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# *Philosophy and the meaning of 'education'*

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## abstract

Although it is hard to see how any coherent theorizing about education might proceed in the absence of some answer to the question of what 'education' means, recent educational philosophy seems to be a source of some scepticism about the possibility of any such answer, given the (alleged) inherently ambiguous and/or contested character of education. This article dismisses the idea that instabilities of ordinary usage constitute serious obstacles to useful theoretical refinement of the term 'education', and then proceeds by exploring and rejecting philosophical objections to one ambitious modern account of the nature of education on the grounds that it relies upon an untenable objectivist conception of knowledge and truth. Still, despite upholding the possibility of a theoretically coherent general answer to the question of the meaning of education, the paper concludes with some reservations about its practical consequences for curriculum policy and planning.

keywords *ambiguity, contestability, education, instrumental worth, intrinsic value, truth, vocation*

## meaning, contestability and ambiguity

On the face of it, the primary question for educational theory and research would appear to be that of the meaning of 'education' as such. Despite this, I suspect that two key modern philosophical developments have been influential in persuading educational philosophers that this may not be a very meaningful question to ask. The first is the idea, deriving from the work of such mid-20th century 'ordinary language' philosophers as Wittgenstein (1953), Austin and Ryle, that meaning is a function of use, that linguistic expressions have different senses in different contexts of use, and that it is therefore unhelpful to look for the meaning of such 'big' philosophical terms as

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'knowledge', 'truth', 'goodness' – or, perhaps, 'education'. The second (not unrelated) idea is the thesis of the social character of meaning (see Dummett, 1978). According to this view, meaning is a function of language, language is a socially constructed instrument of local human purposes, and the meanings of terms are therefore liable to considerable variation between different social or cultural contexts. Although I think that both ideas are of profound philosophical importance, I also believe that they have been subject to dangerous misconstrual and distortion, not least in educational philosophy. Indeed, I intend in what follows to examine some major implications of such confusions for educational philosophy, and to argue that the question of the meaning of 'education' is consequently not only meaningful but – for some purposes at least – theoretically indispensable.

Briefly, the theses of the social character of meaning and of meaning as use are liable to confusion with two main obstacles to attempts to give a definite sense to the term 'education': (1) the idea that the term is essentially contested and (2) the notion that it is (perhaps hopelessly) unstable or ambiguous. Despite significant connections between these ideas, they also seem to be in some respects separable; although ambiguity might (or might not) be a consequence of contestability, ambiguity does not entail contestability. It may therefore be helpful to take these ideas in turn. Moreover, as I suspect that the issue of ambiguity is less philosophically pressing than that of contestability, I shall therefore first briefly examine the theoretical significance of some different common uses of the term 'education' before turning to my main target – the claim or suggestion that there might be diverse if not incommensurable senses of 'education', which no disambiguation could remove.

First, there can be no doubt that the term 'education' is commonly used in loose ways. Thus: 'I went to a party last night, drank two bottles of Scotch and woke up this morning halfway up a tree: that was a real education'. This is certainly a way of talking – according to which 'education' refers to any experience from which we might stand to learn something – but it hardly expresses a theoretically useful concept. Likewise, education is sometimes a little more precisely used to refer to those experiences from which we do learn – but, of course, this is still a rather broad usage, which is clearly at odds with other familiar senses of the term. Rats, cats, bats and amoebas are all capable of some degree of learning, but we would not otherwise seriously speak of educating flatworms or of educated mice. Such considerations should suffice to show both why we need a more specific concept of education to refer to what we are trying to achieve, for example in schools, and why we should aim to avoid blatant ambiguity. The key problem about ambiguity, of course, is that failure to keep track of different senses of a term jeopardises inference. There would clearly be a problem about arguing that: since x (getting drunk up a

tree) is an education, and education should be promoted in schools, x (getting drunk up a tree) should therefore be promoted in schools.

For the most part, however, ambiguity is avoidable by simply recognizing that we are using a given term to refer to different things – in which case, of course, we are dealing with two concepts rather than one. This is where there is often a case for some conceptual regimentation of the sort in which student essay writers or trainee researchers are exhorted to engage when asked to 'define their terms'. Such exhortation is sometimes objected to on the grounds that: (1) it involves procrustean adaptation of usage to theory that is distortive of the conceptual richness of pre-theoretical idiom and/or (2) that (outside mathematics) such usage anyway resists such strict definition. But the short answers to such objections are: (1) that disambiguation for the precise purpose of avoiding ambiguity is a *sine qua non* of coherent theory and (2) it is possible to disambiguate for particular theoretical purposes in ways that do not require the formulation of strict definitions (at any rate in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions). With regard to education, for example, this can precisely be done by highlighting certain salient distinctions. As already noted, I may not be able to define precisely either 'education' or 'learning', but I know that they do not mean the same thing, precisely insofar as I am able to point to cases of learning that are not also plausible cases of education.

### a modern account of the meaning of education

One might well be encouraged by such systematic disambiguation to be optimistic about the prospect of distinguishing some fairly objective, uncontroversial or uncontested concept of education for theoretical and policy prescription purposes. Such optimism, indeed, seems to have inspired the educational theory of the British philosopher R.S. Peters (himself thoroughly versed in Oxbridge 'ordinary language' philosophy) – arguably the most sustained attempt to address the question of the meaning of education of the last half-century. Although one cannot hope to do full justice to Peters' elaborate and nuanced account (see, e.g. Peters, 1966, 1973) in a short space, we may focus for present purposes on four general features of his view.

First, Peters (1966) seeks to distinguish education from a range of other processes of human learning or formation with which it might be ordinarily confused: from this viewpoint, education is to be distinguished from wider socialization, therapy or – above all – training. This is not, of course, to deny that education might be counted a form of socialization, or that it could involve modes of training – more to claim that it is more particular than the former, and not reducible to the latter. Second, Peters offers a particular normative account of the sort of learning in which education is implicated:

education involves initiation into forms of objective knowledge and understanding (of, he says, 'broad cognitive perspective'), by which we are enabled to make 'disinterested' rational sense of the world, and of our place in it. Educated persons seek to ground their views on objective truth rather than self- or sectional interest. In this light, and third, education may be sharply distinguished from vocational and other forms of training via its focus on forms of knowledge of intrinsic rather than extrinsic worth or value: the educated person seeks knowledge for its own sake more than as a means to some further end. Peters insists that there is something at best philistine and at worst solecistic or incoherent about asking what education is for, in the way that one might ask what training is for. Fourth however, an educated interest in rational knowledge and understanding for its own sake ought not to be limited in any narrowly specialist way: we could not therefore seriously regard as educated anyone who knew an enormous amount of science, but was entirely ignorant of history or the arts. Indeed, part of being educated is a matter of being able to distinguish the logic of one form of rational discourse from another, and one could hardly do this without some rational initiation into a range of them.

Although the impact of this modern analytical account of education has by no means entirely dissipated, its influence has certainly declined under the weight of mounting criticism of some of its most central claims, and with changing philosophical fashions. My aim in this paper is neither to bury nor to praise this conception, but to use it as a peg for further discussion of the meaningfulness of this or any other suggested account of education. From this viewpoint, I think that we may stand to learn much from consideration of different fundamental criticisms to which Peters' liberal account of education as broad initiation into intrinsically worthwhile forms of knowledge and understanding has been subject since its influential heyday. In fact, I believe that there are three basic levels of objection to such an approach which can and have been raised.

The first most basic objection need not directly question the coherence of the enterprise in which Peters takes himself to be engaged, but only whether he has actually got it right about the meaning of 'education'. Why, for example, should we accept that what it means to be educated is to have undergone broad initiation into a range of forms of knowledge of intrinsic worth? One persistent form of criticism focuses upon Peters' understanding of intrinsic worth in primarily theoretical or intellectual terms (e.g. Pring, 1994, 1995); for Peters, intrinsically worthwhile knowledge is the truth-focused knowledge of cognitive understanding rather than (say) the (instrumental) knowledge of practical skill. But another more fundamental criticism questions the very idea that education is a matter of broad initiation (Warnock, 1973, 1977). On the face of it,

the liberal educational requirement that only those who have been broadly initiated might count as educated, seems excessively strict – since many we might count as educated in today's world of increasing specialization would not readily meet this criterion. This has been strikingly expressed in the claim (Warnock, 1973, see also 1977) that it is better for pupils to leave school with 'one genuine enthusiasm' than with a broader, but more superficial acquaintance with a range of knowledge. Indeed, I believe that the full theoretical implications of this claim for the question of the meaning of education have not yet been fully appreciated or addressed. Why should we suppose that there is any one set of criteria – of the kind Peters sought to identify – to which persons would have to conform in order to be regarded as educated? Perhaps the term is after all inherently protean and evaluative, unsusceptible of any codifiable rules of use and subject only to the vagaries of individual or social preference: it might be more like calling people handsome (say) rather than fair-haired. We shall in due course return briefly to this point.

A second more direct criticism of the sort of account given by Peters however, inclines to question any characterisation of education as focused upon intrinsic rather than extrinsic or instrumental values of education. In fact, given an apparently commonsense understanding of education as a form of (often institutionalized) social practice devoted to the formation of young people in certain approved values, virtues, and skills, it might seem perverse to the point of incoherence to deny that education is a means to an end, or that it makes no sense to ask what education is for. In this respect, the liberal traditionalist conception of education of Peters and his followers has widely been regarded as far too precious or intellectually rarified for either its own good or that of the world of real life. To be sure, one could agree with liberal educationalists that all instrumental justifications have to end somewhere with judgements of what is valued for its own sake (see, e.g. White, 1975), but why should what is so valued be states of knowledge – which might seem to be always instrumentally valued? In short, we might insist that education is valued only as a means to certain social and cultural goods that we value in themselves. We require children to attend schools precisely so that they can acquire values and skills which will equip them to be well adjusted, responsible, healthy, and socially productive members of civil society.

Criticisms of Peters' account along these instrumentalist lines are derivable from different philosophical and ideological (e.g. Marxist and Deweyan) sources but they achieve perhaps sharpest definition in modern utilitarian accounts. To some extent, indeed, postwar disputes between the modern analytical liberal educationalists of intrinsic value and the new educational utilitarians (see, e.g. Barrow, 1975) may be regarded as latter day re-runs of disputes about the purposes of education between 19th century utilitarians and such

proponents of liberal education as Matthew Arnold and John Henry Newman. Perhaps the key difference between older and newer utilitarian accounts is that more recent advocates of education as a means to human happiness and satisfaction are more likely to conceive the external goods of education in wider cultural and civic, rather than narrower cash benefit, terms. All the same, it is likely that a broader utilitarian instrumental interpretation of education, reinforced by a not unrelated Deweyan antipathy to distinctions between theory and practice, has greatly influenced the criticisms of Peters' distinction between education and vocational (or other) training, advanced by what might be called new vocationalists (see, e.g. Pring, 1994, 1995; Winch, 2000, 2002). According to such philosophers, Peters' (alleged) separation of training from education has led to widespread denigration of vocational skills, a failure to recognise the rich intellectual and moral, as well as economic, contribution that such skills have to make to human flourishing, and hence also their rightful place in any well-conceived school curriculum.

However, just as it is not clear that criticisms of a broad initiation model question the coherence of the quest for criteria of educatedness as such (though they may if pushed do so), so it is not clear that instrumentalist attacks on exclusively non-instrumental construals of educational value undermine the coherence of intrinsic value as such. Instrumentalists might only be concerned to show that subjects with instrumental more than intrinsic value (in Peters' sense) have a rightful place in the school curriculum, or that what has intrinsic value has also instrumental value. However, if it could be successfully shown that there is no such thing as intrinsic educational value in Peters' sense, then the final nail in the coffin of any account of the nature of education as focused upon such value would be well and truly driven. The target here, moreover, would not so much be the idea that things might be non-instrumentally pursued, for there is always a clear enough sense in which I will do some things – play tennis or listen to jazz – for their own sake; it would be rather the idea that some pursuits or forms of knowledge have a worth that lies beyond my valuing of them – a worth that makes them valuable whether or not they are actually (contingently) valued by someone. Briefly, for Peters, the intrinsic value in this sense of his educational forms of knowledge lies in their concern with objective truth. Hence the surest demolition of the idea of intrinsic educational value would rest on showing that there is no such truth, or showing that such truth has no intrinsic value.

For many if not most contemporary educational philosophers, it would appear that this final nail has been driven by a general current of anti-realist and constructivist thought about meaning, knowledge and truth hailing from various modern – and/or postmodern – directions of social, moral and cultural theory. To be sure, the tide of scepticism regarding the coherence of any idea



of objective knowledge in the sense required to underpin Peters' notion of intrinsic worth would seem to run highest among the growing number of educational philosophers influenced by Nietzschean poststructuralism and postmodernism (e.g. Blake et al., 1998, 2000). But whether contemporary educational philosophers take their main inspiration from Derrida, Foucault or Lyotard, from pragmatists such as Dewey (or more radically Rorty), from such new communitarians as MacIntyre and Taylor (see, e.g. Carr, 1995, 1997; Hirst, 1994), or from such broadly 'analytical' philosophers as Wittgenstein, any notion of intrinsic value as predicated on the idea of objective or human interest-transcendent truth is liable to much the same anti-realist dismissal. Indeed, idealist, pragmatist and communitarian claims that knowledge is a matter of social construction in the service of all too local human interests clearly does much to reinforce an educational instrumentalism that insists education is just a means to the achievement of particular social and cultural goods and goals. In this light, since different cultural constituencies have diverse if not incommensurable goals, any answer to the question about the meaning of education is liable to differ from one location to another: education is essentially contested and cannot have universal meaning.

### revisiting the objectivity of knowledge and truth

Far from clinching the case against intrinsic educational value – and hence finally demolishing the prospects of a definite answer to the question of the meaning of education – the case against objective knowledge and truth seems to rest on arguments that are not nearly so persuasive as recent educational philosophers seem to have supposed. Moreover, although much contemporary analytical epistemology is quite technical, it seems worth trying to spell out some difficulties for the anti-realist position in more accessible non-technical terms. First, it is worth noting that ordinary non-philosophical intuition is heavily on the side of regarding many knowledge claims as plainly true. If someone, for example, responded to my claim to know that pigs cannot fly by saying that this is only true from my social perspective, this could seem like grounds for locking them up. But in that case, the burden of proof that I cannot have at least this much objective (factual) knowledge is clearly upon those who seem against commonsense to deny it – and their arguments merit the severest scrutiny.

The heart of modern arguments that knowledge cannot be objective in the sense of correctly describing aspects of a reality 'external' to human perception – states of affairs that might be supposed to exist independently of human perception – goes back to 19th century idealist reactions to Kant's Critique of



Pure Reason. Such idealism rejects both the empiricist subjectivism of 'sense-impressions', and the notion of unperceivable 'things-in themselves', but it agrees with Kant that knowledge is a product of the organization of empirical experience according to rational principles. What, however, could be the source of such principles? An influential line of thought has it that the organizing principles of knowledge have socio-cultural rather than individual psychological origins: human knowledge claims are a function of social construction. Moreover, rejection of Kantian 'things-in themselves' – the indescribable metaphysical substrates of appearances – combined with recognition that knowledge claims can differ to the point of contradiction between cultures, casts doubt on the possibility of any non-perspectival reality that rival social constructions might succeed or otherwise in describing. (For against what, other than competing conceptions, could such rival constructions be tested or measured?)

None of this provides much foundation for the anti-realism of idealists and their poststructuralist and postmodern heirs. First, rejection of empiricist subjectivism and recognition that there can be no knowledge without interpersonal agreement, cannot mean that this is all there is to knowledge: insofar as we can have such agreement over judgements that are just plainly mistaken, knowledge claims need to be correct as well as supported by interpersonal judgement. But, second, recognition that there can be no socio-culturally independent conception of the world – no unconceptualized 'view from nowhere' of things-in-themselves – does not imply either that reality is entirely shaped by our conceptions of it, or that our judgements cannot be wrong by dint of failing to identify how things actually are. From a psychological viewpoint, any such views sound more like autism than epistemology. But insofar as we might reasonably expect any serious sociology of knowledge to be based on some evidence of the actual processes of sociocultural meaning-making, it also makes poor logical sense. In fact, it is surely more reasonable to base sociology of knowledge on realist epistemology, than to doubt objective reality on the basis of non-realist sociology.

Postmodern and poststructuralist epistemic excesses aside, more plausible modern offshoots of post-Kantian idealism have not denied the significant connection between knowledge and evidence: indeed, this connection is central to modern pragmatism, and mainstream pragmatism has continued to regard evidence-based science as the chief source of reliable knowledge of the world. True to its anti-realist roots in idealism, however, pragmatism rejects the view that scientific theories offer true or false descriptions of the world (rather than provisional tools for its manipulation), denies distinctions between theory and observation and fact and value, and prefers (following Dewey) to speak of 'warranted assertability' rather than truth. Much of this though, is shot through

with deep tensions and contradictions. First, the notion of 'warranted assertability' is prey to ambiguity and dilemma. If it means something like 'supported by agreement', it is vulnerable to the already noted objection that agreement is not sufficient for truth, but if it means judged on the basis of independent evidence, it is not clear how exactly it avoids reference to some extra-personally ordered world.

Second, pragmatist antipathy to dualisms issuing in denial of distinctions between observation and theory, and fact and value, succeeds only in voiding the very notions of theory and value of much sense. Just as there may be no counterfeit coins where none are genuine, evaluation makes scant sense where all judgements are evaluative, and talk of theory appears to idle where there is nothing for theories to explain. A general problem with pragmatism seems to be that it confuses the drawing of distinctions with dualisms, and fails to see that it is impossible to be either dualist or anti-dualist in the absence of some distinction-making. Thus, while pragmatist and other forms of anti-realism are right to attack empiricist versions of the fact-value dichotomy (as a gulf between cognition and affect), refusal to recognize any distinction between fact and value – by way of effective reduction of the former to the latter – makes it impossible to make sense of either, or to discern their true relationship. In fact, as modern ethical naturalists have shown in the course of criticising a similar non-cognitivist reduction of value to commendation (Foot, 1978, 2000; Geach, 1970), we may make the best sense of value only by showing the evidential grounds upon which rational evaluation is based.

Just as much idealism (particularly in its modern post-Nietzschean forms) overstates an important point about the social character of meaning, so pragmatism overstates an equally important claim about the evolutionary and/or provisional character of knowledge. The observations that knowledge is not an individual achievement but dependent upon some degree of social agreement in concepts and judgements, that there can be no view from nowhere, and that rival cultural constituencies differ to the point of contradiction in their judgements and values, fall well short of the verdict that there is no objective reality which such constituencies may nevertheless aim to describe and evaluate correctly. For one thing, the extent to which the culturally plural customers of modern air travel do agree on the value of safety and security, and upon the objective conditions needed to secure this is (here) noteworthy, but otherwise unsurprising. For another, where cultures do disagree – perhaps over whether an air crash was caused by witchcraft or faulty parts – there is clearly a better rational case (whatever ethnomethodologists or postmodernists might say about the relativity of reason) for anyone to accept the explanation based on hard scientific evidence. But are not current scientific theories and explanations – like those of the past – always open to revision? This, however,

though a further important philosophical point, is also prone to unhelpful pragmatist overstatement.

At the very least, the pragmatist claim that there is no theory-independent observation (probably also based on some failure to distinguish theorization from conceptualization) seems to confuse two different senses of knowledge which need separating for many important educational and other purposes. If I teach a child that caterpillars turn (with luck) into butterflies, or plants are nourished by photosynthesis, then what I teach them qualifies as knowledge if true, and does not so qualify if it is not true. If what I have taught them is not so, it is in virtue of falsehood not provisional but inadequate explanation – and one cannot, for example, be half or nearly right about such matters. This is what is liable to mislead about pragmatic or other progressive educational talk of encouraging children to be ‘little scientists’ by finding out things for themselves, rather than simply being instructed that things are so – if this suggests that there may be any creative ‘openness’ with regard to such search. For whether or not one wants to argue that it is better for children to acquire such knowledge by observing or reading it for themselves than by teacher instruction, such factual knowledge is hardly negotiable in any social or other constructivist way. But even though our scientific and other explanation is not exactly true in the manner of natural fact, such explanation could not be other than shaped or constrained by the way things are, and it is still clearly meaningful – despite the evolutionary and provisional character of human explanation – to speak of such past and present knowledge as correct or mistaken.

The varieties of modern philosophical anti-realism are appropriate enough reactions to a crude empiricist or ‘spectator’ epistemology which tries to found certain knowledge upon subjective experience, and perhaps (in some versions) construes the advance of knowledge as no more than information gathering. But any and all argument to the effect that we may not speak of the world as having any reality or shape apart from our local socially constructed perspectives goes too far, throwing the epistemic baby out with the bathwater (for criticisms of such anti-realism from educational and other philosophers, see Adler, 2003; Carr, 2003; Luntley, 1995; Siegel, 1998; also Eagleton, 1996). On this view, the firmest epistemological ground between an untenable positivism and an implausible social constructivist non-realism, which severs knowledge from its objective moorings in the world, is a critical realism that combines appreciation of the social constructedness and provisionality of our best current knowledge with due recognition that the windows of human reason and perception (when cleansed) can lead us beyond the veil of sociocultural conditioning to locally transcendent (moral as well as scientific) truth and wisdom.

## education, vocational training and schooling

Making the case for an epistemic objectivism, which resists reduction to local sociocultural construction is important for any claim that knowledge has intrinsic or non-instrumental worth: if there is no more to our truth claims than local cultural norms, then it seems difficult to construe knowledge acquisition as other than a means to such social ends as (say) the pursuit of vocational expertise, the search for cultural identity, the survival of the group or the service of one's tribal deity. That said, it is possible that such knowledge might still have no more than instrumental use in human affairs, and it is less easy to spell out the respects in which the perspective-independent character of such knowledge might contribute to personal formation in a way that transcends such utility. Still, it seems to have been Peters' view (and, arguably, the view of Socrates and 19th century liberal educationalists), that it is largely through the objective perspective on reality afforded by such disinterested knowledge that human agents are enabled to achieve the moral and spiritual emancipation that issues from a clearer view of themselves and their place in the world. One might put this by saying that despite its impersonal nature, such objective knowledge nevertheless underpins the genuine wisdom of any and all personal virtue. On this view, the primary purpose of attempting to acquaint young people with evolutionary theory, the plays of Shakespeare or the history of the Reformation is not so that they will be better citizens of this or that social or political order, but so that they will discover truths about themselves, the world and their relations with others that will make them better – or more virtuous – human beings as such. The trouble today with expressing the ends of education in terms of the acquisition of virtue, is that much contemporary educational philosophy has been influenced by a fashionable, but misguided communitarian construal of virtue, as instrumental to particular socially defined practices and purposes (MacIntyre, 1981, 1987, 1999; see also MacIntyre and Dunne, 2002). But this precisely misrepresents the virtue ethical tradition from Aristotle to the present, according to which human virtues transcend the needs of particular human societies and are admirable in their own right. Arguably, for Peters, the intrinsic value of objective knowledge lies in its potential to make us better, *qua* virtuous people, *per se*.

But even if education has ends which are non-instrumental or which transcend social definition, it may be less clear that it cannot also have instrumental and socially defined ends. Indeed, insofar as we expect schooling to equip young people with the skills for adult work, and the more functional virtues of ordinary civil association, it may seem difficult to deny that it has. This is undoubtedly the point that former utilitarian and newer vocationalist

philosophers of education are keen to emphasize. Whatever there may be to this point, however, there also seems to be some confusion in many presentations of it. One recent defence (Winch, 2002) of so-called 'vocational education', for example, purports to justify it precisely on the grounds that education is an 'essentially contested' notion – which presumably means that it is subject to variable local definitions. On this view, it is simply a local prejudice to define education in terms of intrinsic value, since other accounts of education are likely to regard it as having such instrumental worth as preparation for fulfilling work. Moreover, it is alleged to be an adverse consequence of regarding education as focused upon knowledge for its own sake, that one cannot regard the ends or purposes of life in terms of anything other than the pursuit of such knowledge (Winch, 2002: 102).

In the first place, the last argument is clearly a *non sequitur* – and could rest only on the generally false (suppressed) premise that becoming educated is the only goal people have in life. On the contrary, people have many goals in life, including getting married and raising a family, making a great deal of money, playing lots of golf – as well as securing useful employment – and becoming educated may not figure among these at all. It is also worth asking, however, what 'vocational education' means. First, in distinguishing 'vocational education' from 'vocational training', new vocationalism aims to bridge the liberal educational divide between education and vocational training. But while this is noteworthy in itself (since it clearly buys at least partly into the liberal distinction between education and training) the precise sense of 'vocational education' is not yet clear. On the one hand, it seems concerned to emphasize that many forms of work involve complex forms of principled understanding, which cannot be reduced to mindless training. But while this is true, such complex understanding might still be said to fall well short of anything much worth calling education. Indeed, ordinary usage would seem to license our coherently talking of those who possess high levels of theoretically grounded expertise – engineers or surgeons – as exhibiting considerable educational deficit. This is arguably for the kind of reasons given by Peters that: (1) their knowledge is over-specialized or not very wide ranging, or (2) it is too much focused on the achievement of such 'external' goals as reputation or financial gain (and these might also be causes or consequences of each other).

On the other hand, the idea of 'vocational education' might be based upon the rather different and more interesting consideration that there are types of professional or other work that seem to require not just simply theoretically complex forms of principled expertise, but also the kind of intrinsic commitment to knowledge, understanding and virtue that Peters associates with education, as distinct from vocational or other training. Indeed, teaching and the ministry would seem to offer good examples of such professions or vocations.

On this view, becoming a good teacher or priest is not just a matter of acquiring the skills or competences of a particular office or function – no matter how theoretically complex these might be – but of becoming the kind of person or agent whose very understanding of professional office or function is shaped by a love of knowledge, truth, justice and virtue for their own sake. But this, of course, may be just another way of saying that in order to be a good teacher or minister, one needs not only high levels of professional theoretical expertise and procedural competence, but also to be an educated person. But although I would be the first to agree (not least with respect to the particular example of teaching) that this identifies an important respect in which some vocational preparation needs to be 'educational', it should also be evident that far from eroding or dissolving the liberal distinction between education and vocational training, it actually presupposes it.

But why should one want to argue so? If my quarrel with new vocationalists is not merely a terminological one, it may seem that my position is unreasonably exclusive – if not elitist. In denying the educational status of vocationally focused knowledge and skill, I may appear to be denying the important place of such knowledge in people's lives and in the school curriculum. However, I am doing no such thing, and I believe that it is practically and morally as well as philosophically important to get the terminology right regarding this issue. From this viewpoint, one should first observe that the new vocationalism commits the common error of failing to distinguish between education and schooling, employing these terms interchangeably. But, as I have previously argued (Carr, 1996; see also 2003), this is a grave philosophical error – a kind of category mistake – which can mislead educationalists into saying all sorts of absurd things. Since schools, unlike education, are social institutions, which are bureaucratically or otherwise organized, one can say things about schools which are not applicable to education – and vice versa. In this light, it makes sense to speak of schooling (but not education) as accountable to taxpayers, and the idea that there may be education without schooling makes sense in a way that 'lifelong schooling' does not. But to recognize this is also to appreciate that schools are legitimate sites of other enterprises besides education. Whereas school is indeed a place in which we might train people in vocational skills, education is not (since education is not a place at all) – and of course we may also there engage in projects, such as submitting children to athletic regimes, certificating or delousing them, which have no significant vocational or educational implications whatsoever.

To recognize that schools are social and public institutions with a variety of aims and purposes other than initiating children into commitment to the intellectual and moral virtues that constitute education in Peters' more conceptually purist sense is not exclusive, since it is consistent with recognizing that



schools are there to provide a wide range of other publicly accountable functions of basic socialization, training and welfare. This may be a headache for curriculum planners, but balancing these different priorities is what curriculum planning and educational policy is all about. But, far from being an exclusive view of the place of knowledge and skills in the school curriculum, it is a highly inclusive position that renders unto both God and Caesar. To recognise that schools have a diversity of purpose is to appreciate that they have a duty to educate Sharon or Tracy (not least if such pupils have 'learning difficulties'), in the 'best that has been thought and said', as well as to train them in the social and workplace skills necessary for effective adult functioning as mothers, hairdressers or receptionists.

Indeed, serious neglect of this point, and of consequent exclusivity and discrimination, is much more likely on new vocationalist blurring of the distinction between education and schooling, and more 'generous' extension of the term education to cover 'principled' initiation into vocationally relevant knowledge and skills. In this respect, much past and present emphasis on the educational value of vocational skills has been driven by the idea that since some young people (of 'lower' ability) have trouble getting to grips with the academic knowledge of liberal educationists, it is better to occupy them with the practical forms of expertise that they are likely to find useful after or beyond school. Such 'educational' strategies and policies are indeed more likely to be endorsed in the name of a real 'vocational' alternative to education for its own sake: but we will only have been misled by our own rhetoric if we hold that in substituting hairdressing skills for an acquaintance with history or poetry in the schooling of Sharon and Tracy, we have really educated them in any fully human or morally defensible sense.

### revisiting ambiguity and contestability

In this paper, we have asked whether, or to what extent the prospect of a definite answer to the question of the meaning of 'education' is liable to be compromised by either the ambiguity or the alleged contestability of education. I certainly believe that the last two sections of this paper serve to show that the contestability card has been considerably overplayed in recent educational philosophy. At all events, the liberal educational construal of education as the 'Socratic' pursuit of intrinsically worthwhile knowledge and truth that is also 'objectively' transcendent of particular socially defined interests and agendas, does not seem to be decisively undermined by postmodern or other non-realist epistemology. But if education is centrally focused on the pursuit of objective knowledge and truth, and we are not to embrace the logical absurdity of a plurality or diversity of truth, then education has a significantly



universal aim and goal – and, as we have seen, the idea that it might have diverse goals is anyway predicated on the cardinal confusion between education and its various social embodiments in culturally diverse systems of schooling. If this is so, then one might indeed regard some such Socratic or 'liberal' view of education as both theoretically coherent and practically useful for educational policy making and curriculum planning.

Thus, for example, appreciating that education is principally concerned to initiate individuals into a range of non-instrumentally valuable, but personally formative modes of knowledge and virtue, provides a justification of the curricular relevance to all pupils of forms of knowledge, understanding and appreciation (of history, philosophy, poetry, music and so on) that are not likely to be of specific practical or vocational use. At the same time, the distinction of education from schooling and concomitant recognition that the provision of such personal formation is not the only aim of state-funded schooling enables us to accommodate this conception of education to a broader social theory of schooling, and to appreciate that schooling has other more instrumental concerns with the wider socialization and welfare of pupils. Moreover, certain theoretical and practical dangers are avoided by the distinction of education from schooling: first, the utilitarian instrumentalist confusion of education with schooling, which takes the view that only subjects with practical pay-off merit inclusion in the curriculum (so that poetry becomes difficult to justify in the education of Sharon, if she is destined to become a hairdresser); second, the liberal non-instrumentalist confusion of schooling with education which can encourage the view that only non-instrumentally valuable and personally formative modes of knowledge are admissible in the school curriculum (an error which has actually led some on a wild goose chase for liberal educational justifications of handstands). I also suspect that the new vocationalist conception of 'vocational education' inherits the worst of both these confusions.

It would also seem that Richard Peters' concept of liberal education fits well enough into this more strictly defined conception of education as one aspect of schooling: does this mean that Peters' conception of education is correct? In fact it is not clear that it is, and there could after all be a problem with Peters' precise view – which may or may not turn out to be a problem with any such particular account of education. The difficulty arises with regard to the claim of Peters and other liberal educationalists that educatedness precludes specialization, and requires broad initiation – a claim which we earlier observed to have been challenged but not well addressed by educational philosophers. For although we may be justified in arguing that if education is personally formative knowledge, it should be promoted in schools, we seem on less secure ground in arguing that: if x (broad initiation) is education; and

education should be promoted in schools; then x (broad initiation) should be promoted in schools. The problem is, as previously indicated, that we may regard people as educated on grounds other than broad initiation. Thus, it seems reasonable to regard someone who has an in-depth knowledge of poetry and literature (say), but little else as better educated than the 'know-all', who is a mine of shallow information.

That said, this difficulty is not obviously a function of either the ambiguity or the contestability of our concept of education. If what we have so far argued is correct, it is not that we do not have a stable concept of education, or that we have license to apply the term 'educated' however we like. It is more that our shared objective criteria of education and educatedness are prone to individual application in a complex range of particular and personal ways: 'education' and 'educated' may be, in Wittgensteinian terms, 'family resemblance notions'. In practice, however, this may mean that it is difficult if not ultimately impossible to accommodate individual educational needs entirely satisfactorily to any normative generalities of the kind dreamed up by educational theorists and curriculum policy makers. This may also be no more than what good practising teachers could have told us on the basis of actual classroom experience all along. But in this respect the liberal educational strategy of broad initiation may be no worse off than any other, and it may well be rather better placed than many of its competitors if we are seriously committed to the moral task of trying to realise the full human potential of the many rather than the few.

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biographical note

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