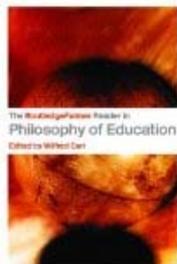


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Review - The RoutledgeFalmer Reader In The Philosophy Of Education

by Wilfred Carr (Editor)
Routledge, 2005
Review by R.A. Goodrich, Ph.D.
Oct 26th 2005 (Volume 9, Issue 43)

Wilfred Carr's anthology provides us with eighteen papers published in the decade up to 2004 by a predominantly British cohort of professional philosophers of education with tertiary students in mind. To that extent, we are given a snapshot of how the turn-of-the-century self-consciously defines its forays into the thickets of educational politics and policy, institutional pedagogy and practice, against a previous generation's adherence to conceptual analysis of a supposedly decontextualised kind. Also brooding over this collection is the specter of the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre whose seminal 1981 work, *After Virtue*, explicitly figures in seven of the contributions. Both factors will form the kernel of this brief review.

In the initial segment of the anthology, readers are immediately introduced to the theme that rival traditions employed by philosophers of education nowadays cannot be adjudicated because there is no basis for so doing which is itself not dependent upon some tradition or other. For this reason alone, we are assured, we should not expect that any approach contained within the anthology has been or will be universally accepted. This concession proves to be a marked contrast to the analytic approach of the 'sixties inspired by R.S. Peters and Israel Scheffler on either side of the Atlantic. As MacIntyre himself is cited as claiming, by its "piecemeal" focus upon isolated issues whilst rigorously analysing the logical criteria of such basic educational concepts as teaching and learning, development and indoctrination, the analytic movement failed to "provide decisive answers" to the pressing substantive concerns affecting actual pedagogic policies and procedures (3). Ultimately, the movement is found guilty of erecting conceptual interpretations which, though universal in intent, were "both historically contingent and culturally specific" (4). In its place and mindful of the growing irrelevance of mere conceptual analysis, the task at hand is now largely though not exhaustively construed in the Aristotelian terms promulgated by MacIntyre since the 'eighties. Philosophers of education, we are told, need to develop a practical

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and evaluative rather than a theoretical and speculative approach--at times given to "analysis of policy"; at other times, "analysis for policy" (24). Demonstrated by all contributors is the degree to which they specifically attune themselves to the socio-cultural and socio-political practices of persons joined in pursuit of the intrinsic (or internal) good rather than the extrinsic (or instrumental) goods of educative processes. Nowhere perhaps is this attunement more tightly captured than in the "experiential subtleties of the moral vocabulary of care" (220) explored by Max van Manen.

Notwithstanding the foregoing contrasts, the papers by Wilfred Carr and Terence McLaughlin more explicitly, James Walker and Mark Halstead more implicitly, take care when condemning the analytic approach for presupposing that concepts exist in some non-temporal form or for presupposing that the very act of analysis is detached from actual cultural and ideological circumstances. None simply reduces the analytic movement to its linguistic variant, the so-called ordinary language approach dominating Oxford during the 'forties and 'fifties. Yet none recognizes the full ramifications that the aim of analysis, irrespective of its execution, is one of understanding the cluster of concepts that, in specific communal, cultural, or institutional settings then and now, so often lacks clarity and coherence, let alone consistency. Moreover, all seem oblivious to the radical strains of the wider analytic movement as it evolved in North America. None recognises, for instance, how W.V.O. Quine, whose assault upon our crucial appeals to meaning and reference, or Donald Davidson, whose construal of action and interpretation, might invite a profound re-configuration of the very nature of pedagogic theory and practice.

When readers enter the last three segments of this collection, very noticeable is how contributors--most notably Joseph Dunne and Richard Smith--wrestle with the persistent theme of practice, a theme that lends a unity to the anthology as a whole and which would have been more evident had an index been provided. To a greater or lesser degree, it becomes apparent that the initial wave of MacIntyre's tripartite analysis of the acquisition and development of virtues--charity and courage, honesty and integrity, to mention but four--buoys so many papers here anchored as they are to his conception of practice. By "practice" we are meant to understand, as succinctly summarized by Dunne (152-154), any coherent, complex, and co-operative activity whose intrinsic worth is realized in the attempts to achieve the appropriate standard of excellence that are at least in part constitutive of that activity. Hence, those individuals socially inducted into it find their notion of its intrinsic ends and goods systematically extended. Because our practices may be multiple and competing and because they are not immune to criticism and may in fact be evil, MacIntyre concedes that this preliminary phase of analysis cannot be regarded as the final word. None the less, whatever else "practice" might mean, for MacIntyre and, by extension, his followers in this anthology not all activities are practices. Laying bricks is not a practice in the way that composing a lay is, to draw upon Aristotle's distinction between "praxis" and "poiesis," between doing and making. Nor are practices simply a means to an institutionally ordained end or a set of technical proficiencies. Nor again are the standards of a practice merely determined by individual choice; rather, they are the historical product of practitioners past and present.

Readers may well ask whether, in the rush to seize upon the educative dimensions of MacIntyre's coupling of practice and virtue, one factor has been overlooked in this collection. Practice is not a unitary notion. Not only do we constantly switch between its "task" sense ("Epsilon was, is, or will be practicing how to sculpt a block of limestone") and its "achievement" sense ("Epsilon had, has, or will have practiced how to sculpt a block of limestone"). We also apply the notion of practice in quite different ways: from exercising a profession or occupation to planning or scheming in a duplicitous manner; from the action of doing, executing, operating, or performing something to the usual, habitual, customary, or conventional way of doing something; from having a committed rather than a nominal membership of some institution to training or drilling someone in order to gain proficiency; or from emphasizing the contrast with believing, knowing, professing, or theorizing something to negotiating or dealing with someone in order to influence or persuade him or her in some course of action. Not all of the half-a-dozen kinds of practice just enumerated need be linked to the acquisition or development of moral virtues.

Finally, even if we accept the stipulative use of practice employed within this anthology, we still encounter another quandary. How are we to

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discriminate communal practices from the very institution at the centre of each writer's pre-occupation, the school as the site of education? In sum, the location and the number of people involved is as insufficient a set of criteria as is the basis of membership in or "exclusion" from these "curiously sequestered zones" (146). Similarly, the overt or covert enforceability of relationships and rules (whether rules be of the regulative or imperative or of the constitutive or definitional kind) would seem to apply to both practices and institutions. As Robin Barrow reminds us in light of debates over the education of the handicapped (186-187), it would appear our puzzlement persists as long as we continue to resort to contingent sociological or empirical factors. Describing a set of activities exclusively by brute facts fails to establish what makes the very activities so described a distinctive practice. No matter how detailed our description of Epsilon's actions of cutting and chiseling, brushing and polishing a block of limestone, appealing to raw facts alone does not capture the institutional practice of sculpting (aside from whether, in turn, the resultant sculpture can be construed as a representation or not). So, not only is the onus on contributors to Carr's anthology to confront what might be meant by practice--and here the absence of reference to the work of, say, Pierre Bourdieu, Jean Lave, and Etienne Wenger seems curious--but they also have the burden of logically distinguishing the notion of practice from the concept of institution.

Yet, if we are correct in identifying certain gaps in how the analytic movement and the notion of practice are handled, testimony still should be given to the strengths otherwise displayed by this collection of essays, a collection which extends yesteryear's adherence to the formal logical process of inferring conclusions from propositions to philosophical argument which nowadays deliberately encompasses psychological, sociological, and linguistic perspectives.

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