

## Philosophy of education and political commitment

M. A. B. Degenhardt

Centre for Education, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia

### ABSTRACT

There have recently been striking changes in the manner and content of much educational philosophising - changes which consist in deliberate and often explicit moves to politicise the subject. It is now quite common for educational philosophising to be presented or evaluated as part of the enterprise of bringing about or resisting political change. In recent books and papers, we find philosophising about education with an unmistakable intention to promote particular political doctrines and programmes. My present concern is not to chronicle these developments but to consider whether we should welcome them. In this paper I aim to do little beyond taking a first look at some of the issues involved, in the hope that fuller discussions will follow. I start by noting some points that can be made in favour of the new politicisation. I will then consider some grounds for disquiet at the new politicisation of educational philosophising.

There have recently been striking changes in the manner and content of much educational philosophising - changes which consist in deliberate and often explicit moves to politicise the subject. Of course educational philosophy has always and necessarily had important political aspects, as Plato, Rousseau and Dewey clearly evidenced. Indeed it is hard to find or even imagine, a body of thought-out educational philosophy that did not include political themes.

Where much very recent philosophy of education differs from typical work done in the nineteen-sixties is not in being political but in being developed in terms of substantial and unhidden political commitments. It is now quite common for educational philosophising to be presented or evaluated as part of the enterprise of bringing about or resisting political change. Thus while a book like *Ethics and Education*<sup>1</sup> treats of political themes, readers could hardly venture confident guesses as to which party got the author's vote and they might be surprised to learn that he had spoken on Labour Party electoral platforms. Things are very different however in recent books by such writers as David Cooper, Antony Flew, Kevin Harris and Michael Matthews<sup>2</sup>. In these books, and in a host of recent papers, we find philosophising about education with an unmistakable intention to promote particular political doctrines and programmes.

My present concern is not to chronicle these developments but to consider whether we should welcome them. To answer this question with an unequivocal 'yes' or 'no' would be inappropriate, for the new orientation promises considerable gains as well as serious dangers or losses. These should be thoroughly discussed. For while it would be Canute-like folly to try either to stop the change, or to channel all educational philosophising into the new mould reflection on what the change involves should help to maximise gains and minimise losses. In this paper I aim to do little

beyond taking a first look at some of the issues involved, in the hope that fuller discussions will follow. I start by noting some points that can be made in favour of the new politicisation.

1. Education matters just are inescapably political. Questions about who is taught what, how, by whom and on whose authority, are political questions because

- a) the de facto answers given in any particular society will depend on who is powerful in that society and because
- b) the answers given may be important factors shaping the way society changes or does not change.

Martin Hollis has argued the impossibility of taking education out of politics.<sup>3</sup> Educational decisions should not be left to 'the experts' to be taken on educational grounds alone because they are inherently political. "Political questions are those needing public moral decisions about priorities."<sup>4</sup> Educational decisions affect the future shape of the community and "when a decision to be taken affects the future shape of the community it is a political decision... There has to be a communal ruling about what should be done."<sup>5</sup> Since differences of political commitment are in large measure differences of view as to what the future shape of a community should be, then the political and the educational are one.

I am doubtful whether Hollis is well advised to define the political in terms of the appropriateness of public moral debate. It is perhaps more illuminating, and nearer to our everyday understanding, to put the emphasis on power. Power settles what decisions are made, and the decisions made have a bearing on who will have access to power in the future and how they will be likely to use it.

Some anti-politicisers will find all this strangely puzzling. They will allow that it holds of some educational decisions but find it strange to suggest that all decisions in education are thus political, perhaps citing all sorts of questions about what to include in the curriculum and how to teach it. They might, for example, challenge the politiciser to explain what on earth could be political about a decision whether and how to teach a course in art appreciation. To this the politiciser can reply by cataloguing some of the questions that will be involved in such decision making. Which pupils are to study art appreciation? What sort of art are they to study (questions of content, didacticism, social origin)? What aspects of art works are they to attend to (formal properties or social comment)? What consideration are they to give to the historical and social context of creation? Are they to exercise their own judgment or be guided by authoritative commentary? The answers to such questions can make a difference to how students learn to think of the place and role of art within society, and to how they learn to esteem their own power of judgment in relation to that of authorities.

On reflection it does seem that all but the most trivial educational decisions are likely to have political implications.

2. This conclusion should give cheer to educational philosophers who hope that their work will be of benefit to their fellows, and not just an exercise in personal intellectual satisfaction. Lots of philosophers have interpreted the world; educational philosophers have a chance to change it. Yet it is naive to hope to make a difference in the world by philosophising alone - the political dimension of our work must be made explicit and active. And we must also alert ourselves to the possibility that certain styles and manners of philosophising have unintended political implications that we might not welcome - as when it is charged against linguistic analysis (a) that it undermines authority or (b) that it buttresses the status quo by attending to standard usage and neglecting possible new usages.

3. Some might protest that the making of such connections can only sully the pristine purity of philosophy, understood to be the disinterested pursuit of truth. More persuasive however is the view which says that philosophers do not and should not attempt a disinterested understanding of just anything. The things that are worth understanding are the things that make a difference in human lives. If we do not guide our inquiries accordingly we are hardly earning our bread. And

philosophy soon lapses into pretentiousness or triviality if it loses touch with genuine human concerns such as how people should be educated and governed. Moreover, those who attempt the impossible, who attempt to theorize about education in a political vacuum, will be in danger of misunderstanding other educational theorists to be doing likewise. (Consider some courses on “The Great Educators”.)

There are, of course, university philosophers who from time to time tell us that their teaching and research is of no practical consequence - that they are just interested in some intellectual puzzles. I am not sure if they always really mean this. They may be over-reacting against the idea of philosopher as guide that was, for example, characteristic of much nineteenth century Oxford philosophy under the impact of T. H. Green. But if they do mean what they say then clearly their own is a political position according to which it is in order for taxpayers to pay for some of a nation's best minds to spend their undergraduate years and, in some cases, lucrative careers, thinking hard about things that do not matter.

4. Philosophers as well as philosophy can be corrupted if our work is not pursued for what it can contribute to human betterment. One who believes that there is virtue in the pursuit of knowledge ‘for its own sake’ can easily see this as licensing his neglect of moral obligations to act. We will guard against this by seeing engagement in educational philosophising as just one way to influence the future of education, and thereby the future of society.

I will now consider some grounds for disquiet at the new politicisation of educational philosophising.

1. Typically politics is party politics. So politicised educational philosophy is likely to conceive itself in party terms. Indeed this already seems to be happening. For it is now common practice to lump together a varied group of somewhat eclectic educational philosophers and to label them ‘analytic’, with hostile implications but no definition. Similarly the label ‘radical’ brackets together educationists who perhaps differ as much as they agree. This sort of thing is doubly unfortunate. It is badly misleading in that such labels notoriously generate over-simplification and stereotyping, so that philosophical understanding is necessarily impaired. Furthermore, for philosophers to misrepresent one another so freely will hardly conduce to the kind of personal relationships appropriate to the co-operative pursuit of enlightenment.

2. A too direct linking of philosophy to politics invites an over-simple view of the relation between the two. As with education, so with philosophy in general - most, perhaps all inquiry can be politically significant, But to recognise this is not to say that the significance is simple and straightforward. However, if we habitually view philosophy in an exclusively political perspective we may come to believe in a direct one-to-one relationship between philosophical doctrine and political commitment. Of course the matters involved are too complex for any such relation to hold, as the history of philosophy often illustrates. An example is provided by the changing political fortunes of phenomenology and positivism in the present century. The early phenomenologists saw themselves and were seen as defenders of traditional values against the radical assaults of scientists and logical positivists. In Austria conservative authorities resisted appointing these young ‘radicals’ to university posts, and there was no proper investigation into the assassination of the only logical positivist professor. More recently however, philosophers of the ‘new left’ have embraced phenomenology in order to resist the de-humanising positivism manifest in a capitalist technocracy. Similarly in educational theory, empiricist views of knowledge and learning have been used both by those who would liberate students from over-reliance on verbal authority as well as by those who would deny the learner's autonomy by making him a function of environmental conditioning. One of the most important achievements of educational philosophy in the sixties was to show the impossibility of making such direct links between philosophical schools and educational practice.

3. A related point is that many educationally important questions in philosophy transcend any particular party political allegiance, and should be dealt with accordingly. Some thinkers have discerned such issues deeply embedded, indeed hidden, in our culture. Thus R. G. Collingwood said

of Elliot's *The Waste Land* that it will not please "the little neo-Kiplings who think of poetry as an incitement to political virtue...for it describes an evil where no one and nothing is to blame, an evil not curable by shooting capitalists or destroying a social system, a disease which has so eaten into civilisation that political remedies are about as useful as poulticing a cancer".<sup>6</sup> Some, of course, will respond to Collingwood's assertion by denying that there is a reality corresponding to this description and others will say that he misdiagnoses a disorder that is really political. But these would be highly contestable views such that philosophical discussion of them should never be foreclosed. Moreover other transcending issues are in a different category. Much presently fashionable work in the philosophy of science has been politically motivated (consider Popper and Feyerabend) but what has been centrally involved is a reappraisal of the nature, authority and cultural standing of science. This reappraisal points to big changes not only to how science is taught and to its status in the curriculum, but also to the place of other disciplines and to tendencies to make them ape science. Such matters are important to educationalists of any political persuasion.

I will mention one other transcending question because it is not always recognised as such and because it is particularly pertinent to the present topic. Some politicisers of educational philosophy have objected to the recently fashionable emphasis on linguistic analysis. Not only do they allege that the approach is inherently conservative. (This charge might be more justly directed against the way linguistic analysis is sometimes used, for clearly many who pioneered the approach had good reason to see it as liberating.)<sup>7</sup> It is also charged that teaching students to do philosophy by linguistic analysis is inherently indoctrinatory. As Gellner argues in his famous broadside, teachers committed to linguistic analysis tend to 'teach' a view about the nature of philosophy by means other than direct statement, insinuating a view through what they do or do not allow to go unchallenged in essay or tutorial. Students learning how to do philosophy in fact learn just one way. They are blinkered against the fact that there are other ways, and that any one view about how to do philosophy itself presupposes a philosophical doctrine.<sup>8</sup>

No doubt many linguistic philosophers are guilty as charged. But we may wonder how many philosophers of any persuasion could face such charges without: a blush. For the same complaints can be made against those who teach students to philosophise by scrupulously reading the masters, by testing in experience, by phenomenological reflection or by referring doctrines to their class origins.

Here then we have a problem which must face any philosophy teacher. Since reflection on the teaching problem will require reflection on the problem of philosophical presuppositions and their accessibility to philosophical critique, it must be a problem transcending particular commitments. If we do not recognise it as such we may persuade ourselves that it is a problem for other philosophers to which we personally are immune.

If then, there are many questions in philosophy of education that transcend political difference, then surely the co-operative attempt to solve them should also transcend such differences. But politicisation can threaten such co-operation. At some conferences, for example, it seems that participants are being classified and attended to for their political commitments rather than the quality of their thinking. And sometimes participants present papers that are unashamedly intended to interest only those of a particular political persuasion even though there is no reason to believe that the audience is thus restricted. There is a danger that such developments would so divide educational philosophers into political camps that it becomes pointless for us to meet or confer on the basis of geographical region and shared discipline. The emergence of new groupings (associations, conferences, journals...) of conservative, social democratic, marxist, anarchist...groups of educational philosophers might follow naturally. This is a depressing prospect for those of us who have learned much from associating with philosophers of wide and varied commitments.

It was argued earlier that all important educational issues can and should be seen as significantly political. Accordingly we might conclude that whenever we engage in educational

philosophising we should conceive ourselves as engaged in one form of political activity. But this is to make the kind of mistake that Julian Huxley somewhere characterised as “the fallacy of nothing but...”. Just as it is fallacious to conclude that since humans are animals they are nothing but animals, so it is a mistake to reason that since all questions in (philosophy of) education are political, then they are nothing but political. Earlier on I sought to show some of the political dimensions of decisions about aesthetic education - but this did not amount to showing that the political dimensions were the whole matter. Distinctively aesthetic dimensions remain and are important. How are we to conceive of art and of artistic values? What do the answers tell us about how to conduct aesthetic education? Moreover the political and the aesthetic might conflict. An educator whose understanding of aesthetic experience made autonomy of judgment central and necessary might find himself in conflict with a political authoritarian who would have education become an instrument of conformist socialisation. (If the aesthetic account is right here it would provide one ground for calling the political view in doubt.) Similarly of other issues: while we should regard the political aspect of educational thinking as very important we should not allow it an exclusive monopoly, nor overlook the way it interacts with other kinds of question.

On some views however this conclusion would be a mistake, for it can be held either that man is so thoroughly a political animal that nothing we do or think can be properly understood except in thoroughly political terms. Or it can be contended that what ought to matter to us above all else is the pursuit and achievement of social justice, and so that we should engage in educational philosophising only in so far as it serves this end.

The obvious rejoinder, of course, is that such theories themselves presuppose or embody philosophical doctrines, and since, like any other doctrines, these may be mistaken, then they should never be exempt from philosophical critique. After all there have been plenty of serious philosophies of life in which politics or the pursuit of social justice are of no great importance - where what is important is knowing how to live as best one can within an inherently unjust world or according to one's allotted place within the great chain of being. Such philosophies are hardly to be dismissed out of hand. Exponents of all contestable views must be willing to face rational critique and scrutiny.

To say this is not to suppose that there are well established canons whereby we can assess the rationality of various doctrines in an essentially unproblematic way. Knowledge of disputes in the history of human thought, and an awareness of cultural differences in our own day, renders this view untenable. What seems to have been at stake in the clash between Galileo and the cardinals was not that one side had reasons and the other did not. It was rather that they had different views of what counted as good and relevant reasons. What is important to my argument is rationality understood to consist not in conforming to or applying a set of tests but in an attitude of open-mindedness - a willingness to sympathetically listen to and explore possible views other than one's own, plus a commitment to going as far as one can in comparing and assessing different rational foundations. It is in this sense that Galileo's persecutors forsook rationality, and in which we too are always at risk.

However, some politicisers can now respond with one of their strongest points. For there are those who hold that reasoning towards truth is only possible in the right socio-political context. In an unjust society all thinking is liable to ideological distortion since, in ways we may not make fully explicit even to ourselves, our thoughts and perceptions become distorted in the struggle to preserve or achieve power. The argument is telling precisely because we can recognise such distortions in so many human beliefs. And the conclusion seems to follow that only by liberating ourselves from social injustice can we liberate ourselves from pressures to ideological distortions - political commitment must have priority over philosophical inquiry.

Few, I suspect, will deny the importance of the insights contained in this view; what is debatable is the extent to which they can be generalised. Apart from anything else, paradoxes arise from the claim that in an unjust society all views must be ideological in a pejorative sense. And again the point must be made that this is a contestable view which should ever be subject to philosophical

scrutiny. Moreover, even on this view we need to work out a vision of the non-oppressive society to be striven for; it is by no means obvious when relationships are or are not exploitative. To do this philosophy must be kept autonomous.

If by way of summary I now try to bring my various points together they seem to indicate a boringly tame yet very important conclusion. The new politicisation of educational philosophy should be welcomed, but cautiously. It should be welcomed because it repairs serious and misleading incompleteness in an a-political philosophy of education, and because it emphasises and gives direction to philosophising about education as a practical enterprise. Incidentally, too, it has helped to reduce the threat of doctrinal monopoly. The welcome should be cautious because it is important to limit politicisation for at least two reasons. First, while all educational issues can have important political dimensions they also have other dimensions which should be the philosopher's concern. Second, political commitments should always be subject to philosophical scrutiny. This will not happen if philosophy loses its autonomy. It is hard to say whether such autonomy is most at risk when the political commitment is explicit, as on the new model, or implicit and unnoticed as on the old. The danger is that we escape the illusory freedom, the open prison of a-political philosophy, only to find that we have slipped into the security block.

Two years ago in a broadcast talk which Mrs. Thatcher's government tried but failed to keep off British television, E.P. Thompson spoke eloquently of the importance to public life of the "specialist intellectual craftsmen or women", that is to say of "all those working in the laboratories of the spirit and the mind, with paint or sermon or pen or with thought and scholarship."<sup>9</sup> Recently and disastrously, he says, these intellectual craftsmen have been relegated to the edge of the nation's discourse, and the nature of political thinking has thereby changed. We used to ask why and where questions but now only ask how questions. We used to ask why something is justified and where it is leading us. We now only ask how it is to be done. Philosophy of education, I am suggesting, should contribute importantly to the kind of public discourse that Thompson wants to preserve. We will fail to make our proper contribution either if we pretend to be nothing to do with politics or if we abandon philosophical autonomy to the service of one specific political commitment.

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