

GETTING ONE'S HANDS DIRTY; OR, PRACTISING WHAT YOU TEACH

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Brian Patrick Hendley. *Dewey, Russell, Whitehead: Philosophers as Educators*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois U. P., 1986. Pp. xxi, 177. US\$19.95; paper \$9.95.

Brian Hendley's book is more than a well-written account of three eminent philosophers who wrote about and participated in educational theory and reform. The author has in fact selected Dewey, Russell and Whitehead as three stallions to draw a chariot. The precise nature of this "chariot" is indicated in the chapter entitled "The Philosopher as Educator Today" appearing at the end of the book:

My intention throughout has been to suggest a way out of the current impasse in the philosophy of education by reopening a conversation regarding a more productive role for philosophers to play, rather than merely analyzing concepts and policing arguments. My claim has been that philosophers of education can learn from their past, that we can see in Dewey, Russell and Whitehead instances of a productive approach to educational problems through thought and action. (P. 105)

Having said this, the structure and contents of Hendley's book fall squarely into place. Chapter One, entitled "The Reconstruction of the Philosophy of Education", argues that there is a crisis in the current state of educational philosophy. The ensuing three chapters are devoted individually to Dewey, Russell and Whitehead. The concluding chapter, resting upon the strength of the examples given of three constructive contributors to the field, suggests new directions for the philosophy of education.

It is clear that Hendley's book is more than an interesting account of the practical and theoretical educational activities of three of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. Dewey, Russell and Whitehead are not gathered together between the same covers in order to explore or present a detailed analysis of their theoretical similarities or who may have influenced

whom. Instead, one gathers that the author has selected them on the basis of his own admiration and preference rather than for any shared theories which connect them. The point is made, however, that the strongest common element, and the most significant one, is that each man had ideas about education, each was a philosopher, and each attempted to exert some practical influence upon the educational institutions and practices of the day. In short, Dewey, Russell and Whitehead were theorists who were prepared to get their hands dirty.

Hendley argues that after the death of John Dewey in 1952 educational philosophy was neglected and philosophers tended to pay less attention to education. The author goes on to suggest some renewed interest in the field on the grounds of contributions made to the fifty-fourth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education in 1955 under the theme "Modern Philosophies and Education", a special issue of the *Harvard Education Review* published in 1956; the publication of Israel Scheffler's edited collection of readings entitled *Philosophy and Education* in 1958; and R. S. Peters' Inaugural Address given at London in 1963, and his publication of *Ethics and Education* in 1966. According to this argument, we witness a general lapse after the death of Dewey, a rekindling in the mid-1950s and a broader resurgence in the 1960s.

On the basis of the author's own account, I think that it is very difficult to argue that Dewey's death initiated any period of calm or disinterestedness. Furthermore, it is very problematic to point to various yearbooks or publications as indicators. The point is that with the death of Dewey there were numerous contenders to fill his position as the pre-eminent American philosopher of education. The extent to which anyone has been able to do so is a different matter. What I believe Hendley is really trying to say here is implicit in his argument, namely, that after the death of Dewey, no philosopher of equal stature took his place. The reason why no candidate equal to the task emerged is also suggested by the author. Dewey, Russell and Whitehead are to be admired because they had the courage and vision to create in their own minds a coherent ideal of society and the kind of person that an educational system should attempt to produce in order to bring about that state of society. The author indicates that whereas he feels that these are admirable traits, the intellectual climate of the last forty years has been such as to severely criticize any newcomers issuing forth with such prescriptive judgments and forceful viewpoints.

One of Hendley's fundamental arguments is that there is a crisis in educational philosophy, a crisis that has resulted in a divorce of action from theory and analysis from synthesis. He is highly critical of R. S. Peters as having contributed to this problem through the creation of a legalistic mentality

devoid of action and focused upon the letter of the law rather than its spirit. An exhaustive analysis of words, concepts, definitions and meanings has left behind it no legacy of action. I would liken Peters' movement to soldiers who were drilling and training for an action that never comes and being told each day that as soon as they were fit and ready they would go to the front. Since they were never fit enough, they never went to fight, and after many years had passed they started to feel that there was no battle worth fighting in the first place and it was actually quite comfortable where they were.

Although I am in agreement with the observation that there is a crisis in the current state of educational philosophy, I cannot help but think that this crisis is part of a larger crisis afflicting philosophy itself and that both crises are part of a general crisis characteristic of modern society. In this regard, it is easy to overlook the fact that in dealing with such thinkers as Dewey, Russell and Whitehead within the context of twentieth-century thought, we are presented with men whose formative years date back to the Victorian era. Each of them had at least one whole foot in the nineteenth century and, it could be argued, a number of the toes on the remaining foot belonged there as well. This is not meant as an indictment of any sort. Dewey, Russell and Whitehead emerged from an era in which individualism was arguably more prevalent than it is today and in which there was less reserve about making prescriptive statements about how other people should behave and what kinds of values, characteristics and attitudes they should possess. These three could be described as aristocratic liberals who were convinced of the values of civilization and who held those values as absolute. Each of them had a sense of mission that education has as its purpose the elevation of the individual to standards that are not themselves held in question. Further, the purpose of education goes beyond meeting the immediate needs of society by aiming to elevate the individual to a level of civilized activity and awareness that would draw society forward.

As the reader will gather, I find myself to be fundamentally in sympathy and agreement with Brian Hendley's thesis as well as with his selection of admirable individuals who should be emulated. However, I do disagree with him as to the nature of the crisis and its causes. We can admire such men as Dewey, Russell and Whitehead, but it is also quite clear that it would be difficult to emulate them in the context of our existing society and its attitudes. Contemporary society is pulling itself apart in so many directions at once that no comprehensive viewpoint can be put forward without evoking criticism from all quarters. Coherency has become a thing of the past, and it is every day more apparent that more people are convinced of what is not the case rather than what is the case. I am reminded of Francis Bacon's essay "Of Truth" in which he states:

What is Truth; said jesting Pilate; And would not stay for an Answer. Certainly there be, that delight in Giddiness; And count it a Bondage, to fix a Beleefe; Affecting Freewill in Thinking, as well as in Acting. And though the Sects of Philosophers of that Kinde be gone, yet there remaine certaine discoursing Wits, which are of the same veines, though there be not so much Bloud in them, as was in those of the Ancients.¹

What we are confronted with is a simple case of a thinning of the "blood" and a prevalent desire to avoid any restrictions upon personal behaviour and advantage that might arise, should beliefs and ideals once again become fashionable.

Educational philosophy faces a crisis because there is no consensus on priorities and values. The practical application of educational philosophy within the state system is confronted by the various pressures of vocal and even militant interest groups who would rather see nothing done than see any policies enacted that they perceive as limiting their own power. An example of this kind of behaviour comes to mind with respect to recent attempts to introduce the teaching of moral values within the Ontario School Curriculum. Considerable thought and preparation went into planning how this could be done, and plans were drawn up which would no doubt have yielded some success. However, the main problem was in gaining consensus on their introduction. As it turned out, organized religious groups within the province were opposed to the idea because they felt that any attempt to teach morality without a definite religious context might threaten the power of the church. To teach morality without religion was regarded as laying the foundations for the erosion of the power of organized religion and opening the door for secular involvement in matters properly determined by the church. Those of liberal sentiment, atheists and agnostics, also viewed the proposal with suspicion, for they feared that moral education amounted to moral indoctrination. The result was that the project died before any progress could be made. In this matter, we have an example of how the various forces at work can and will inhibit any action that may lead to progress. Not one critic expressed the opinion that it was undesirable for young people to have moral values developed, but fear and suspicion inhibited any concrete action.

The crisis in educational theory is not a contained intellectual crisis but rather a social-*cum*-intellectual crisis in which the implications extend beyond educational philosophy and philosophy itself.

In regard to Hendley's chapter devoted to Russell and Beacon Hill School,

¹ Francis Bacon, *Bacon's Essays and Colours of Good and Evil*, ed. W. Aldis Wright (London and New York: Macmillan, 1892), p. 1.

the author has produced a very readable and informative account that establishes a comprehensive overview of Russell's views on education and the manner in which he attempted in one instance to put them into practice. Hendley introduces some insights and information that would be of value to anyone who had made an in-depth study. My main point of contention is that all writers on the subject of Russell's educational views have tended to underestimate or neglect entirely the extent to which his early interest in education resulted from an intense feeling of dissatisfaction with his own upbringing. One of the conclusions of my own study of Russell and Beacon Hill was that in many ways it seemed that he wanted to recreate at that school all of the best elements of his own education while eliminating those aspects that had caused him to be unhappy.

The question of whether Beacon Hill School was a failure is addressed by Hendley with considerable skill. I have personally come to the conclusion that the answer to this question depends entirely upon how it is approached. Financially, the school was, without doubt, an abject failure. From Russell's personal point of view, I believe that it was a failure in so far as it was inextricably bound up with his failed marriage to Dora Russell and the ensuing bitterness that arose during the divorce. Moreover, Russell had hoped that the school would provide an ideal environment for his own children, and he was sensitive to the fact that the school had created considerable tensions and hardships for John and Kate due to the artificial distance that he had to maintain as headmaster of the school.

Hendley makes reference to the important dynamic between theory and practice and how a type of developmental process can be derived from the two working in conjunction with each other. Without disagreeing with this point, the only area of which I am aware in which Russell was forced to rethink some of his original positions was in the matter of the children's behaviour on the playground. I have no doubt that he was genuinely shocked by what he regarded as the brutality and intolerance of children. As a result, he became convinced of the need for more adult intervention so that the weaker children could be protected from the bullies. When we recall Russell's own exposure to other children during his own early childhood, it is perhaps less surprising that he should have underestimated the brutality of small children towards each other. After all, as a lonely child, he had longed for the company of other children and had never been exposed to any of the drawbacks that might have arisen from this, had his wish been granted.

Hendley makes several other pertinent points in this chapter which I have had cause to assess independently over the past ten years of operating a private school myself. The first of these is that there is a tendency for those with theories that they wish to put into practice to regard their teaching staff

merely as tools to carry out their will. An inevitable tension then arises between the headmaster or administrator and the fundamental professional autonomy of the teaching staff. The author perceptively indicates a tension between the theoretical considerations that allowed Russell to promote a free environment for students, and the restrictions placed upon the staff as to how they should teach and behave.

Hendley is equally accurate in stressing the "aristocratic" presuppositions that permeated Russell's thoughts and actions. But how pleasant it is to see an educated man's ego and prejudices so readily exposed, instead of being hidden beneath a formidable heap of apparent humility and objectivity. One of the great delights of reading Macaulay and Gibbon is that their prejudices are so explicitly presented and eloquently phrased. Much of modern historiography takes the form of ploughing through apparently objective presentations by men who wish to cling to the pretence that the facts suggested the theory that unifies them. If a man can be respected for his choice of enemies, he can also be respected for his choice of prejudices.

Hendley's book is an eloquent attempt to stimulate a renewed vitality in educational philosophy through the just appreciation of what is great in great men and to overcome the insidious concept that a philosopher should be like a lawyer who delights in his skill of arguing a case without any regard to his client's guilt or innocence. Hendley's book is a valuable contribution to educational thought as much for its provocative stance as for its theoretical contributions.