. Much the same may be said of other aspects of personal demeanour. Although most pre- and in-service teachers may be expected to observe
conventional standards of public decency, and observe national and local
guidelines on equity of respect and provision, I suspect that relatively few
in the present-day climate of liberal rights and tolerance would see the
relevance of personal character transformation to assisting the moral
growth of children, and certainly few appear able to grasp the self-
developmental relevance of moral philosophy and enquiry to both
education and teaching that Socrates would certainly have emphasised.

The upshot of these remarks is that the sense in which education and
teaching are practices is both fundamental and unmysterious. I believe that
that this sense needs first to be distinguished from the sense in which
schooling is a practice. As public institutions devoted to the promotion of
social and economic ends, schools are bureaucratic organisations whose
employees require a certain level of specialised professional training. But
it is important to see that what makes me a good teacher (if I am one) in
my professional role is at heart no different from what makes me a good
teacher when I am explaining the meaning of a story to my own children
at home. In this (both) wider and deeper sense, good education and
teaching are expressive not of some theory-based repertoire of technical
skills or competences, but of a fundamental form of moral association in
which all human agents are engaged by virtue of social membership. From
this viewpoint, by the way, educational philosophy would count not as an
‘applied’ philosophy but as just one topic of ethics—as, for example,
Aristotle treated friendship. But does this not mean that teaching is a
simple task that anyone—professionally trained or otherwise—can do? It
means that most if not all can and do teach by virtue of their place in the
web of human association: but of course it does not mean that it is either
simple, or something that all can do equally well. On the contrary, some
(not necessarily employed as teachers) may do it much better than others
(who are so employed). A key mistake here may be (as I have previously
argued (Carr, 2000)) that of supposing that because a task is not theoretical
or technical it is therefore easy. But if education and teaching are
construed as moral relations in which positive self-transformation is
presupposed to improvement of others, the truth may well be the reverse
of this. In that case, however, the real burden of self-development on the
shoulders of those who have chosen to devote their entire working lives to
the personal growth of others, may be much larger than their professional
training has often led them to suppose.

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