# THE FORMATION OF REASON
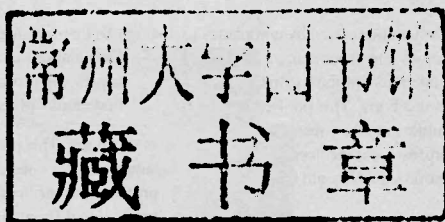
*David Bakhurst*

# The Formation of Reason

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*For Christine*

# Acknowledgements

# Foreword

There can be few questions more pressing for education than those that appear at the interface between philosophy and psychology, for these are critical to how we learn and how we teach, and inseparable from what it is to be a human being: they are inseparable from what it is to be minded and what it is that makes the mind. But, strangely perhaps, when philosophers and psychologists discuss these things, they are apt to pass one another by. When educationalists turn to such writings, they commonly find that their real concerns are not being addressed, or that they are being broached in a manner that disappears into abstraction, cut off from the realities that confront teachers in their daily lives. These barriers to understanding are symptomatic of deep divisions in scholarly self-conception— not just legitimate disciplinary differences but divergent notions of what a discipline can and should do. Academic specialisation, accentuated by competitive research assessment regimes, amplifies these problems, deepening the division, while the imperative to demonstrate impact, in a culture of supposedly evidence-based policy, is an enticement to some—perhaps for the psychology of education especially—to superficiality or formulaic quick fixes. What then can philosophy do? When one turns to the philosophy of education, one finds, currently, that these questions receive less direct attention that one might expect; or perhaps that their treatment tends to be partial and partisan. All this is regrettable, it goes without saying, and these theoretical and practical deficits cry out for a more creative response.

*The Formation of Reason* answers to these needs. Drawing upon a rich and varied range of sources, David Bakhurst transcends these limitations with an account of the acquisition of reason—of how, as human beings, we come into the 'space of reasons', in Wilfrid Sellars's memorable phrase—that is remarkable for its breadth of vision. In a text that reflects the influence of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jerome Bruner, Bakhurst brings Lev Vygotsky and Evald Ilyenkov together with Robert Brandom and John McDowell, forging connections that are sometimes surprising but always refreshing, drawing distinctions that are nicely nuanced and often revelatory: the reader is thus cautioned against too easy an acceptance of received views of any of these thinkers and any acquiescence in formulaic responses. Bakhurst moves adroitly between the detail and the big picture, always maintaining a sense of the practical responsibilities of his task, in a manner professional philosophy has schooled itself to eschew—so, at least, it would sometimes seem. To enquire into the nature and origins of human psychological powers, and the extent of their dependence upon history and culture, is to address questions central to the

philosophy of mind, but it can also be to venture into borderlands with psychology that a more scrupulously anxious philosophy would avoid.

The book is an overt tribute to McDowell, and he is plainly the strongest presence in these pages. But it breaks new ground in demonstrating his signifi-cance for education, and this is achieved partly by a qualified but highly original reconciliation of his thought with that of Vygotsky. Prominent place is given to other Russian thinkers too, most notably, as we saw, the philosopher Ilyenkov, but this also extends to some acknowledgement of the insights into the semiotic nature of the human psyche of V. N. Voloshinov (that is, Mikhail Bakhtin?). This move-ment between disciplinary traditions and philosophical cultures gives a critical edge to Bakhurst's discussion such that the expository elements in the text are never merely exegesis but always challenge the reader in new ways.

So too McDowell's turn to *Bildung* in his account of 'second nature' is expanded here in such a way as to acknowledge something of the extraordinary richness of association the term carries. Thus, Bakhurst shows an appreciation of the idea's embeddedness in the facts of human life—of human finitude and sensibility, of human beings as subject to emotion and mood. Hence, his later discussion of music and the arts becomes all the more apposite, and this is just one of the ways in which the significance of engaging intelligently with concrete subject-matter is realised. Rooted in Renaissance humanism and ultimately Ancient Greek thought, and with strong connotations of character formation, *Bildung* is then explicated as a process of self-making. It becomes thus incumbent upon educators to ensure that this proc-ess is informed by plausible conceptions of the good, Bakhurst's account of which is resolutely affirmative and pluralistic. This is a vision of education, then, that conjoins freedom and reason.

When Bakhurst foregrounds the idea of autonomy as central to educational aims, he finds connections not only with *Bildung* but also, perhaps more obviously, with that restatement of the idea of a liberal education, in the 1960s and 1970s, that is associated with R. S. Peters, Paul Hirst and Robert Dearden. The interweaving of questions of ethics and epistemology in their enquiry, which, with its strongly Kantian inspiration, contributes to the robustness of that restatement, finds resonance in the present text also with Christine Korsgaard's examination of the sources of normativity. But this proves to be one of the several points where apparently like-minded philosophers are shown to differ, sometimes in ways that would escape the less critical reader of their work. A similar point can be made about the various forms of social constructionism that are evaluated, some of which are clearly congenial to Bakhurst, but many of which are shown to be vacuous—notwithstanding the seemingly religious enthusiasm for them that is sometimes found in educational and social science research. With these differences clearly exposed, the account we are offered of the socio-historical charac-ter of mind, and of the salience of this for education, is all the more convincing.

What these brief preparatory remarks should have indicated is that *The Formation of Reason* offers something other than a mainstream approach to these mainstream questions. Yet this is not the work of a maverick. The originality arises from the

seeing of connections and the ability to draw these out in ways that are often surprising and always cogent. In doing this, David Bakhurst has succeeded in writing not only a work of philosophy that can speak to that mainstream in philosophy of mind but also a book that should be read by psychologists and educators and, in fact, anyone who has the kind of interest we should all have in what it is that makes the mind.

Paul Standish
Series Editor

# Author's Preface

This book begins by posing the question of whether and in what sense our distinctively human psychological powers are essentially social in nature and origin. It responds by developing a socio-historical account of mind according to which we owe our status as rational animals to our initiation into culture. Such issues are the focus of some of my earlier writings, especially my work on Russian philosophy and psychology, and my papers on Wittgenstein and Bruner. This book affords me the opportunity to revisit ideas from those works, expounding them in greater detail and exploring their consequences, especially their relevance to our understanding of education. But there is much here that is new, in part because some of my views have evolved, and in part because my primary inspiration in this book is the philosophy of John McDowell, whose work I have long admired, but have never before given a sustained treatment. I hope the result complements my previous efforts, and offers a fruitful exploration of what we might call the conceptual foundations of the philosophy of education.

I have long been interested in questions of education, a topic dear to the hearts of many thinkers on whom I have written in the past. Nevertheless, I did not set out to write a book in philosophy of education. That came about because a number of friends and colleagues encouraged me to develop my ideas in that direction. I am especially grateful to Jan Derry for her interest in my work, her critical insight, and her marvellous generosity and enthusiasm. Through Jan, I have met many others who have influenced me, such as Paul Standish, Harry Daniels, Anne Edwards, Michael Young, David Guile, John Hardcastle and Andrew Davis (whom I first knew many years ago when he was a graduate student at Keele and I an undergraduate). I associate the writing of this book with good times spent among friends, discussing matters philosophical in seminars, and afterwards over food and wine. Very little of this philosophical camaraderie would have come to pass had Jan not made it happen.

In 2001–2, I was privileged to hold a visiting fellowship at All Souls College, Oxford, where I was able to conduct preliminary research for the book in a setting supremely conducive to scholarly reflection. I thank the Warden and Fellows of the College for their kindness and hospitality. I am especially indebted to Myles Burnyeat and Hanna Pickard for making my stay at All Souls so pleasurable and productive. I am also extremely grateful to London's Institute of Education, where I am now fortunate to have an association as a Visiting Professor. I have given numerous talks at the Institute in recent years to audiences that never fail to be perceptive in criticism and generous in spirit. I only wish I could spend more time there. I am also indebted to Queen's University at Kingston for granting me academic leave to pursue this project, and to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for funding the research at its embryonic stages.

I have had the opportunity to present material from the manuscript to colloquia at All Souls College, Bath University, Birmingham University, Durham University, Griffith University, Hertfordshire University, The Institute of Education, London, Queen's University at Kingston, and York University (Toronto), at meetings of the Humanities and Social Sciences Federation of Canada (in Winnipeg), the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain (at New College, Oxford), the Philosophy of Education Society of the United States (in Montreal), the International Society for Cultural and Activity Research (in Amsterdam, Seville and San Diego), at the Gregynog Philosophy of Education Conference, and at workshops at Queen's University at Kingston and Laurentian University. I thank the audiences on these occasions for their questions, comments and criticisms.

I would like to thank John McDowell for his help and encouragement over the years. His influence on the text is conspicuous; I hope he likes the result. Many other people deserve my heartfelt thanks. Paul Standish, Andrew Davis and Willem deVries read the whole manuscript with great care and provided countless astute criticisms and suggestions that made the book much better than it otherwise would have been. I am also indebted to two anonymous referees for their comments on the project, and to many friends who discussed parts of the text with me, including David Wiggins, Andrew Chitty, Michael Luntley, Adrian Moore and Hanjo Glock. Jonathan and Sarah Dancy merit special thanks—Jonathan for philosophical inspiration, Sarah for expertly copy-editing the manuscript and managing the book's production. Other friends had a less direct but nevertheless important influence on the work, including Adam Swift, Cheryl Misak, David Dyzenhaus, Peter Jones, George Lovell, Maureen Garvie, Vladislav Lektorsky and my colleagues at Queen's, especially Sergio Sismondo, Henry Laycock, Steve Leighton, Rahul Kumar, Deborah Knight and one other, mentioned below. Queen's is blessed with outstanding students, and I have been fortunate to work with many. I would particularly like to thank Tom Brannen, Anthony Bruno, Octavian Busuioc, Rachel Fern, Jane Forsey, Katie Howe, Ryan McInerney, Rachel Sheffrin and John Symons. I am also very grateful to the staff of the Queen's Philosophy Department, Marilyn Lavoie and Judy Vanhooser, for the superb job they do, and for the tremendous help and support they have given me during my time as Head of Department. On a sad note, since I began this book I have lost several people dear to me who inspired me greatly: Genia Lampert, Felix Mikhailov, Jerry Cohen, and my mother, Peggy Bakhurst. I miss them very much.

The book is dedicated to Christine Sypnowich, my wife and colleague at Queen's. Christine and our two children, Rosemary and Hugh, are the greatest. Not a day goes by without my giving thanks for my good fortune in being part of such a family. Christine is the perfect friend to me, a wonderful mother to our children, and a constant source of inspiration, intellectual, moral and aesthetic. She's also great fun. Many years ago when we were doctoral students in Oxford, I was writing to our friend Hanjo Glock. I asked Christine if she had a message for Hanjo. She answered self-mockingly, 'Just tell him Christine is as lovely as ever and never ceases to delight.' Joking she may have been, but what she said was true then, is true now, and has been true at all points in between. Thanks for everything, Christine.

# Contents

# 1
# What Can Philosophy Tell Us About How History Made the Mind?

This chapter is concerned primarily with two questions. First: to what degree do we owe our distinctively human psychological powers to history, society and culture? Second: if our relatedness to others is a precondition of our mindedness, to what extent can this be demonstrated or illuminated by *philosophical* reflection?[1]

My interest in these issues goes back to the early 1980s, when I began research on Russian philosophy. I spent the 1982–3 academic year in Moscow, trying to get inside the philosophical culture of the USSR. I was convinced that there had to be more to that culture than the tired doctrines of dialectical and historical materialism that were the official creed of the Soviet state. And I was right. I was fortunate to fall in with a group of talented philosophers, who took me under their wing. These thinkers were not dissidents; they were Marxists, but they were representatives of a very different form of Marxism from the kind peddled by the Soviet establishment. These were so-called 'men of the 'sixties', who had done their most creative work during the brief 'thaw' that succeeded the Stalin period. They were creative, critical and scholarly. They were steeped in German classical philosophy, especially Hegel. Their cast of mind was sceptical, playful and, as you might expect, dialectical. They were typically excellent orators.[2]

One prominent theme in their work was that the human mind is an essentially 'socio-cultural' or 'socio-historical' phenomenon. Now, I had been brought up to think that the idea that human beings are 'socially constituted beings' was a leitmotif of the incorrigibly feeble-minded: the sort of claim that no self-respecting philosopher would advance. So I was intrigued to find the idea flourishing among thinkers whose intelligence and ingenuity were hard to question. I therefore set about trying to establish what exactly these Russians were arguing and to explore similar ideas advanced by other thinkers. As it happens, since the early 1980s, the idea that the human mind cannot be understood without essential reference to culture has come to prominence in certain areas of Western philosophy and

psychology: for example, communitarian political philosophy, feminist theory, certain readings of Wittgenstein, some forms of poststructuralism, and the various species of social-constructionist, discursive and cultural psychology.[3] Even in cognitive science it is now common to hear reference to the importance of culture. Yet there remains little consensus about how exactly to understand the relation of mind to culture, or society, or history.

## WHAT ROLE FOR PHILOSOPHY?

My Russians were convinced that the socio-historical character of mind is something that philosophy can illuminate. But there are grounds for scepticism here, for the influence of culture, or social interaction, or history, on the nature and development of mind must be an empirical matter, and as such one that lies outside the province of philosophy. If you muse about how great the influence of culture is on your own development, you might find yourself asking questions like: *What would I have been like had I been born the child of a Roman centurion?* And you might think that headway can be made by treating this as a thought experiment. But in so far as we can make sense of the question at all, surely the only interesting reading is this: *How would someone with your genetic make-up have turned out had he or she been brought up as the child of a centurion?* That looks like an empirical question about the respective contributions of nature and nurture, not a philosophical one. Questions about the manifestation of genetic traits in contrasting environments are the stuff of twin studies, not thought experiments.

It is interesting that my Russians strongly resisted the idea that they were making a speculative intervention in the nature–nurture debate. In fact, they explicitly argued that psychological development should not be seen in nature–nurture terms (see Mikhailov, 1995, pp. 76–7). First, they maintained that it is a mistake to suppose we can neatly distinguish two discrete causal factors, natural/biological, on the one hand, and cultural/environmental, on the other, and then sort influences on development into one kind or the other. Second, they complained that the nature–nurture debate portrays development exclusively in causal terms. It represents individual development as a product of either natural or environmental influences, or (more plausibly) of some combination of the two. But the position these philosophers were advancing was not one about the causal conditions of human development. Their argument was more transcendental in character: that initiation into culture, social interaction, having a history, and so on are not so much causes of psychological development as preconditions of the possibility of rational agency, and hence of mind, at least in its human form, since these Russian thinkers identified our mindedness with our status as rational agents. We can ask of a rational agent, say, whether she is naturally good at mathematics or prone to fits of anger, but we cannot portray rational agency as determined by nature, nurture, or anything else, for we represent an agent as rational in so far as we see her as autonomous and *self-determining*. The question for my Russians was the relation of history, culture and society to the possibility of self-determination, an issue that, they complained, was rendered invisible by the nature–nurture debate.

But even if we take a nuanced view of nature and nurture, human development is surely in the realm of the empirical, so what exactly is there for the philosopher to contribute? Well, the Lockean job of underlabourer for the sciences is available. But we can probably find more challenging employment even if we concede that the relation between culture and mind is to be explored by empirical investigation. One role might be to integrate material from different disciplines. Understanding the mind is an interdisciplinary project: we need insights not just from psychology, biology, neuroscience, linguistics, anthropology, etc., but from a number of historical disciplines, such as archaeology, ancient history, and so on. There are many reasons why practitioners in one field may be unable to see the significance of work in another, even if they are aware of its existence. So one task the philosopher can assume is to weave insights from different fields into a single synoptic vision. This is no easy job, not just because it is hard to establish a common universe of discourse, but because one has to reckon with all the entrenched reasons for thinking the project unnecessary or impossible.

I want, however, to consider whether there might not be a yet more ambitious role for the philosopher—that is, to argue that the human mind is essentially a socio-historical phenomenon. Might there not be distinctively philosophical arguments that would show what my Russians wanted to show—namely, that there is a more than merely empirical connection between possession of a mind and membership in society, culture or community?

Such a position seems to have been held by two of the greats of twentieth-century analytic philosophy: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Donald Davidson. I shall briefly sketch their respective positions.

## WITTGENSTEIN AND DAVIDSON

In the passages in the *Philosophical Investigations* known as the 'private language argument' and the 'rule-following considerations', Wittgenstein argues—or appears to argue—that there could not be a language that is essentially private in character, from which it seems to follow that language is necessarily a public, or communal, phenomenon.

The argument is this: a language in which the meaning of the words was given by entities accessible only by the speaker (such as the speaker's ideas or sensations) would lack standards of correctness. There would be no way to distinguish correct usage of the words of the language from usage that merely struck the speaker as correct. But a language with no standards of correctness is no language at all; therefore, a private language is impossible.

The 'rule-following considerations', which precede the private language argument in the *Philosophical Investigations*, seem to show that we can make sense of standards of correctness in a practice only by appeal to such notions as agreement and custom. There is no philosophical vantage point from which we can declare that one way of extending a mathematical series, or deploying a concept, is correct and another incorrect. Correctness and incorrectness are disclosed from within our practices—activities that cannot be underwritten by philosophy but must be