

Beyond the Present and
the Particular:
A Theory of Liberal Education

Charles Bailey

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Epigraph

This is what generalising and talking about the past have in common; they are both departures from that which is present and particular. This common feature is what links them with rationality. The idea of rationality is that of the ability, given certain present and particular data, to unite or relate them with other data in certain appropriate ways. This is the Kantian idea of concepts as unifiers, binders together, creators of a *multum in parvo*.

Jonathan Bennet, *Rationality*

In the first place, reasonableness is not exhausted in the exercise of reasoning. A rational man may well be an intellectual, but he will not be an intellectualist, if this means that he retreats into his own corner and contents himself with spinning webs. Indeed, to try to squeeze a normal man into a tiny bed of his own cognitive faculty, and then lop off whatever will not fit into it, is to stunt him and indeed to kill him . . .

Secondly, rationality has a far larger field than that of propositions and concepts. It is as truly at work in judgments of better and worse, of right and wrong, as in those judgments of analytic necessity to which a narrow convention would confine the name of reason. It may exhibit itself, for example, in the sanity and good sense with which one appraises the types of human experience . . .

Thirdly, rationality extends to reasonableness in conduct. A man would not in our present sense deserve the name, no matter how clever he was, or how judicious in problems of value, who was incapable of translating his insights into action.

Brand Blanshard on the rational temper, in *Reason and Goodness*

Acknowledgments

This attempt to write a modern characterization and defence of liberal education has been provoked and stimulated by many encounters over the last two decades. Particularly in conferences and in-service courses with teachers I have frequently been asked to spell out the overall view of education in which were lodged my particular views on moral education, the curriculum, appropriate teacher strategies and attitudes, and so on; and this has always been difficult to do in any brief but satisfactory way. Without these repeated challenges the book might never have been written.

A second provocation has been the succession of suggestions from politicians and others in recent years that seem to me to threaten what is most valuable in education. It has become increasingly necessary for me to make clear to myself why I see certain educational content and method to be valuable, and the exact nature of the forces and arguments threatening these values.

In this undertaking my greatest debt is to those who have wrestled with these problems before me in recent times, especially Paul Hirst, Philip Phenix and John White, all of whom have had the courage and wisdom, against the spirit of the age, to address the right fundamental questions and problems. My criticisms of these three writers, liberal educators all, will, I hope, be seen as a mark of respect for their endeavours rather than the reverse.

I have been helped and encouraged by many friends and colleagues in conversations directly and indirectly related to what I have written. I would particularly like to mention Paul Hirst, who kindly read the first four chapters and encouraged me to continue; Michael Bonnett, David Bridges, Ray Dalton, Patrick Heffernan and Terry McLaughlin, who were kind enough to comment on parts of Chapter 6 for me; and John Beck who gave me much wise advice and also read and commented on Chapters 9 and 10. For this and a great deal else I am grateful to my Cambridge colleagues. They are not, of course, to blame for what I have done with, or in spite of, their advice.

I am indebted to the Principal, the Trustees and the Academic Board of Homerton College for releasing me from my teaching duties

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For one term in 1982 and another in 1983. Without this generous release, and the readiness of colleagues to undertake some of my duties, I could not have produced the book.

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Introduction – Theory and education

Since the aim of this work is to present a comprehensive and coherent *theory* of liberal education it is important to be clear in what sense I am talking about theory.

The word 'theory', like many other useful words in our language, has more than one meaning. Some of these meanings are plainly derogatory. For example 'theory' can mean 'an unproved assumption' or a 'mere idea', and there could be little to say about theory if this was all there was about it. We do not have to look far, however, to see that when we talk about bodies of ideas like the wave theory of light, the theory of radioactive decay, or the special theory of relativity, although there is a sense in which we are talking about assumptions, we are certainly not talking about *mere* ideas or lightly held assumptions. We are talking rather about carefully worked out and internally coherent bodies of ideas that seem to explain observed phenomena over a wide range of experiences. Although not verified beyond any peradventure of doubt, these theories enable us to make reasonable predictions and have not been refuted, though critically probed in many ways.

There are two important points to note about these scientific or explanatory theories. Firstly, they are not, as is sometimes supposed, derived from some piling up of observations until a theory emerges. They are, instead, the result of imaginative and creative ideas on the part of a Newton, a Rutherford or an Einstein about how things might be. Only then can propositions be deduced from the theories which we might try, as Karl Popper¹ has indicated, to refute. The theory stands as an explanation in so far as we fail to refute it. The theory is, to use Popper's language, the unrefuted conjecture.

The second point to notice about scientific theories of this kind is that it would be arrant nonsense to say of such a theory, 'It is all right in theory but not in practice.' This would be nonsense because a failure in practice would amount to refutation. Einstein's general theory of relativity, for example, provided propositions about the motion of the perihelion of Mercury, about the deflection of light in a gravitational field and about the displacement of spectral lines towards the red, all of which provided opportunities for refutation. Had the propositions

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not been found to fit practice in the sense of practical observation, then the theory would not have been all right but would have been discarded, however elegant the internal coherence of the mathematics might have been.

I do not want to claim that an educational theory, least of all the theory of liberal education to be advanced in this work, is a scientific theory in this sense. All I am concerned to show at the moment is that here is one quite respectable sense of 'theory' which anchors it securely alongside a particular kind of practice.

Another sense of 'theory' sees it as related to practice in another way, and since this is the sense in which I am using the term 'theory' in the expression 'a theory of liberal education' I must try to spell it out as carefully as possible. The sense I have in mind is a combination of the two following meanings from 'Webster's International Dictionary':

- (i) the body of generalisations and principles developed in association with practice in a field of activity, and
- (ii) a belief, policy or procedure proposed or followed as the basis of action.

It will be seen that both of these meanings attach theory clearly to practice and action and that two complementary ideas are blended together. In the first the idea is that of principles or rules developed *together with* the practice of an activity, say medicine, jurisprudence or education; and in the second there is the idea of the body of beliefs or principles *guiding* the practice or action. The two ideas are superficially contradictory in that one seems to derive theory *from* the practice whilst the other might be seen as imposing theory *on* the practice. This would be to oversimplify, however, since reflection does show that the two ideas appear to co-exist in theories of practice. In medicine, for example, the actual practice produces knowledge about the body, about disease, the effect of drugs and surgical practice and technique. Reflection on the practice raises problems, not only those requiring laboratory-based research but also those of an ethical or valiative kind not susceptible to scientific enquiry. The body of knowledge and valiative attitudes so gained in turn guides practice and can be studied by student practitioners. Not all of the rules and principles so studied are of a factual, cause-effect kind, though in medicine many of them are. The important point is that there is an inter-play of practice and reflection upon the practice, with the reflection becoming more structured, systematic and sophisticated as the body of knowledge, and the literature in which it is embodied, grows.

Theory in this sense is not so much explanatory, as in the case of scientific theory, rather it is systematic reflection for a purpose, the continual characterization, delineation and guidance of a practical

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activity. The idea that theory, especially educational theory, has a guiding function, has of course been indicated by others. Paul Hirst, for example, in a well known paper has written:

Educational theory, like political theory or engineering, is not concerned simply with collecting knowledge about certain practical affairs. The whole point is the use of this knowledge to determine what should be done in educational practice.²

Later he says of theory of education:

It is the theory in which principles, stating what ought to be done in a range of practical activities, are formulated and justified.³

What has *not* been so commonly noted is that such a reflective theory of practice from time to time re-defines, re-characterizes, the practice itself. This is certainly true of educational theory, where what *counts* as education, or what makes a practice educational rather than non-educational is one of the questions continually reflected upon and calling for imaginative conjecture. People like Froebel, John Dewey and A.S. Neill do not simply perceptively describe the existing educational practice of their time, nor yet do they merely inform and guide such practice, what they do is to set out to recast that practice, reformulate it along more justifiable lines. Such thinkers have not just told teachers how they might better achieve agreed ends, they have questioned the ends and proposed different ones.

Educational theory, then, in the sense used here, is inescapably linked with practice. It cannot be the case that the theory is all right only to fail in practice since the proper relationship to practice is the test on which the theory stands or falls. It is very important, however, that the relationship of such a theory to practice is not misunderstood and some possible (indeed common) misunderstandings must be noted.

(i) It does not follow from the idea that theory must properly relate to practice that a theory is false or bad if it cannot be implemented without disturbing in some way *present* practice. Mixed-ability grouping, for example, is not shown to be a false or bad theoretical idea simply because it cannot be effectively managed with normal methods of class teaching, since the theory normally carried the accompanying idea that existing methods of teaching *should* be disturbed. All this is a consequence of the guiding and/or re-defining nature of educational theory. As mentioned above, educational theory might tell us how better to achieve ends already agreed upon, but it might also tell us what is wrong with the ends we are setting and why and how they might be bettered. There is much confusion in the interpretation of educational research because of a failure to distinguish between arguments as to ends and arguments as to means. Relatively straightforward

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experimental techniques and correlation studies can usefully inform us about preferable methods *if* the desired end is clear and agreed, and *if* the desired end does not change as the method changes, and *if* non-relevant variables can be avoided in the experimental comparisons. This essential clarity is rarely met with in educational research, however, partly because of the difficulty of controlling variables, but more importantly because there is nearly always a different attitude to ends implicit in the adoption of different methods. Consider, for example, the following pairs of contrasts.

comprehensive organization	selective organization
setting by ability	mixed-ability grouping
traditional mathematics	modern mathematics
formal teaching	informal teaching
differentiated subject curriculum	integrated curriculum

Any teacher familiar with these juxtapositions will know that they involve not only differing methodologies, arrangements and techniques, but differing views or conceptions of what the enterprise is supposed to be about. Setting and mixed-ability grouping, for example, are not just two opposed ways of achieving the same end, where one might be shown experimentally to be the better; they are two different conceptions of what should be going on in the education of children and young people. The issue between them is not therefore to be determined solely, or even perhaps at all, by experimental and statistical methods of investigation, but by a much more complex comparison of valuative positions backed by some kind of philosophical — ethical, conceptual, logical — argument.

Where a theory, in this sense, characterizes or re-characterizes a practice, then by implication it defines or re-defines what is to count as a skill or a successful method within the practice. The test is still in the practice, but not necessarily in the *existing* practice.

(ii) It does not follow from the idea that theory must properly relate to practice that the substance of the theory, and changes to the substance of the theory, must only derive from inside the practice itself. There is no reason why ideas influencing the practice should not come from outside the practice, from any appropriate bodies of disciplined thought or even from other practices. Of course such an influential idea, discovery or argument *can* come from within the practice upon which it bears, but it does not have to. A doctor in general practice *can* have such an idea or make such a discovery, but so *can* a bio-chemist or even a metallurgist. A teacher *can* have an idea influencing educational theory and thereby educational practice, but so *can* a philosopher or a psychologist. *Ad hominem* arguments against a theoretical point on grounds of the inadequacy of the protagonist's

teaching experience are common in the educational world, as is the ad populum argument that something should be done because it is fashionable. Both are clearly fallacious. All that should count is that the theory should be clear as to the *kind* of propositions being urged: whether they are, for example, conceptual or ethical recommendations or scientific, and, further, that the appropriate kind of justificatory argument should be offered or relevant criteria of falsifiability should be indicated where the claims are allegedly scientific.

(iii) It does not follow from the idea that theory must properly relate to practice that the *only* appropriate tests of a theory are those seeking to refute it in practice. Such tests *are* appropriate for theories or parts of theories claiming to be scientific, that is, theories claiming to state how things are. Examples of such theories, not necessarily true, would be:

- (a) Children are encouraged to learn by the promise of extrinsic rewards.
- (b) Punishment has an alienating effect, especially on adolescents.
- (c) Clever pupils make slower progress in mixed-ability groups than equally clever pupils in groups of relatively similar ability.

Such tests are not appropriate, however, for claims seeking to guide or re-define practice which make no claim to be scientific. Claims like:

- (d) Liberal education should involve the development of the rational mind in whatever form it freely takes.
- (e) Education should always involve initiation into what is worthwhile and be concerned with knowledge and understanding.
- (f) Teachers should respect their pupils as persons.

It is clear that (a), (b) and (c) differ from (d), (e) and (f) in that the first three claim to state what *is* the case, whilst the second three are all about what ought to be the case. Both kinds of claim or theory guide practice but they do this in two different ways.

The kind of facts claimed in the first three examples guide practice by telling us (if true) what happens if we do certain things. They do not tell us, of course, that we *have* to do that thing. To know that children are encouraged to learn by the promise of extrinsic reward, for example, does not in itself mean that I should, as a teacher, promise my pupils extrinsic rewards. There might well be other considerations. It does not even tell me that I should promise extrinsic rewards to my pupils if I want them to learn, since there may be other, more desirable ways of encouraging my pupils to learn. There are, therefore, two appropriate considerations about factual claims, or what we might call *fact theories*: firstly, how can they be tested for falsity and, secondly, in what way should they influence my action? Educational research has

tended to be dominated by the methodology of statistics and experimentation necessary for answering the first question, and all too little attention has been given to the important but quite different requirements of the second question.

The second question, indeed, moves into the area of the type of theory exemplified by (d), (e) and (f) above: the type of claims, or *value* theories, as to what ought to be, or should be, done. It is this type of theory that cannot be tested by the statistical and experimental techniques appropriate to scientific or factual claims. This type of theory is about what is to be held important, significant and valuable; about what we *should* do, not in the sense of what *causes* us to do things, but in the sense of what reasons we present to ourselves as justification for doing things. There is a sense in which all such theories are ultimately moral in nature. A theory of liberal education, for example and to anticipate what is to follow, must make and justify a number of valuative claims before it can get anywhere near seeking factual theories to help it. We need to claim, for example:

- (i) children *should* be liberally educated, and
- (ii) liberal education *should* take such and such a form, have such and such aims, satisfy such and such criteria,

and to argue such claims, justify such claims, *before* we are in a position to see what factual information or claims may or may not be relevant.

Such arguments will of necessity be conceptual, logical and philosophical. A theory of this kind can only be tested by its internal coherence and consistency and by its coherence with other values we accept, especially those about persons characterized as creatures who reason and value coherence, consistency and justification. I do not believe myself that this makes such theories mere matters of opinion when compared with the theories susceptible to statistical and experimental testing. Critical probing for coherence and logical consistency is a rigorous, rule-governed activity. Some theoretical structures and prescriptions *are* more coherent than others and can be shown to be so. In any case, there would appear to be no other grounds on which we can rationally choose between one value theory and another, between one advocated course of action and another. If fact theories, as I have claimed, can never in themselves tell us what to do in education, and if value theories are to be thought of as merely arbitrary acts of commitment, then however much the statistics and experiments are multiplied, our acts and decisions would be ultimately non-rational.

I have tried to indicate in this section that a theory of liberal education can be a rationally justifiable theory, but that to be such it must be a *critical value theory* whose appropriate tests are those of coherence and consistency. Theories of this kind relate to practice, and would be

worthless without such a relationship, but they relate to it in a special kind of way.

There is perhaps one other point that needs to be made about theories claiming to guide action and practice before leaving this introduction. Action-guiding theories do not have to be proven with the certainty attributed to, say, mathematics, and I have already said that in large part they are not to be tested for truth or falsity in the same way as scientific theories. In seeking to be guided by the most consistent and coherent justificatory framework the rational temper requires that we hold our views at any one time critically, that is, subject to change if we can better them in terms of consistency and coherence; but the rational temper also requires that at any given time we are prepared to *act* on the justifications or reasons that present themselves to us at that time as the best. The twin dangers are, on the one hand, ceasing to care about justification and only valuing decisive action, and, on the other, losing the will to act in a vain search for the perfect justification. It sounds like a clever philosophical trick to say that anyone who asks, 'Why bother about justification?' is already bothered about justification, but it is nevertheless a profound truth. One can, of course, simply not bother about justification, but you cannot *argue* for such a happy abandonment. Similarly, one can, as a matter of fact, not bother about consistency and coherence, but you cannot *argue* for such a rejection. To attempt to argue either of these positions is already to play the justificatory game where the necessary ground rules *are* consistency and coherence. Rationality does not require, then, that in practical matters like education we act only on theories held to be completely proven, whatever that might mean; but rationality does require that we act on a systematically related body of beliefs justified by us as the most consistent and coherent we can arrive at. Indeed, at any given time we might not even be able to act directly or properly on the basis of an accepted theory because many things have to be changed to make such direct action in accord with the theory possible. Our theory is like an ideal. It directs us in our resisting and in our cooperating; and how anyone knows quite what to resist and what to support without such an ideal or theory puzzles me greatly.

Teachers, then, if they see themselves as general and liberal educators, rather than the hired instructors of specific and limited vested interests based on economics or politics, have need of a theory of liberal education of this critical value kind. The rest of this work seeks to construct such a theory.