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Philosophical Foundations For A Critical Educational Science: An Interview With Wilfred Carr

Q.1 The main concepts of your proposal for a critical educational science are, for us, the three closely related concepts of "practice", "science" and "critique". In our opinion, what is of most importance is your attempt to provide a conceptual synthesis of "practice" and "science" as mutually constitutive (for a "practical science" and for a "scientific practice") and for the consequent reformulation of the concept of an educational science. Is this a correct way of interpreting your work?

A.1 Yes it is. As you say, the concepts of practice", "science" and "critique" are central to much of my work. To these I would like to add two more: the concept of "theory" and the concept of "education" itself. You are also correct to emphasise my attempt to reintegrate these concepts by showing how they are dialectically related. Let me try and explain why I regard the reformulation of these concepts as crucial in any attempt to reconstruct the idea of an educational science.

The motivation for much of my work is a conviction of the need to detach educational theory and research from the positivist tradition which has dominated the ways in which they have been conducted since the nineteenth century. Because of the strength of this tradition, educational theory is still regarded in Britain primarily as a form of "applied science" which uses value-free empirical knowledge as a basis for resolving educational problems and for critically evaluating educational practice. When educational theory is interpreted in this way, the concepts of "theory", "science", "criticism", "practice" and "education" all acquire a particular meaning. Moreover, once we accept these meanings, a number of conceptual dualisms and distinctions become inevitable - the distinctions, for example, between knowing and doing, theory and practice, science and ideology, facts and values. In education, these distinctions are now socially embedded in an institutionalised division of labour between teachers who "practice" but do not "theorise", and educational researchers who "theorise" but do not "practice". Because of this teachers are commonly portrayed as theoretically impoverished practitioners and educational theorising is assumed to be the exclusive preserve of an academic elite.

The way in which I would like my work to be read is as a sustained critique of these positivist distinctions and the institutionalised division of labour which they support. On the basis of this critique, I have tried to formulate a conception of "educational science" which interprets practice as ineradicably theoretical and which construes science as a practical process of rational and critical self-reflection. Such an educational science would eliminate the segregation of teachers and theorists which positivism has bequeathed.

Q.2 About the concept of "practice", could you explicate your general treatment of this concept. In this context, could you say what are the main elements in your reconceptualisation of an "educational practice"?

A.2 My general treatment of the concept of practice arose from my dissatisfaction with the positivist ways in which the relationship of educational practice to educational theory is commonly understood. Central to this commonsense understanding is the positivist assumption that practice is everything that theory is not. "Practice" is particular, concrete and involves doing something; "theory" is general, abstract and involves knowing something. But, in education, these appositions rarely make sense. When I ask myself "what should I teach?", I am asking a practical question about what to do, which is general and abstract. When I ask "is intelligence innate?", I am asking a theoretical question which is clearly intrinsic to many practical educational situations. The basic issue which emerges is: how can we characterise educational practice as being both general *and* particular, both abstract *and* concrete? Can we articulate a concept of educational practice which can reconcile these appositions?

In looking for an answer to this question, I turned to Hans-Georg Gadamer's attempt to re-establish the classical Aristotelian tradition of

"practical philosophy" [1]. Like Gadamer, the main elements I draw from this tradition concern Aristotle's exposition of the epistemological presuppositions of *praxis* - morally informed action aimed at the realisation of some worthwhile "good". For Aristotle, *praxis* is different from *poesis* - instrumental action aimed at producing some pre-specified object or artifact - because the ethical ends to which it is directed cannot be "made" or "produced", they can only be pursued *in* and *through praxis*. In *praxis* means and ends cannot be separated.

Put simply, my argument is that educational practice cannot be made intelligible as a form of *poesis* - instrumental action guided by determinate ends and governed by fixed rules. It can only be made intelligible as a form of *praxis* - action guided by ethical criteria which are immanent in educational practice itself: criteria which we tacitly use when we distinguish genuine educational practice from that which is not; good educational practice from that which is indifferent or bad.

When viewed as a species of *praxis* it becomes clear that the kinds of practical knowledge guiding educational practice is not technical knowledge about how to improve the effectiveness of action undertaken to achieve some specific goal. "Practical knowledge" is knowledge of how to apply general ethical and educational principles to particular cases. Practical educational reasoning thus always requires what Aristotle called *phronesis* or "practical wisdom" - a capacity to combine a knowledge of general educational principles and values with sound practical judgement about when and how to apply these principles and values in a particular educational situation. *Phronesis* is thus the crucial term which integrates the general and the abstract of "theory" with the particular and the concrete of "practice". When educational practice is understood in terms of the language of praxis then its separation from educational theory no longer makes any sense.

Q.3 About the concept of science. What are the main components of your concept of science? What are the epistemological features? What, in this context, is an "educational science"?

A.3 The concept of science to which I appeal in my work is the concept of science which emerged from what is now known as the "post-empiricist philosophy of science"[2]. For my purpose, the main epistemological features of this philosophy of science can be summarised as follows. First, scientific theories are under-determined: although scientific theories are empirically constrained, they are not empirically confirmed or refuted. Second, there is no theory-free language for reporting observations: observation always entails the use of concepts which interpret what is being observed in accordance with some prior theoretical scheme. Third, scientific inquiries always occur within the context of some overall paradigm which incorporates some metaphysical assumptions about the nature of their object of study. Fourth, the distinctive feature of "scientific inquiry" is not its empirical method but the critical norms and standards of rational discourse which are shared and accepted by a community of enquirers. It is this shared intersubjective commitment to impersonal standards of rationality - standards which are designed to ensure that beliefs and practices can be critically assessed and that bias, dogma and personal prejudice can be minimised or eliminated - which is the hallmark of scientific enquiry. On this view the essential feature of science is not its "method" of enquiry or its "logic" for testing and confirming empirical statements. It is that science is a social activity conducted within a critical community whose members are committed to free and open dialogue, respect for argument, a tolerance of criticism and the other norms of rational discourse.

One of the benefits of this post-empiricist philosophy of science is that it makes it possible to distinguish between a science "of" or "about" education and a genuine *educational* science. The former simply uses psychological or sociological paradigms in order to produce scientific theories about education. An educational science, however, uses an educational paradigm which incorporates epistemological assumptions drawn from our understanding of education itself. It is an "educational" science because it offers an educational perspective and, because it is an educational perspective, it is a "practical" science concerned with problems of what should be done rather than a theoretical science concerned with what is the case. It is also an educational science in the sense that it is itself an educative process designed to produce that kind of reflective knowledge which education itself aims to cultivate and promote.

Q.4 The ways in which you use the related concepts of "self-reflection" and "critique" are very close to the ways they are used in Habermas' theory of emancipatory interest. These concepts are for us, the foundation of an enlightened view of

education. What, for you, are "self-reflection" and "critique" in an educational context?

A.4 You are quite correct to emphasise the centrality of the concepts of self-reflection and critique to my philosophical arguments and also that these arguments are heavily influenced by Habermas' theory of knowledge constitutive human interests[3]. However, the starting point for my use of these concepts is, once again, my recognition of the adverse consequences of positivism for educational theory and research. One consequence of positivism's insistence that only "neutral" facts can provide a foundation for valid scientific knowledge has been to relieve us of any obligation to think critically about the origins of our existing beliefs and practices. Because of this, the self-knowledge we acquire by reflecting on the social and ideological roots of our existing beliefs and practices is denied any epistemological validity. What Habermas' theory of "knowledge-constitutive interests" provides is a philosophical justification for "emancipatory knowledge" - a form of reflectively acquired self-knowledge which "enlightens" individuals about the origins and ideological purposes of their existing beliefs and actions. The method outlined by Habermas for producing this kind of knowledge is the method of *ideology-critique* - a method which encourages individuals to consider the rationality of their beliefs and actions in a broad social and historical context and to explore the source of their irrationality in the ideological context out of which they emerged.

In an educational context, this foreshadows the emergence of an educational science which produces that form of self-knowledge which can emancipate teachers from the irrational beliefs and misunderstandings that they have inherited from custom, tradition, habit and ideology. By using the method of critique, educational practitioners would be able to acquire greater self-knowledge which would help them to resolve some of the contradictions they experience in their work.

Q.5 We think that the concepts of self-reflection and critique demand a general frame of values to be used as a reference. What is this frame of values? What is its theoretical status? Could you explicate its normative foundations?

A.5 Of course the notions of self-reflection and critique require a normative framework and the framework I have outlined draws on the Aristotelian theory of practical reasoning as ethically informed reasoning. How can this kind of practical reasoning be philosophically justified? Although the justification I have tried to elaborate draws on the work of Jürgen Habermas it is also much influenced by the work of the British educational philosopher R.S. Peters. For Peters, the ethical basis of the educational aim of rational autonomy can be justified by an analysis of the *a priori* presuppositions of ordinary practical discourse. What such an analysis reveals is that in the very act of engaging in discourse about practical questions, we thereby reveal our commitment to the educational aim of rational autonomy and to the values of freedom, equality, tolerance and respect for others which are constitutive of the rational life. These are the aims and values in terms of which an educational *science* is epistemologically justified, because they are the aims and values which an *educational* science seeks to foster and promote.

Q.6 When we read your philosophical work we think immediately of teachers critically reflecting on their practices and the conditions under which they practice. Is this a correct interpretation? If so, how do you see a teacher becoming critically engaged in educational practice?

A.6 Yes your interpretation is correct. In *Becoming Critical: Education Knowledge and Action Research*, which I wrote with Stephen Kemmis [4], we try to show that one concrete way in which teachers can become critically engaged in their practice is by using the methods and procedures of action research. It needs to be stressed however, that the ways in which action research is now being used with teachers often displays many positivist elements. In particular, much educational action research employs technical interpretations of the concepts of "self-reflection" and "critique" which completely fail to appreciate their central meaning and importance for reconstructing action research as a form of critical educational science[5].

Q.7 What are the consequences of this for the organisation and conduct of teacher education?

A.7 There are in my view, many such consequences, but I would like to stress two. One obvious implication is of the need to reconstruct teacher education in terms of the concepts and language of praxis. Within teacher education, at present, theorising is something that is done in isolation from practice and which then has to be "implemented in" or "applied" to practice. Similarly, educational practice is treated as some kind of non-theorised performance to which theory

can somehow be attached. One of the aims of my work is to support an approach to teacher education which treats theory and practice as dialectically related so that each informs, and is informed, by the other. In such an approach, teachers would theorise their practice by reflecting critically on their understanding of their practice and the circumstances in which these practices are embedded. Similarly they would practice in ways which were informed by their general educational values and theoretical principles. In this kind of teacher education, theorizing and practising would not be two separate activities but mutually constitutive elements in a continuous dialectical reconstruction of thought and action[6].

Another implication concerns the conception of professionalism that should inform teacher education. In many teacher education programmes it is assumed that the professionalism of teachers derives from their expertise and skill in applying theoretical knowledge to the everyday problems of teaching. What I would want to argue, however, is that teachers' professionalism derives from the fact that they "profess" educational values and practice under a professional obligation to promote these values in their work. If teacher professionalism is understood in this way, teacher education would necessarily portray teaching as a practical art of translating abstract educational values into concrete educational practice. And it would unavoidably be concerned with helping teachers to confront the numerous non-educational pressures and non-professional constraints which undermine their work as professional educators[7].

Q.8 In recent years, we have seen an increased use of Habermas' work in educational contexts, not only in terms of epistemological issues but also in terms of the ethical foundations of moral education, in social and political theories of adult education and in critical pedagogy. We are, therefore, interested in your own view of the importance of Habermas' work and about the ways in which this is now being received in education. In what context do you see the importance of Habermas' work? What are the educational problems to which it is addressed? What purposes does it serve?

A.8 As your question makes clear, critical theory in general, and Habermas' work in particular, are now beginning to penetrate various areas of education. However, in my view, some of the ways in which this is being done are rather disturbing. For example, some educational sociologists have simply equated critical theory with Marxist sociology - even though the intentions of critical theory are to overcome the uncompromising determinism of orthodox Marxism and to provide space for the role of reflexivity and human agency in the process of practical change. But a more serious way in which Habermas' work is being misrepresented by educational theorists and researchers concern the efforts that are made to "apply" his critical theory to educational practice - even though the view of critical theory as something to be "applied" to practice is one of the positivist assumptions that Habermas' goes to some length to reject.

I would argue that the real educational significance of Habermas' work is not that it provides a *source* of "theory" to be applied to various aspects of education such as moral education or adult education. Rather it provides us with intellectual *resources* - concepts, ideas, arguments, insights and the like - which we can reflectively and critically appropriate in order to address fundamental educational issues and concerns. As my answers to some of the previous questions should make clear, the ideas and arguments of Habermas which I regard as having the greatest significance are his idea of, and arguments for, a "critical social science" - a science which as Habermas puts it "has practical intent": Habermas' argument is particularly compelling for education because it replaces the elitism and authoritarianism inherent in the epistemological foundations of a positivist educational science with an epistemological form of justification based on the principles of democratic discourse and debate[8].

Q.9 We think that we can go along with the main normative concepts of your work: democracy and autonomy. Should we understand these concepts in the context of Habermas' theory of Communicative Action? How do these concepts modify or extend the British tradition of the philosophy of education?

A.9 When I first read Habermas' theory of Communicative Action, and in particular, his argument that rational discourse requires a democratically organised form of social life, I was immediately reminded of R.S. Peters' book, *Ethics and Education*[9]. In this, Peters argued that education was intrinsically related to the ideals of rational autonomy and the democratic form of social life which it presupposed. Like Habermas, Peters pursued this argument by using a transcendental argument which makes explicit how a commitment to individual autonomy and a

democratic society is itself presupposed by the very act of engaging in ordinary practical discourse.

When read together, Habermas and Peters' philosophical arguments have several important consequences. In the first place, they make it abundantly clear that the educational aim of developing individual autonomy and the political aim of creating more democratic forms of social life are not two independent aims: they are interdependent and closely interrelated. Second, locating the work of R.S. Peters within the context of the philosophical project of Habermas, enables us to reinterpret Peters' philosophy as a modern exposition of the classical view of education as an essentially humanising and liberating process: "humanising" in that it is the process of developing the essential human capacity for enlightened rational thought; "liberating" because, through this process of rational enlightenment, individuals can begin to emancipate themselves from the dictates of ignorance, habit and tradition and bring their lives under greater rational self-control.

An important consequence of this re-interpretation of Peters, work is that it requires us to reconsider our understanding of the analytic tradition of philosophy of education within which Peters' work is usually located[10]. Within this tradition, education is treated in a largely a-social and unhistorical way, so that the analysis of educational concepts often proceeds without any reference to their historical origins or to the social context in which they are embedded. In my view, this limitation can only be overcome if the British tradition of philosophy of education is modified and extended so as to accommodate more dialectical methods of philosophical enquiry. Only by doing this can the philosophy of education resist the temptation to interpret education as a timeless and universal concept and instead recognise that education is a culturally-embedded and historically-located social practice which can only be adequately analyzed by recognising its constitutive relationship to the particular forms of social life by which it is produced and which it, itself, serves to create and sustain.

Notes

(1)See, in particular, Gadamer (1981).

(2)For a detailed discussion of the post-empiricist philosophy of science see Hesse (1980).

(3)Habermas (1972).

(4)Carr and Kemmis (1986).

(5)I have made this criticism in more detail in Carr (1989a).

(6)This approach to teacher education is discussed in an American context by Beyer (1988). See also Carr (1989b).

(7)For an elaboration of this view of teacher professionalism, see Carr (1989c).

(8)I have described this view of the relationship between critical theory and educational studies in Carr (1987).

(9)Peters (1966).

(10)I try to do this in Carr (1986).

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