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The Politics of Identity and the Experience of Learning: Insights for Pluralism from Western Educational History

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ABSTRACT: The eight short explorations in the first part of this paper attempt to identify some crucial developments in the history of Western learning which eclipsed pluralist educational practices in their (Socratic) infancy and thereafter, and which contributed to the widespread employment of education as a force for cultural uniformity, or assumed superiority. Drawing together the lessons of the first part with contemporary insights from hermeneutic philosophy, the second part sets forth briefly the promising educational possibilities for human self-understanding and co-existence which are furnished by a newly-inspired reclamation of the long-eclipsed heritage.

KEY WORDS. eclipse, prior influences, partiality, critical interplay, integrity of education

> But genuinely to adopt the standpoint of a tradition thereby commits one to its view of what is true and false and, in so committing one, prohibits one from adopting any rival standpoint. ... The multiplicity of traditions does not afford a multiplicity of perspectives among which we can move, but a multiplicity of antagonistic commitments between which only conflict, rational or nonrational, is possible. (Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* pp 367-368)

PART ONE: GLEANINGS

The Socratic Example

The passage from MacIntyre's work expresses a gloomy view of pluralism,[1] even one which identifies it a bane rather than a benefit. Although prominent in today's debates, the idea of education as a pluralist enterprise has been an alien one in most of the history of Western learning. Yet it is rarely acknowledged that an exemplary case of pluralist principles at work pre-dates most of that history itself. I am recalling here some distinctive currents of Greek civilisation in the fourth century BC. The educational work of the historical Socrates seems to have combined a deep respect for inherited traditions with the most thorough questioning of these same traditions. This questioning – as evidenced in the earlier Platonic Dialogues – promoted pluralist forms of discourse and enquiry. It enabled convictions to be deeply held, but in a self-critical manner. It never claimed certainty for any form of knowledge of understanding that was merely human. Indeed any moral or political doctrine claiming the status of certainty would invite scrutiny from Socrates in a special way. The practice of Socrates

sought to illustrate that the virtues accompanying an educated sense of one's own ignorance were more worthy of human commitments than were doctrines whose dogmatic character discouraged questioning. In the Socratic practice then, the integrity of education lay in its disciplined toleration and sustained exploration of contrasting perspectives on all important matters relating to how life ought to be lived. For Socrates, this offered the most promising and most defensible context for pursuing issues associated with personal and cultural identity. He believed this engagement to be entitled to an essential measure of sovereignty, as distinct from being mainly an instrument to be controlled by political or religious authorities. His refusal to submit to attempts by those authorities to suppress that sovereignty cost him his life, but also led his pupil Plato to immortalise him in his writings.[2]

The Platonic Aspiration

The legacy of Plato however was different from most things Socratic and was to prove far more influential than the actual example of Socrates himself. Although we would have little reliable knowledge of Socrates and his work without Plato's writings, Plato differed from Socrates in some key respects. The importance given to jointly undertaken enquiries in the work of Socrates yields pride of place in Plato's works (especially the middle and later ones) to the systematic construction of metaphysical doctrines. For Plato, truth was *one* and changeless; not plural, or subject to the limitations of opinion and perspective. It was to be attained only by those whose intellectual abilities and rigorous moral training equipped them to be philosopher-rulers; people whose understanding and insight remained unsullied by the desires and gratifications of the sensual world. Plato's metaphysics was all-inclusive in its scope and was to inspire many key developments in the history of Western learning. It envisaged a unitary and hierarchical state, where the educational enterprise was to be institutionalised under the close supervision of philosopher rulers. The philosopher rulers were to be the supreme authority in matters political and religious, and the conduct of teaching and learning was to confirm to what they laid down.[3]

Enforced Uniformity in Christendom

Although Plato's custodial conception of education was not realised in his own day, it had an incalculable influence on how learning was to be conceived during the thousand year era of Christendom in European civilisation (roughly 800 AD to 1800). It is not necessary to review in detail here the conceptions of authority and obedience, of censorship and censure, that pervaded life and learning in the Medieval world. Two brief references are sufficient. Firstly, in the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas had attempted to accommodate diverse strands from classical and Christian sources, in the effort to construct an elaborate metaphysical system which would provide authoritative answers to all questions about truth. The system of scholasticism which the following centuries inherited mainly from Thomas preserved the idea that the goal of human learning was certainty about truth, and that anything less than certainty was a deficiency. Secondly, and by contrast, the humanistic studies championed by figures like Erasmus of Rotterdam

in the early sixteenth century were sceptical of metaphysical doctrines and sought
to make space for greater diversity within the institutionalised Christian tradition.
Where Thomas Aquinas attempted to achieve a new uniformity of Christendom on
a higher plane, there was in Erasmus' work the more pluralist conviction that a
Christian culture is itself enriched by a diversity of perspectives, when these are
disciplined in such a way that they promote a richer, more inclusive understanding
of the human condition than scholasticism had yielded. The search for such an
understanding was the guiding ideal of the renaissance in humanistic learning
which is associated in a particular way with the work of Erasmus.

Cuius Regio, Eius Religio

The Reformation accomplished an unprecedented diversity within Christendom,
but on sectarian foundations rather than on the tolerant lines advocated by
Erasmus. The Reformation not only introduced rival versions of the truth but
institutionalised these in different regions of Europe. The Peace of Augsburg
(1555) introduced a principle which become known as *Cuius Regio, eius religio*.
The purpose of this principle was to identify an entire state, or principality, with
the religion of the ruling monarch: Catholicism on the one hand and Lutheranism
on the other. This principle was reaffirmed by the Peace of Westphalia (1648),
which also added Calvinism as a third religion to which it would apply. The *Cuius
Regio* principle helped not only to arrest the growth of pluralist influences in the
post-Reformation period. It also granted a new political acceptability to anti-
pluralist currents of thought. Firstly, it gave monarchs the right to install one
religion from among the different denominations of Christianity as the prescribed
religion for all the monarch's subjects. Secondly, it also enabled monarchs to
persecute, or even banish from the state, those who professed a different religion
from the officially established one. Thirdly, it promoted an ever closer
relationship between denominational religious allegiance on the one hand, and
ethnic and national identity on the other. Fourthly, and perhaps more significantly
for my present purposes, it systematically discouraged the idea that a people's
national identity could be compatible with religious and cultural diversity, not to
speak of being enriched by such diversity. Finally, it institutionalised many
divisive hierarchies, not merely in the laws and machinery of government but also
in the minds and hearts of people; hierarchies which in time became deeply
ingrained in whole cultural inheritances. These consequences were also manifest
in education. The adversarial attitude to other Christian religions which came to
characterise most denominational schooling in the period of modern history did
much to becloud the more worthy features of Christianity itself and to nurture new
forms of cultural chauvinism and ethnic prejudice.

Revolutionary Sequels to the Enlightenment

The American and French Revolutions embodied many of the ideals of the
European Enlightenment and promoted the idea of the secular state. Here the
connection between religious influence and political institutions would be severed
and different religions would be granted recognition in the same state. They

would also be allowed the freedom to practice, but this freedom would be subject to the rule of civil law. Bearing in mind the acrimonious legacy mentioned in the last paragraph, it is hardly surprising that in very many countries the nineteenth century witnessed churches battling afresh with each other and with the state for the control of schooling. But churches and state were not the only parties in conflict. A proliferation of emergent ideologies, including utilitarianism, liberalism, socialism, democracy, also joined battle as a turbulent plurality of outlooks became a notable feature of most cultures in Europe and North America. Different countries made different accommodations to settle these acrimonies. But this rise of a turbulent pluralism brought little in the way of enlightenment to how education as a public undertaking was understood. Indeed in many countries the intensity of the conflicts strengthened further the attitude that education was an enterprise to be fought over and controlled by the victorious party. In other words, the new and renewed ideological conflicts of the post-Christendom era served to bury even further, rather than to resurrect, the long eclipsed Socratic idea that education is a pursuit with an integrity or sovereignty of its own.

Partiality and the Control of Schooling

The Platonic aspiration – the urge to make the conduct of education subject in all essential respects to the priorities and powers of a political party or religious institution – has shown itself capable of accommodating many different doctrines, indeed conflicting doctrines. Thus, depending on the historical setting, the "wisdom" of the philosopher-ruler can be read as the wisdom of the Holy Office, or of the Communist Party, or of the Tory Party, or whatever. With the benefit of hindsight, the partiality of these conceptions can strike us clearly enough. But this realisation also confronts us with some further questions which in our own day are all too frequently dodged rather than faced. What if the "wisdom" in question is now less conspicuously declared than in the past, but nonetheless deeply influential? – as for instance in the rarely questioned "wisdom" of the OECD, or the ubiquitous force of the free-market philosophy which has actively pushed educational reform efforts in many countries in recent years? Are the purposes of teaching and learning likely to enjoy any more sovereignty from these newly ascendant international influences than they enjoyed in the past from the authorities of Church and state? Is any more justice done to the claims of personal and cultural identity by the imperatives of international economics than by the traditional imperatives of church or state? Can any measures be taken in democratic societies to ensure that the divisive partialities of outlook wrought by schooling in many circumstances in the past are not substituted by a more subtle, though no less intractable kind of partiality?

Politics, Power and the Purpose of Learning

In pursuing questions like these just raised, it is important to try to prevent our efforts from getting disoriented from the start. With this in mind, the following point calls for acknowledgement and indeed for emphasis. The questions should be tackled essentially from an *educational* point of view, and in a way which

recognises the abiding and defensible priorities of education, rather than primarily from a political point of view, which is all too often dictated by the pressures and exigencies of the moment. The orientation provided by this acknowledgement would enable different dimensions of education – including the economic, the social and the cultural – to be addressed in a promising and faithful way; more promising and more faithful than can be the case if one approaches education with a heavy agenda of political priorities and attempts to use schooling mainly as an instrument in furthering these priorities. The use of power in this latter manner is of course understandable, particularly where the integrity proper to educational practice has for centuries been honoured more in the breach than in the observance. Yet, this makes it all the more important that politicians and governments now acknowledge the point that the social, political and economic goals of democratic government are themselves best served when the conduct of education is granted a fundamental measure of sovereignty in pursuit of the goods that are intrinsic to education itself, and essential to its own integrity. Of course in return for this recognition, education as a publicly-funded enterprise must show equity and inclusiveness in its conduct, accountability for the resources granted to it and worthiness of the pubic trust placed in it.

The Inherent Pluralism of Education

The gloomy view of pluralism contained in the quotation from MacIntyre at the start is countered somewhat by a further remark he makes some pages later in the same book: "Only those whose tradition allows for the possibility of its hegemony being put in question can have rational warrant for asserting such a hegemony" (p 388). There is some concession to the idea of mutual tolerance in this latter statement. What it might mean for the cultural practices of a society or the emergent identities of learners is not explored by MacIntyre.[4] But this is of first importance to us here, since it has direct implications for how pluralism might be counted as a cultural benefit, to be promoted through the practices of teaching and learning. Indeed there is more than a hint of something Socratic in the suggestion that a predominant cultural tradition might adopt a questioning standpoint to some of its own most distinctive characteristics and perspectives. But the educational force of the suggestion comes home to us only when we realise that even the most highly regarded of traditions *is still radically incomplete.* Its accomplishments and practices proceed not from an understanding which has escaped the limitations of interpretation into some incontrovertible insight. On the contrary, they are inescapably influenced by interpretations and perspectives which, no matter how refined or subtle, are themselves partial. To reject this conclusion as an invitation to relativism is, perhaps, tempting for many whose sense of identity is strongly linked with traditional theories of truth in Western civilisation, or with strong manifestations of cultural distinctiveness. Such a rejection is, however, to turn one's back on a crucial insight into the structure of human understanding itself. It is also to overlook the point that one of the most important dispositions which education can cultivate arises from a particular kind of practice in teaching and learning. This is the practice of a generous, yet critical discipline, in whatever subject or field of study: where the overt and hidden curricula are pursued in harmony; where a growing fluency is methodically accompanied by an attitude of

cultural modesty; where any tendency to deprecate other cultural standpoints or fields of study is rapidly reminded of the inherent partialities of one's own cultural standpoint or field of study; where the pre-judgements through which human experience is addressed by tradition are habitually disciplined towards a keener sense of proportion and of limitation in all judgement that is human.

PART TWO: CLEARINGS

I have referred just here to the *pre-judgements through which human experience is addressed by tradition*. Far from seeking to assert a controversial point, this phrase expresses an important philosophical insight: one moreover which disappoints some of the more central aspirations of the rationalism championed by the Enlightenment. This insight, which is now associated chiefly with some European philosophers of the twentieth century, suggests that our best efforts to achieve objectivity in understanding are still inescapably coloured by the influences – often hidden ones – which we bring with us from our own experiences. It also suggests that all forms of teaching, from a lesson in science to a seminar on poetry to an interactive video on art, embody such prior influences; though again, often in an inexplicit way. Most contemporary philosophical research would now accept this insight, though for some it leads to the negative conclusion that, at the end of the day, there is no conclusive way of overcoming relativism. Many writers who accept the designation "postmodern" inhabit one or other variant of this perspective.[5] For others, the realisation that prior influences cannot be finally overcome in our efforts to understand leads to a more robust articulation and defence of sectional standpoints, as can be seen in the quotation from MacIntyre at the start. This latter reaction is a kind of neo-traditionalism which views other standpoints essentially as rivals, inferior ones at that, and which considers it a virtue to adopt an adversarial attitude towards them.

But I want to suggest here that both the relativist and traditionalist reactions are mistaken. I am keen to point out that both overlook the philosophical significance and educational promise of the insight we have been discussing. Far from cultural relativism on the one hand, or cultural chauvinism on the other, the significance and promise of this insight lie in the incisiveness of the awareness it brings us: the incompleteness of human understanding and the inbuilt character of its pre-conceptions are realities which *constitute us as human* i.e. something inescapable – as distinct from a blemish that a superior exercise of logic or reason can eradicate in the interests of certainty. The following nine-point summary of the insight's import should help to illustrate this more clearly.[6]

1. Human understanding is never neutral of self-contained. Rather it is inescapably interpretative and historical in character. What it accomplishes in any particular instance is not final knowledge, but a kind of knowing constrained by perspective.
2. Such constraints arise from prior influences, or pre-conceptions, which are already at play in the experience of the person in whom the understanding takes place. They now come more actively into play in response to what addresses human experience in any particular act of understanding.

3. Without such pre-conceptions and prior influences, the earliest of which may even be prenatal, understanding itself would not be possible. There would be nothing like a personal context within which such addresses could make sense and become significant.

4. The contexts which we bring to any event of understanding include not merely our pre-conceptions in a cognitive sense, but also our pre-dispositions in an emotional sense; that is to say, our sensibilities, and even more delicately, our ever-emergent sense of personal identity.

5. Much of the interpretative context which we bring with us to any event of understanding will lie beyond our explicit awareness, all the more so if we place an uncritical faith in a method which claims to be neutral, i.e. without bias.

6. Nevertheless, a potential critical interplay between the accomplishments and claims of cultural traditions on the one hand, and the emergent abilities and identities of learners on the other, remains possible as one of humankind's most distinguishing and promising pursuits.

7. Although this pursuit may come upon more than a few disclosures during its course, it retains its integrity only insofar as it retains the character of an unfinished and unfinishing search. It becomes disfigured wherever it is regarded as any kind of completed knowledge with a fixed and final set of doctrines.

8. The judicious bringing about of such an interplay, its sustenance and advancement, is a venture which requires co-operative energies, a fluency in one or other of the main fields of cultural tradition (e.g. scientific, religious, technical, artistic, literary), an attitude of openness to those fields in which we ourselves are not fluent, a commitment to generous but critical learning, and not least, a commitment to the procedural requirements of dialogue.

9. Such a venture properly describes the undertaking we call education. But it remains in essential respects stillborn, unless it is granted the standing of a distinct and respected office; an office whose professional freedom yet remains accountable to the society in which it is undertaken and whose resources it has been granted in significant measure.

These points suggest that the unattainability of certainty in one's efforts to understand, far from being a shortcoming within one or other rival traditions, is a basic feature of the human condition itself. To put this in another way, the quest for certainty, and the attempt to establish one's own certainties in a place of prominence over those of one's opponents, represents a standpoint which sees knowledge essentially as power and which gives an ethic of domination and self-interest primacy in the arena of education. It would of course be foolhardy to suggest that such an ethic could somehow be *excluded* from this arena. Only by the most repressive means could schooling be thoroughly insulated from tendencies which are prevalent in society at large. And even then, such measures would be likely to be of only limited success.

But what I am suggesting is this. Insofar as the educational enterprise fails to understand its *own essential purposes as lying in the opposite direction* of an ethic of power and self-seeking, it becomes the instrument and accomplice of such an ethic, albeit in an unwitting way. And this is far from making the simplistic recommendation that education should be used to change society's evil ways. It is

rather a question of nurturing in all the various branches of learning those human dispositions which keep alive, and in some sense realise, the possibilities of making significant inroads; inroads, that is, on those inclination which all too easily accommodate individual or group identity to one or other dogma, especially those which enjoy an unquestioned ascendancy. Or to use a maritime metaphor, it is to engage wholeheartedly in the continual play of ebb and flow, but in such a way as to keep tidal waves of partisan origin at bay. In short, it is to restore to our understanding and practice of education the rich diversity of perspectives which the original example of Socrates invited, but which was soon eclipsed by an insistent uniformity, different variants of which colonised all too frequently the spirit of learning in two millennia of Western civilisation.

Three Conclusions

Truncated as the foregoing reflections have been, there are still some tentative conclusions that might be offered. I shall confine myself to three general ones, which are at the same time among the most basic of principles for pluralism in education.

Firstly, instead of looking at education primarily from the viewpoint of economic policy, or social policy, or indeed cultural or religious policy, the interests of the pluralist democratic state are themselves best served by acknowledging that education is, in the first place, not an instrument to be controlled and deployed as a strategic arm of state policy. Rather it is a public concern which is nobody's exclusive possession, but a human undertaking with intrinsic benefits, with its own integrity, with its own defensible purposes and practices.

Secondly, insofar as education as a public undertaking – with its own measure of autonomy – receives funds from the public purse, it should use these in a manner which respects the requirements of equity in a pluralist context and also the requirements of transparency and accountability. For instance, if any of these funds are used to promote practices which cultivate deprecatory attitudes, either in the curricular or extra-curricular life of a school or college, a strong case can be made for withdrawing funds, or perhaps withdrawing from the institution in question its status as a recognised educational institution.

Thirdly, wherever an institution undertakes, *for educational reasons*, projects which promote the kind of self-critical learning discipline described above – including, for example, well-planned study visits, field trips and exchanges – a strong case can be made for that institution to attract additional resources and support from the state.

Bearing in mind the history we have reviewed, acknowledgements and provisions of this kind identify practical and public ways for pluralism in education to be a force for cultural enrichment, as distinct from a force for the kind of diversity which nurtures – wittingly or otherwise – cultural chauvinism and recurrent animosities.

NOTES

[1] "Pluralism" is defined by the *OED* as a "form of society in which members of minority groups maintain independent traditions". It is important to recognise then that pluralism can be characterised as much by mutual animosity as by mutual tolerance between these independent traditions.

[2] See *Apology* 38a-39d.

[3] These points are a summary of some of the main themes in Plato's *Republic*, but some of them are also pursued in many of Plato's other Dialogues, particularly the middle and later ones.

[4] In a later work, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, MacIntyre has some observations to make on this point, but in the context of higher education only. There he talks of the necessity of the committed academic to play two roles, firstly that of a partisan on behalf of pre-liberal forms of moral enquiry, but also the second role of sustaining ordered conflicts – i.e. to uphold the university "as an arena of conflict in which the most fundamental type of moral and theological disagreement was accorded recognition". (P 231)

[5] Here I have in mind some writings by Jean-Françoise Lyotard and Richard Rorty, but also much of the secondary literature on these writings.

[6] The nine-point summary which follows here includes paraphrases of some key arguments from the works of writers like Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur and Martin Heidegger, but is also indebted to writings by Karl Popper and Charles Taylor. The summary is an edited extract from chapter 7 or my own book *The Custody and Courtship of Experience – Western Education in Philosophical Perspective* (Dublin: Columbia Press, 1995).