

**Educational theory
and its
foundation disciplines**

Edited by
Paul H. Hirst

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Introduction

The publication in 1966 of a collection of papers under the title *The Study of Education*, edited by Professor J.W. Tibble,¹ inaugurated a new era in the character of educational studies in many British colleges and universities. In that volume it was argued hard that educational theory is necessarily dependent on the development of a series of contributory disciplines with recognised academic roots quite outside educational studies and a number of distinguished professors sought to map the current contributions of particular disciplines. They covered not only recent achievements in the well-established areas of educational psychology and the history of education but also the exciting work then being developed by quite new techniques in both philosophy of education and sociology of education. At this time many courses for both intending and experienced teachers came to have a sharply differentiated structure with major elements devoted explicitly to the separate disciplines. A large series of books in 'The Students Library of Education' under the editorship of the contributors to Professor Tibble's volume did much to promote the study of education in these terms.²

Since that period the nature of educational theory, its relationship to educational practice and the significance of the disciplines for it have been the subject of important critical discussions. Each of the distinct disciplines considered

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in the 1966 collection has also undergone major shifts in content and methods. This present volume has therefore been designed simply to take a look at how things now stand in these particular matters. New organisations for educational studies have, of course, emerged and their appropriateness for many purposes is not in dispute. They are, however, not the direct concern of these papers. The nature of educational theory as such, rather than organisations of it for teaching purposes, and the contributions to it of what continue to be the major disciplines on which it draws remain fundamental issues. It is these that are addressed in this collection.

Four of the five papers published here had their origins in public lectures to mark the centenary of the first series of lectures given in the University of Cambridge for intending teachers. They are printed here for the first time. The fifth paper, by Professor Davies, has been largely re-written for this volume but uses material previously published elsewhere. Each author has been encouraged to express his personal point of view on developments in his particular domain. Three of the authors contributed the parallel papers in Professor Tibble's 1966 collection.

Notes

1. J.W. Tibble (ed.), *The Study of Education*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966.
2. The Students' Library of Education, Series Founding. General Editor J.W. Tibble, published Routledge and Kegan Paul.

1 Educational theory

Paul H. Hirst

In my contribution to Professor J.W. Tibble's volume *The Study of Education*¹ I sought to characterise educational theory as a domain of practical theory, concerned with formulating and justifying principles of action for a range of practical activities. Because of their concern for practical principles I sharply distinguished domains of practical theory from domains concerned simply with purely theoretical knowledge. The function of the latter is primarily explanation. The function of the former is primarily the determination of practice. The one is concerned with achieving rational understanding, the other with achieving rational action. In this approach I was in major respects at variance with that set out several years previously by Professor D.J. O'Connor in his influential book *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*.² He had argued that though the term theory could be used for 'a set or system of rules or a collection of precepts which guide or control actions of various kinds',³ it is better used as in the natural sciences for a hypothesis or logically inter-connected set of hypotheses that have been confirmed by observation. In this sense we have 'standards by which we can assess the value and use of any claimant to the title of "theory"'. In particular this sense of the word will enable us to judge the value of the various (and often conflicting) theories that are put forward by writers on education.⁴

He concluded: 'we can summarise this discussion by saying that the word "theory" as it is used in educational contexts is generally a courtesy title. It is justified only where we are applying well established experimental findings in psychology or sociology to the practice of education. And even here we should be aware that the conjectural gap between our theories and the facts on which they rest is sufficiently wide to make our logical consciences uneasy. We can hope that the future development of the social sciences will narrow this gap and this hope gives an incentive for developing these sciences.'⁵ It seemed to me then, as it seems to me now, in spite of all Professor O'Connor says, critical for the development of educational practice that we hold hard to developing educational theory of a kind that is fully adequate to the nature of the educational enterprise. And to this end we should resist the seductions of a much more limited paradigm of 'theory' taken from another area, however prestigious its claims.

The differences (and agreements) between myself and Professor O'Connor were sharpened in an exchange of papers between us subsequently published in *New Essays in the Philosophy of Education*, edited by G. Langford and D.J. O'Connor.⁶ We agree that all theory is concerned with explanation, but to my mind the explanation of human activities in an area like education involves not only the sciences, including the social sciences, but also matters of beliefs and values. Reasons as well as causes enter into the business, mental concepts as well as the empirical concepts of the sciences are involved. If we agree acceptable theories are to be refutable, refutation is for me not confined to the form it takes in the sciences. We agree that educational theory is concerned with 'improving' and 'guiding' practice, but for me that is more than a technical matter for a scientific form of educational theory, on the assumption that the values involved come from outside the theory itself. Of course, if I insist that the debate of educational ends as well as means comes within the theory, because to my mind the development of rational practice demands that debate and

because ends and means are not ultimately separable, I must accept that the theory must incorporate all the confusions of contemporary debate about values. I must accept too that at present the logic of practical reasoning is unclear and that the structure of educational theory is therefore uncertain. But I do not despair of our progressively making our educational practice more rationally defensible, indeed I think we are slowly doing that. What is more, I see no reason to think that the logic of practical reasoning will forever elude us. After all, the elucidation of the logic of discourse can only be discerned after the emergence of acceptable paradigms of the discourse. Even in scientific discourse that logic is still a matter of dispute, whilst in the practical domain acceptable sophisticated theories are still in the making.

This second debate with Professor O'Connor has left me unrepentant in seeing educational theory as primarily the domain which seeks to develop rational principles for educational practice. To this end it draws, of course, on all the theoretical knowledge available in the social sciences. Educational psychology and sociology of education are precisely those sub-areas of psychology and sociology that are of use in this way. But it also draws on history, philosophy and much else besides; all that is significant for the formulation and justification of its rational principles. And if educational theory is a composite area of this kind, I remain unrepentant in regarding its unity as the unity of a consistent set of principles of practice at which it aims, not that of one vast theoretical integration of the contributory disciplines.

By the early 1970s, however, it was becoming clear that even if this view of the nature of educational theory is accepted, much more has to be said about the way in which the contributory disciplines are related to practical principles. Developments at that time within these disciplines only served to accentuate their radically different characters and the limited significance of any one or even all of these domains in the formulation of practical principles. Each discipline, even when concerned with educational practice,

clearly has its own concepts, employing these to ask its own distinctive theoretical questions, questions that are essentially, say, philosophical, psychological or historical in nature and not practical. The conclusions reached in each area, however focused on matters of educational practice, are again philosophical, psychological or historical in character and are not themselves principles for practice. The disciplines cannot tackle any given practical questions as such for each tackles questions which are peculiar to itself, those that can be raised only within its own distinctive conceptual apparatus. Psychologists, sociologists or philosophers faced with any matter of practical policy on, say, the grouping of pupils in schools or the use of punishment, can legitimately comment only on different psychological, sociological or philosophical issues that may be at stake. The disciplines each make their own limited abstractions from the complexities of practice. They tackle no common problems of any kind and none of them is adequate to the proper determining of principles for educational practice. Indeed, there seems an inevitable gap between the conceptual framework within which the issues of practice arise and the conceptual frameworks the distinct disciplines employ for their particular purposes. In seeking to characterise the relationship between the disciplines and the principles of educational theory, I have from the start referred to the disciplines as providing reasons, of many different kinds, for the principles. In this the disciplines are seen to be crucial for the justification of what is claimed in the theory. But how can such diverse, partial and limited theoretical studies ever provide a satisfactory justification for any set of practical principles? Even if the account I have given to date is satisfactory as far as it goes, it is certainly in need of further development.

In these early accounts of the nature of theory, uncertainty about what more might be said led to ambiguities that I now consider can be removed, at least to some significant extent. In particular, my view that the disciplines can provide justification for practical principles which in their turn

justify particular educational activities in individual circumstances was interpreted by some in very simplistic ways that must surely be rejected. Taken as giving a methodology for developing rational educational practice, it is clear that this scheme, of proceeding from disciplines to principles to particular activities, simply will not work. As has already been indicated, the disciplines we have deal with certain aspects abstracted from complex practical situations, dealing with these in dissociation from each other. There is no reason whatever to suppose that these abstractions when put together begin to give any adequate understanding of the situation for practical purposes, nor even that they ever could. What other new disciplines might come to contribute to our understanding we cannot at present know, but further, we are not able to see how such an array of disciplines can provide a comprehensive base for the determination of practical principles. It is not just that at present the disciplines we have are too undeveloped and full of disputes for such a method of developing principles to be workable, true though that is. It is rather that the very character of the disciplines seems such that they must prove inadequate as a basis for practical principles.

This approach is in fact simply one version of what Karl Popper labelled Utopian social engineering⁷ and is open to all the criticisms he voiced. It sees rational action as action decided on in separation from immediate experience and concrete situations, and then executed in particular circumstances. In this it assumes either that we can achieve a 'clean slate' on which we can write what we want or that we can achieve what we want no matter what the existing state of affairs. Such a degree of control over men and complex social circumstances is, however, quite illusory and the consequences of practical actions of any complexity are always in part unpredictable. For that reason alone this approach always tends in practice to the seeking of ever larger areas of planning and ever more determined efforts to control matters over longer periods of time. But the greater the scale of operation,

the greater the scale of the unpredictable and the possible irrationality of the outcome. Popper himself advocated instead what he called piecemeal social engineering, in which we confine ourselves to small-scale operations where there are acknowledged deficiencies in our society. In such circumstances we can more readily adjust matters if things go wrong. Larger-scale changes can be made in the light of more modest experiments on a trial and error basis.

Yet for all his opposition to large-scale rationalism, Popper retains a sophisticated version of the same rationalist theory of action. Individuals act rationally to the extent that they understand each problem and respond to it in the terms it itself presents. A person's grasp of a problem is set in part by his society's institutions and traditions, but there is nothing here that is in principle incapable of being understood in the social and other sciences. (There may be unintended consequences to any rational action, but these too are capable of explanation in scientific terms.) My earlier criticisms question whether such rationalism is in principle possible even on a piecemeal scale. Does a practical situation present itself in terms that can be adequately understood from without, using the necessary disciplines? Or is its character determined much more subtly by factors that can only be understood by the practitioner from within this element of the life of the relevant society, with its institutions, traditions, beliefs and values? If, following Popper, educational theory is not to be seen as a form of Utopian social engineering, it is not clear that his picture of piecemeal social engineering is a correct account either. Maybe his idea of social engineering itself, whatever its scale, needs to be questioned because of the technological model it employs. It is far from obvious that in determining social issues the relationship between knowledge and rational action is the same as that which holds in determining engineering practices. In engineering, rational practice comes from an understanding that conforms to what is the case independently of human beings in a particular society's social system. In education, rational practice must be achieved

within an understanding which itself both determines and is determined by the society in which it takes place.⁸

The idea of a methodology moving from the disciplines of educational study to practical principles and then to particular activities is not only practically unworkable and mistaken in its view of rational action, it also involves a serious confusion of methodology with logic. In his book *Educational Theory and the Preparation of Teachers*⁹ John Wilson criticises my original account of educational theory precisely because of its inadequacy as an outline of a methodology for the development of justifiable theory. As he points out, this means that the picture whereby educational theory draws on all the knowledge within the various forms (of knowledge) that is relevant to educational pursuits, but proceeds from there in grappling with practical problems, 'has, in practice to be considerably modified. . . . [In] any actual instance of serious research one has to adopt a quite different strategy. . . . We have to start with clarifying some objective, consider the practical difficulties of achieving it, and pick up whatever empirical knowledge we find to be relevant on the way.'¹⁰ Wilson goes on to outline his own view of the methodology with its progressive emphases on different kinds of knowledge and disciplines. Though I have many questions about Wilson's alternative, my outline is certainly unacceptable as a methodology. Whether or not the pattern for the justification of an individual action is by appeal to principles and thence to the disciplines, it does not follow from this that in developing educational theory one must follow a method of deriving principles from the disciplines. How the most defensible practical principles are best achieved and how any proposed principles are to be justified, are two quite different questions. Questions of methodology are not questions of logic, even if the two are not unrelated. Showing, then, the inadequacy as a methodology for educational theory of what was in fact proposed as an outline of the logic of the theory, does nothing to invalidate that outline. But the question of the validity of the outline of the

logic remains and its adequacy as an account of the justification of educational activities needs further examination.

In my comments on Popper's notion of social engineering I indicated that an adequate general account of rational action is necessary if we are to understand the development of defensible educational theory. Without such an account the logic of the theory remains unclear and the character of the methodology that serves that logic must as a consequence remain obscure. Only if we are aware of the nature of rational action in general and the elements that are necessary to it will it be possible to consider adequately the justification of particular actions. What my earlier outline of educational theory failed to do was to take into account certain elements within rational action whose significance for the justification of actions was consequently ignored. Any adequate account of educational theory must, I now consider, reject more firmly than I once saw certain central tenets of rationalism in favour of a more complex theory of rational action.

On the rationalist account, which I now wish to reject explicitly, rational action is seen as necessarily premeditated. Action waits on prior reflection. The justification of any action is therefore a matter of the justification of the prior decision in the light of the beliefs and principles on which it was based. Gilbert Ryle long ago argued against this account in terms of his distinction between 'know how' and 'know that'.¹¹ Not all forms of intelligent 'know how' presuppose that the person possesses the 'know that' of the relevant principles. In telling examples he pointed out that good cooking came before relevant recipes and that valid deductive arguments were used and known to be valid before their principles were formulated. Rational action can, and in certain respects must, precede rational principles, the latter being the result of reflection on rational actions. That is not to say that principles, once formulated, are not useful in promoting rational action, or that the range of rational action cannot be extended by modifying the principles of such action in specific ways. What is being denied is that an

adequate account of rational action in general can be given simply in terms of principles determined prior to action and justified independently of such action.

A distinction similar to Ryle's has been made by Michael Oakeshott in his analysis of all human activities requiring skill of any sort.¹² By means of this distinction he not only builds up further criticism of rationalism, but begins to develop an alternative account of rational action. All activities, he claims, involve two kinds of knowledge. There is, on the one hand, what he calls technical knowledge, a knowledge of rules, techniques and principles that can be formulated comprehensively in propositions, which can be learned, remembered and put into practice. On the other hand there is practical knowledge which exists only in use, which is not reflective and cannot be formulated in rules. Its normal expression is in a practice of some sort, in a customary or traditional way of doing things. These two kinds of knowledge Oakeshott considers distinguishable but inseparable, both being involved in every concrete activity. Together they make any skill or act what it is. He explicitly denies, however, that technical knowledge tells us what to do and practical knowledge how to do it. Even in knowing what to do there is involved not only an element of technical knowledge but one of practical knowledge too. The propositions of technical knowledge could not exist without a practical knowledge of how to decide certain questions. Doing anything, therefore, depends on and exhibits knowing how to do it and only part of that knowledge can subsequently be reduced to propositional technical knowledge. What is more, these propositions are not the cause of the activity, nor are they directly regulative of it. Rules and principles cannot be applied to situations by the exercise of knowledge of another kind, practical knowledge. For practical knowledge is not simply some blind unstructured executive competence that applies rules and principles. Practical knowledge consists of organised abilities to discern, judge and perform that are so rooted in understanding, beliefs, values and attitudes that any

abstracted propositional statements of those elements or of rules and principles of practice must be inadequate and partial expressions of what is involved. Practical knowledge is acquired by living within the organised social world to which we belong, structured as it is by institutions and traditions of great variety. In education, as in any other area of activity, we come to understand the activity, its problems and their answers from engagement in the activity itself. We have to penetrate the idiom of the activity by practising it. Then, gradually, by a variety of means, we can improve and extend our knowledge of how to pursue it, analysis of the activity and reflection on its rules and principles having their part to play in that process.

On this view, the justification of any individual educational activity cannot be seen simply in terms of an appeal to a set of practical principles. Not merely, as previously seen, because the very existence of principles presupposes the acceptance of at least some activities as independently justified. But now because practical principles are seen to be necessarily inadequate even for an understanding of any activity let alone for justifying it. Justification must be seen, in Oakeshott's words,¹³ as 'faithfulness to the knowledge we have of how to conduct the specific activity we are engaged in', and that is different from 'faithfulness to the principles or rules of the activity'. We may easily be faithful to the latter whilst losing touch with the activity itself. 'Rational conduct is acting in such a way that the coherence of the idiom of the activity ... is preserved and possibly enhanced.' Rules and principles are only 'abridgments' of the coherence of the activity. And if justification of any activity by approach to principles is inadequate, justification of practical principles by an appeal to academic disciplines is equally called in question. The validity of practical principles must, on this view, stem from their being abstracted from practice, rather than some independent theoretical foundation.

Oakeshott's distinction between technical and practical