Introduction

JOSEPH DUNNE AND PÁDRAIG HOGAN

Over the past quarter of a century the work of few philosophers has exerted such powerful influence, or been the centre of such vigorous debate, as that of Alasdair MacIntyre. And although MacIntyre has not often formally addressed educational issues, the thrust of his writing has seemed to bear more clearly on education than that of most philosophers. His assault on central tenets of the Enlightenment in After Virtue already contained an implicit critique of public education in the modern era. That critique was extended and made more explicit in later writings such as his Richard Peters Lecture ‘The Idea of an Educated Public’ (1987), the concluding chapters of Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (1988), the final chapter of Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry (1990), and the essay ‘Aquinas’s Critique of Education: Against his Age, Against Ours’ (1998). With less polemical intensity he furnished some further arguments on education and upbringing in his book Dependent Rational Animals (1999a). And his most recent comments on the subject are presented in the dialogue published in the Journal of Philosophy of Education (MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002). Moreover, even in his most critical writing MacIntyre has also developed an affirmative vision that has seemed to offer resources for a fruitful reconceptualisation of education: his steady concern with human flourishing, strongly linked to his own distinctive conceptions of virtue and of practice, as well as to his ideas of the biographical unity of a life and the encompassing power of traditions, flows easily into discourse about the aims of education and the kind of undertaking engaged in by teachers.

While this whole body of writing provides a context for the papers collected here, the recent dialogue on education in this journal provides their more immediate occasion. There MacIntyre restated some of his characteristic positions: his opposition to the prevailing culture of Western modernity, his refusal of any genuinely moral role to the liberal democratic state, and his conception of the imperilled state of contemporary education—as well as his continuing belief in the personal and political indispensability of the intellectual and moral virtues, the narrative structure of a human life, and the need, one way or another, to reckon with different and rival traditions. But he also made some claims that might not have not been anticipated and that can hardly avoid proving controversial for philosophers of education, even—or perhaps especially—for some who are broadly sympathetic to his work. Chief among these is the claim that, for all the illuminative power of his notion of ‘practice’, not least with respect to professions such as medicine or
architecture, *teaching* is not a practice; and that, *pace* the journal in which his words appear, ‘any conception of the philosophy of education as a distinct area of philosophical inquiry is a mistake’.

Some of the essays here engage at close quarters with MacIntyre’s work (Dunne, Higgins, Katayama and Wain) while others take him chiefly as a point of departure for developing an independent perspective on educational issues (Kerdeman, Noddings and Hogan). Some essays, while finding fruitful points of contact with MacIntyre’s thought, are strongly out of sympathy with its central thrust (for example, Smith and Wain). Others are expressly constructive (though not wholly uncritical of MacIntyre). For example, Higgins carefully reconstructs a central concept of MacIntyre’s work (‘internal goods’), bringing it to a point of elaboration beyond what he himself has offered while deploying it for a purpose (the articulation of a professional ethic of teaching) outside—and perhaps even contrary to—his intention. Or Vokey, who takes central philosophical claims of MacIntyre’s and as it were clothes them educationally: he envisions what a school animated by MacIntyrean ideals would look like and in particular how it would educate students to lead virtuous lives while participating in rational debate about public goods. Or again McLaughlin, who takes MacIntyre’s notion of practice and investigates it sympathetically, yet critically, in parallel with Etienne Wenger’s notion of communities of practice. Some authors find much that is educationally helpful in MacIntyre’s work even while they disagree with its central conclusions; thus Katayama attempts to appropriate some of his thinking on virtues and practice, while incorporating it into a liberal perspective, a perspective that he has steadfastly repudiated. Some authors focus their analysis largely on what happens in schools (Noddings, Dunne, Hogan), while others seek to go beyond an institutionalised context in reflecting on education (Carr, Wain). Some, impressed by the philosophical richness of MacIntyrean ‘practice’, try to demonstrate, against MacIntyre himself, that teaching counts as a practice (Dunne, Hogan, Katayama, McLaughlin, Noddings), while others are critical of the concept of practice itself, let alone its application to teaching (Carr, Smith). On the proper identity of philosophy of education, some agree with MacIntyre in denying it separate status and stressing its status as *philosophy* (Wain, Vokey), while others argue for its need to give special consideration, from the inside, to matters of *education* (Hogan, Smith). Again, authors who profoundly disagree on central themes in MacIntyre’s work can still be found in other respects on the same side. Thus, for example, Smith is deeply out of sympathy with MacIntyre’s interpretation of and response to the endemic divisions and conflicts in contemporary liberal societies, while Vokey sees need to find the commonly agreed basis for rational debate that is valorised, though deemed to be now fatally missing, by MacIntyre; and yet when both authors, towards the end of their papers, propose how teachers—and especially teachers of philosophy—should ply their trade in the normal(ised) contemporary university, each finds his own reasons for recommending imaginative forms of pedagogy that are strongly interdisciplinary in character and unabashedly
critical of neo-liberal policies both in the university itself and in the wider society.

As will be clear to the reader, we have made no effort here either to make out a case for the significance of MacIntyre’s work (for education any more than for anything else) or to do justice to the arguments and viewpoints in the following essays. We shall be content if we have given some flavour of the variety and richness of our contributors’ attempts to think about education in conversation—of whatever degree of closeness—with MacIntyre. While their essays respond variously to the inspiration or provocation of his thought, all of them are concerned to advance claims of their own about substantive issues in education. As for the manifold divergences and disagreements between them, perhaps they can be taken as evidence of MacIntyre’s own dictum that education ‘should be a preparation for constructive engagement in conflict’ (MacIntyre, 1998, p. 107).