The Philosophy of Education and the Social Nature of Human Knowledge

La filosofía de la educación y la naturaleza social del conocimiento humano

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Resumen:

Podría decirse que la filosofía de la educación está peor considerada y es menos apreciada que cualquier otra disciplina filosófica. Este artículo analiza críticamente el destacado intento por superar este impasse realizado por el filósofo inglés Wilfred Carr. Él anima a que la disciplina tome una nueva forma de carácter distinto al de disciplina académica. Sin embargo se indica, en contra de Carr, que la naturaleza social y educativa del conocimiento constituye la pieza central de la investigación filosófica acerca del conocimiento humano.

Palabras clave: La relación entre filosofía y educación, Wilfred Carr, filosofía práctica, postfundacionalismo, segunda naturaleza, receptividad a las razones.

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Abstract:

Arguably the philosophy of education is less well regarded and appreciated than any other philosophical discipline. This paper critically analyses one salient attempt to overcome this impasse made by the English philosopher of education Wilfred Carr. He urges that the discipline take a new shape which is different in character from academic discipline. It is intimated, contra Carr, however, that the social and educational nature of knowledge forms the centrepiece of philosophical enquiry into human knowledge.

Keywords: The relation between philosophy and education, Wilfred Carr, practical philosophy, postfoundationalism, second nature, responsiveness to reasons.

1. Introduction

It is possible to identify a tension within the very phrase 'philosophy of education', namely, between the activity of questioning received knowledge and the activity of transmitting knowledge. This sort of commonsense (and stereotypical) understanding of philosophy and education may be partly responsible for their meagre interaction, which is widely felt not just by ordinary people but also by academic philosophers, especially in the Anglophone analytical tradition.[2] Accordingly the predicament the philosophy of education faces is its lacking of the appropriate impact on educational practices and its scholarly insularity from the rest of the philosophical disciplines. What makes general philosophers think they have little to say about education, however, seems not so much on account of philosophical reasons but rather for sociological reasons: e.g. the topology of the philosophy of education (it is generally conducted, unlike many other branches of philosophy, in Schools or Faculties of Education) and the fact that "most philosophers of education have the goal…of contributing not to philosophy but to educational policy and practice" and thus they, unlike their "pure cousins", "publish not in philosophy journals but in a wide range of professionally-oriented journals".[3] One conspicuous recent tendency in the discourse of the gap between mainstream philosophy and the philosophy of education is to warn us against an "over-philosophication"[4] or an "overintellectual myth"[5] of educational theory. This tendency amounts to Wilfred Carr's "'dephilosophised' or 'postphilosophical'

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[2] Harvey Siegel writes: "[P]hilosophy of education has not always been regarded by contemporary philosophers as important, or even a legitimate, area of philosophy [with notable exceptions]", Siegel, H., Truth, Thinking, Testimony and Trust: Alvin Goldman on Epistemology and Education, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 71(2), 2005, pp. 345-366, at p. 345. David Bakhurst states: "The philosophy of education is perhaps the least distinguished of all the established sub-disciplines of philosophy. …The field is rarely considered a necessary ingredient of a serious philosophy curriculum", Bakhurst, D., Il'enkov on Education, *Studies in East European Thought*, 57(4), 2005, Dordrecht, p. 261.

[3] Phillips, D. C., Philosophy of Education, *the on-line Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (SEP), 2008: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/education-philosophy/.

[4] Rorty, R., The Dangers of Over-Philosophication—Reply to Arcilla and Nicholson, *Educational Theory*, 40(1), 1990, p. 41.

[5] Hirst, P. H., The Demands of Professional Practice and Preparation for Teaching, in J. Furlong and R. Smith, R. (eds) *The Role of Higher Education in Initial Teacher Training*, London, Kogan Page, 1996, p. 169.

educational strategy",[6] namely, his call to disburden the philosophy of education from being "an autonomous sub-area within academic philosophy".[7] I applaud Carr's dissatisfaction with the insulation of philosophy from education and agree with some of his leitmotifs, and yet, I cannot resist the temptation to argue that his discourse ends up being incoherent on closer examination. Thus, my main aim in this paper is to urge that the fear of the isolation of philosophy from education can be reduced in a way that is different from that of Carr's. That is, the fear can be defused not by disclaiming the philosophy of education's burden of responsibility for academic philosophy but by properly recognising the nature of human knowledge as essentially bound up and shot through with issues pertaining to education. This is not to suggest that the discipline finds a new niche in the philosophy business but rather to suggest that such educational dimensions should form the centrepiece of the philosophical enquiry into human knowledge.

2. Carr's Criticism of the Educational Theory Project

What is particularly notable about Carr's line of thinking is a complex mix of his hankering after the Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy and his heavy reliance on what he calls "postfoundationalism".[8] (The recent influence of neo-Aristotelianism on work in the philosophy of education is noteworthy. This is to indicate that the philosophy of education, in drawing on notions like practical reason and practical judgement, reflects the trend for philosophical work in the tradition of practical philosophy.) Carr's basic presumptions are that "what we now call 'educational theory' is deeply rooted in the foundationalist discourse of late nineteenth and early twentieth century modernity"[9] which is merely a reflection of the Enlightenment values and ideals and that we now live in a *post-modern* world insofar as the fundamental conditions underlying the modern Enlightenment period have come to lose much of their force. Carr thus claims: "It is quite bearable to give up on the notion of certainty espoused in the Cartesian view of rationality, or on the idea that there are logical 'foundations' to which philosophical appeal can be made, or on the idea that a *positive* science or philosophy can yield human progress…".[10] This thread of thought leads Carr to his highly controversial idea of "education without theory". In Carr's view, "theory" is to be abandoned precisely because it cannot be disentangled from its own particularities and contingencies and thus cannot take a vantage point from which to inform practice as the modern project of educational theory promises.

There has surely been disillusionment with the idea that (educational) theory can inform (educational) practice and furthermore there is nothing wrong with Carr's insistence that theorising is itself a form of practice.[11] Nonetheless, it seems tempting to raise questions as to whether Carr smoothly combines an appreciation of some Aristotelian notions like practical reason with an employment of postfoundationalism. More specifically, the way Carr presents his ideas, I argue, collapses his own helpful awareness of the culturally, historically contingent context that has placed "educational theory" where it is, and rather opens him to the charge of sheer relativism.

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[6] Carr, W., Education and Democracy: Confronting the Postmodernist Challenge, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 29(1), 1995, p. 89.

[7] Carr. W., Philosophy and Education, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 38(1), 2004, p. 60.

[8] Carr, W., Education without Theory, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 54(2), 2006, p. 147.

[9] Ibid., p. 136.

[10] Carr, W. and Kemmis, S., Staying Critical, *Educational Action Research*, 13(3), 2005, p. 354, italics in original.

[11] Carr, Education without Theory, op. cit., p. 147.

It will help here to take up the dispute between Carr and Siegel[12] over Carr's locution. Siegel points out that Carr relies on the very notions that he himself purports to reject. For example, Carr uses the prohibited tactics, in declaring that "rationality is *always relative* to time and place".[13] If Carr is right, this assertion itself, Siegel maintains, has to be *relative*. That is: (i) if the very sentence is really relative, then the sentence does not deserve special attention; (ii) if the very sentence is not relative, then the sentence betrays its content, since the sentence is *absolute*. In reply, Carr responds that "[p]ostfoundationalism can... without contradiction, include its own thesis within its own scope",[14] for "postfoundationalism is not an epistemological thesis that 'rejects the possibility of objective knowledge' but an explanatory thesis about how objective knowledge emerges".[15] The thesis that no discourse can be justified from outside any local practices of justification is unproblematic, but the trouble comes in if Carr is unaware (and I think he is) of the limits of the so-called genealogical enquiry to which he seems to commit himself in the above remark. That is, Carr often seems to offer his discourse not as explanatory thesis but as an "epistemological" thesis that there is no such thing as objective knowledge. A warning flag for espousers of genealogical enquiry is this: If it is impossible to reach objective knowledge due to historically, culturally embedded contingent factors and interests such as power or class that place constraints on our looking at the world, then, it follows, by the very same token, that it is *also* impossible to reach knowledge of such contingent factors and interests as such.[16] This is to indicate that, if we are to do full justice to Carr's discourse, his "explanatory thesis about how objective knowledge emerges" *cannot*, contrary to his project,[17] offer another *more* legitimate alternative to a view or system it is criticising, even if it could unpack the lack of the "legitimacy" of the presently dominant view or system. In brief, genealogists and strong contextualists *can never* occupy a neutral, transcendental point of view precisely because, *à la* Carr, they are carrying out enquiry from a specific perspective that is already embedded in countless interests and concerns.

What brings out certain essential features of Carr's thinking is his motive for avoiding *justifying* the plausibility of his discourse. For instance, in the final paragraph of his "Education without Theory", he says: "Although I have argued that it [the educational theory project] should [be abandoned], I have carefully resisted any suggestion that this is a recommendation that is 'justified by' or 'follows from' my argument".[18] Note that this goes further beyond the insistence of the "post-analytical" philosophy such as Richard Rorty's view on which Carr heavily draws, one that we can discard the vocabulary of objectivity in

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[12] Siegel's view stands in stark contrast to Carr's in the sense that Siegel takes modernist, Enlightenment epistemology to be still useful and necessary and so raises suspicion of Carr's line of thinking.

[13] Siegel, H., Knowledge, Truth and Education, in Carr, D. (ed.) *Education, Knowledge and Truth: Beyond the Postmodern Impasse*. 1998, London, Routledge, p. 31, italics added by Siegel.

[14] Carr, Education without Theory, op. cit., p. 152.

[15] Ibid., p. 151.

[16] Frederick Schmitt duly makes this point, in a slightly different but surely relevant context. He responds to the pressure to abandon scientific knowledge insofar as social, political factors and interests should be taken into account in the consideration of scientific knowledge, claiming: "One might be tempted, after reaching skepticism, to give up on rationality and epistemic evaluation altogether and turn to social and political criticism of science instead. But I can see no way to make this approach coherent. If interests prevent us from getting straight about electrons, they will also prevent us from getting straight about interests" (Schmitt, F. F., Socializing Epistemology: An Introduction through Two Sample Issues, in F. F. Schmitt (ed.) *Socializing Epistemology: The Social Dimensions of Knowledge*, 1994, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, p. 26, my italics).

[17] The rational for his "education without theory" is predicated on his aspiration to "[produce] an alternative history of the philosophy of education to that which currently exists" (Carr, Philosophy and Education, op. cit., p. 55).

[18] Carr, W., Education without Theory, op. cit., p. 156.

favour of a social practice of conversation—*"the practice of justifying* one's assertions to one's fellow-humans".[19] What underlies Carr's phobia of justification is his own understanding of the Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy.

3. The Interpenetration of Theory and Practice

A reinvigorated awareness of Aristotelian practical philosophy, Carr asserts, involves a radical demand that "theoretical justification" should be replaced by "practical justification", for the latter justification is "the only kind there is".[20] I have no quarrel with the resurrection of Aristotelian practical philosophy to the extent that it is a significant corrective to the excesses in the overly theoretical approach of modern philosophy to social practices like education. In this regard, I do not deny Carr's endorsed "non-theoretical forms of reflective philosophy"[21] that never has "the aspiration to create a body of educational theory that can inform and guide educational practice"[22] but instead which "enables each generation of practitioners to make progress in achieving excellence in their practice and, by so doing, ensure that the tradition constitutive of their practice continues to develop and evolve".[23] Yet, nonetheless, it does seem that Carr's interpretation misses the point of Aristotelian practical philosophy.

Carr's discourse gives an inkling that he fails to acknowledge that practice as such does not speak by itself, as it were. Accordingly, he does not appear to have a proper appreciation of the other side of the same coin: namely, that theory as such is not a copy or representation of mind-independent objects or phenomena. In other words, a practice in itself by no means presents itself to us as the practice we understand and deal with—i.e. practice is *not* self-explanatory. Put the other way round, it is our history of conceptual commitments to practices that makes them deserve to count as a practice and thus practices are humanly-perceived states of affairs that make no sense to any other living beings and which never exist anywhere in the "natural" world. In this important sense, theory and practice are interconnected and go in tandem. This is the gist of what I mean by "practice as such does not speak by itself". To put it in a somewhat provocative way, there exists neither "pure" theory nor "pure" practice. As Carr rightly claims, what theories we obtain is largely a matter of contingency. For what becomes the content of our knowledge never automatically springs to mind from what exists independently of us but (at least partly) depends on how we organise our enquiry into it in particular and on our mode of life in general. Therefore a future unified theory of all the elementary particles, for instance, might alter our practices such as dealing with particular objects. It is probably a fair criticism that Carr's dismissive attitude towards theory in favour of the internally self-justifying character of practice does not take in stride this possibility, namely that theory and practice go hand in hand.

To put this in a slightly different way, what seems missing in Carr's picture is an appreciation of the most basic conditions of human knowledge that make the theory-practice distinction possible at all and which, more generally, operate both as a promise and the conclusion of our intellectual activity. The fact is that behind a practice lie a wide range

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[19] Rorty, R., Introduction, in W. Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, *R. Brandom, study guide*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 4.
[20] Carr, Education without Theory, op. cit., pp. 155-6.
[21] Carr, Philosophy and Education, op. cit., p. 67.
[22] Carr, Education without Theory, op. cit., p. 155
[23] Carr, Philosophy and Education, op. cit., p. 63

of inferences a person can make as well as other practices she ought to know as a condition for conducting that particular practice. This is precisely the way we live in the world as intellectual, sentient beings—as if we stood both within and outside our particular social practices at one and the same time. The major insight here is that the place we human beings live in is, from the very beginning, the world of such a tapestry of theory and practice, not the environment that non-human living beings may perceive by their imperative biological forces. The world I am trying to delineate here has much affinity with what Wilfrid Sellars calls "the logical space of reasons"[24] and what John McDowell dubs the world of "second nature".[25] Along these lines, it is not far from the truth to say that to live *qua* humans, we need to be *socialised* into the world filled with meanings and sentience which are unique to human beings.

A trivial but telling example of *artefacts* may serve to illustrate this point. This present world is filled with artefacts and our daily life, whatever it is, go hand in hand with those artefacts. This means that human beings in no ways live in a simply "natural" environment (which would appear if all humans and accordingly all artefacts magically disappeared). The decisive difference between artefacts and natural kinds is that artefacts are, from the outset, "embodiments of meaning and purpose".[26] It should not be taken, however, to imply that meanings and purposes are fixed and absolute. A part of what makes the human species special is the capacity to create new artefacts one after another and change the meanings and purposes of the existing artefacts—i.e. we can change the ways we are involved in those artefacts. Changes in artefacts do not cause a change in the most basic physical structure of the world such as natural laws[27] but can be relevant to our understanding of, and dealings with, the world. For, first, artefacts, explicitly or implicitly, carry meaning and purpose; second, (new) artefacts might change how things strike us—e.g. the invention of X-ray made it possible for humans to observe what we could not observe before. In short, artefacts and how we live are deeply entangled with each other.

The moral to be drawn from the line of thinking thus far is that the place we inhabit is essentially a *social* world. The deepest sense of "social" resides in the process through which humans as part of the biological species (e.g. as newborn babies) become humans as intellectual and sentient beings. This sense of "social" is prior to the relative difference in the standards of knowledge among societies to which Carr evokes sensitivity. In other words, human animals become a human being as a properly socialised individual. This educational process is precisely the point which the Cartesian brand of individualist epistemology falls short of recognising. To know something essentially requires being a member of a social world.

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[24] Sellars, op. cit.

[25] McDowell, J., *Mind and World*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1996.

[26] Bakhurst, D. Minds, Brains and Education, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 42(3-4), 2008, p. 427. Bakhurst's account is illustrative: "[T]o interact with the artefactual is to engage in activities that are not just elicited by circumstance but mediated by meaning. So the child enters the human world, the world of meaning" (Ibid., p. 426). It is to be noted, however, that natural kinds, if any, such as gold would be unintelligible to us human beings were it not for our conceptual commitments to them.

[27] For instance, the brightest physicist would not be able to break the law of gravity.

4. The Social Character of Responsiveness to Reasons

Insofar as the idea that theory can take a vantage point and inform practice from that point has now been discredited, it is a step forward, as Carr does, to raise awareness of particularities and contingencies that have placed a particular theory where it is. However, we must not miss the forest for the trees. A toxic by-product of Carr's discourse is that he seems to lose sight of the most fundamental sense of 'social', thereby making his discourse look along the lines of utter relativism. The most basic sense of "social", as mentioned above, underlies differences among societies, for living *qua* a human requires us to be a social being rather than simply a genetic, biological creature and this is achieved through initiation into what Robert Brandom calls "social practices of giving and asking for reasons".[28] The capacity to be responsive to reasons in unbelievably complex ways makes the life of the human species as a whole radically different from that of other, i.e. non-human, living beings. Premised on this essentially social character of the ability to respond to reasons, we can, in varying degrees, depending on the motivation and imagination we have, communicate with one another, even if people live in different cultures, using different languages. This is in marked contrast to the case in which, for example, zoologists attempt to (one-sidedly rather than mutually) interpret the life of bats by appeal to anthropomorphism. In other words, the world of human beings as a community of thinking and minded beings is of an essentially social nature—"social" in a uniquely human way.

The insight that the deepest nature of human uniqueness lies in the sociality of responsiveness to humanly-perceived reasons opens our eyes to the *educational* nature of human knowledge. For, the world of second nature or the game of giving and asking for reasons has no final word that is predestined or can be legitimated from outside of our world, but instead it is always in some way in process and flux. At the core of those processes lies education in a broad sense. This is to intimate to us that there is no need to follow Carr in rethinking the nature of the philosophy of education. He makes as if the philosophy of education is different in character from academic philosophy and it is to be best understood and developed as "practical philosophy". In contrast, the perspective I have been urging, I hope, begins to articulate that educational aspects, broadly understood, are the core, if not the whole, of human knowledge. This view pursued here, if taken seriously, encourages us to see the traditional outlook towards the relation between philosophy and education differently. Paul Standish convincingly adverts to this point: "[F]orms of enquiry central to philosophy (into ethics, epistemology and metaphysics) themselves necessarily incorporate questions about learning and teaching: they ask questions not only about the nature of the good (for the individual and for society), but also about *how we become* virtuous; and not only about the nature of knowledge, but also about *how it is acquired.* In other words, these essentially educational questions of teaching and learning are not external matters to which the philosophy is applied, but internal to philosophy itself"[29].

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[28] Brandom, R, B., *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing and Discursive Commitment*, Cambridge, Harvard university press, 1994, p. xiv.

[29] Standish, P., Rival Conceptions of the Philosophy of Education, *Ethics and Education*, 2(2), 2007, London-New York, Taylor & Francispp, p. 162, italics in original. Standish is not alone in making this point. See, for example, Bakhurst's "Il'enkov on Education", op. cit.

The way out of the neglect of the philosophy of education begins with the realisation that the real task of philosophical enquiry into knowledge is to cast light on its "social" character in the sense I have been delineating and on its inevitable implications for the educational dimensions inherent in it. As Carr rightly sees things, there is no occupying a neutral ground in the world we live in. This reminds us that our world is not a simply "natural" environment that can exhaustively be explained in natural-scientific terms but rather a social world that imposes a requirement for there to be reasons unique to human beings. We cannot wipe away these reasons that are embodied and repositted in various forms as the legacy of human history but this by no means implies that such reasons and the ways we respond to them are absolute or fixed. It is instead brought to the forefront of our minds that at the heart of the world we live in, there lie ongoing processes. The full recognition of this point will bring a new tone to the philosophical study of education in particular and of human knowledge and development more generally[30].