
BOOK REVIEW

Philosophy and Educational Foundations, by Allen Brent, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1983.

Allen Brent's *Philosophy and Educational Foundations* is seen by its author to be both an addition and a sequel to his earlier *Philosophical Foundations for the Curriculum* (1978). Where the former volume had a narrower, more specific, focus on curriculum, the latter work is considerably more ambitious. Both books, however, reveal an author concerned with 'foundations' in philosophy and education that set s him apart from the relativism rampaging in recent times through much social scientific discourse.

Indeed much of *Philosophy and Educational Foundations* vigorously attacks what its author clearly sees as endemic, entrenched errors and damaging tendencies in current philosophy of education. In his introduction Brent identifies two 'disasters' in the discipline that exemplify his concern and shape the body of his critique. One concerns the contentions of D.W. Hamlyn in *Experience and the Growth of Understanding* (1978) where a Wittgensteinian argument for the epistemological conditions of a viable social or psychological theory of children's development is advanced. Brent's concern is with a defence of Chomskyan linguistic universals and with the curricular consequences of Hamlyn's proposals. The other alleged 'disaster' for Brent is the emergence: 'of an intellectually powerful and articulate school of marxist materialists exemplified in the writings of Jim Walker and Colin Evers of Sydney University, and Kevin Harris and Michael Matthews of the University of New South Wales (p. xiii). Brent adds that Walker and Evers, using Quinean pragmatism and extensional logic in defence of marxism, could have been the very theorists his critique was addressed to had their work "come into my hands before this book had assumed its final, finished form" (ibid.).

While more will be said below about this pedagogical version of 'Star Wars' the most obvious feature of Brent's book, and the one which occupies more than one-third of its space, is his trenchant and extensive attack upon the grandfather of all disasters - behaviorism. This reviewer shares with Brent an inveterate opposition to behaviorism, and in many ways his lengthy four chapter demolition represents the most cogent and convincing part of the book. Irrespective of Brent's assertions regarding Hamlyn and Australian marxists it is clear that behaviorism is rightly castigated for confused epistemic claims, impoverished understandings of science and authoritarian curricular prescriptions.

In marked contrast to the critique of behaviorism Brent's discussion in chapters five and six of marxism and education is easily the weakest and poorest part of his book. This is regrettable and unfortunate if only for the reason that a considered reply to his erstwhile critics may have had the benefit of provoking a theoretically stimulating tussle. But this alternative is shunned and we are presented instead with a depiction of what are alleged to be 'marxist' alternatives in education which bear a strong family resemblance, so to speak, with the libertarian nostrums of A.S. Neill's *Summerhill*. It is acknowledged that Brent has no wish to score cheap points with his Black Owl Free school paradox fable, but it is hard to overlook its inherently misleading character. More to the point Brent focuses his objections on Geoff Whitty and Michael Young's 1976 collection, *Explorations in the Politics of School Knowledge*. With all due respect to the editors and authors represented therein, it must nevertheless be said that this anthology is not a good example of marxist theorising on education, let alone an historical materialist account of philosophy. It is curious and disappointing that Brent should launch his venom at such an amorphous and confused target while

ignoring the more rigorous (if equally flawed) contribution of Louis Althusser, and the work of a putative opponent, Kevin Harris, whose *Education and Knowledge* was published in 1979. To be sure Harris' structuralist inclinations are acknowledged but the substance of his charge that reality is misrepresented remains unchallenged. Moreover; Brent seems to inhabit some Popperian realm wherein marxism is seen to involve the prediction of history, whereas the fact of the matter is that marxism is about the transformation of material practices, in particular those prevalent in capitalist education.

Again, having identified the 'disaster' and its culprits, Brent concedes defeat by default since he fails to respond directly to Evers and Walker. Charitably speaking one could pass over this deficiency on the grounds proffered by the author and mentioned earlier in this review. But it is hard to ignore the fact that their paper, 'The Unity of Knowledge', was presented at Newcastle University in August 1980: that is some several months before the published date of Brent's introduction (March 1981). Indeed the whole tenor of his discussion or marxism suggests a date of composition several years back. To add a further point, the brief and turbulent marriage of Professor Quine and Dr. Marx, which was the basis of Evers and Walker's 1980 paper, has been annulled and the promiscuous professor is now wedded, more appropriately, to the pragmatic Dr. Dewey. It must be galling to Brent to observe that these nuptial vicissitudes owe nothing to his criticisms. The scoreline reads marxists one, foundationalists nil.

Brent does much better in hosing down the 'disaster' of David Hamlyn. Here he develops points raised in a controversial criticism of Quine in a context owing much to Chomsky and Katz on semantic universals. It is also the point where R.S. Peters' distinction between rule-following and rule-conforming is given fullest expression. This has always seemed a distinction begging for historical contextualization and elucidation in concrete, rather than linguistic, terms. Sadly neither Peters nor Brent provide such an elucidation.

Philosophy and Educational Foundations is a book rich in argument and ripe in controversy. The vigor and energy, if not always the conclusions, of its author are to be much admired. It is a volume that would suit many senior undergraduate and post graduate students. Hopefully the publishers will put as much effort into the binding as the author has into its composition.

Earlier we remarked that this book was an addition to, and elaboration upon, Brent's earlier work. Towards the end of the current volume he remarks that a sequel, to be entitled apparently *The Secular Illusion*, is forthcoming. It is to be hoped that Brent finishes this before born again Christians and Muslim fanatics blow the sacred and the secular to smithereens.

Robert Mackie