

IN DEFENCE OF VALUES

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Of the many perspectives that could be taken on the process of education one could be described in terms of a battleground for values. This battle is waged between those who favour alerting, skilling and equipping a rising generation in the recognition and detection of values and those who favour disguising, negating and embedding values in society. Statements about being neutral in educational experiences have a certain 'hurrah' appeal to them, which survives the charge of superficiality brought by opponents. Indeed we might think of them as statements about neutering in terms of their prescription for budding citizens. Tacit agreement about the curriculum being one set of experiences and therefore one set of values rather than another does not necessarily lead on to an exploration of those values, much less to equipping others to explore those values.

If value literacy is not something that is too difficult to acquire then it is certainly something that is 'not for the children.' Values, we might say, can be picked out by examples of terms such as: good, ought, should, better, bad, wrong, duty, right. Such words, and others, are normally used in a value sense. If someone claims that a vocational education is better than an academic education, or vice versa, that is a value judgement. We are not bound to agree with them. The main problem about the use of such terms in education, as in other aspects of life, is that very often the values are not made explicit and we are asked to agree with something as though it were inevitable or undeniable. Consider the statement we *need* an educational system that prepares people for the twenty-first century. *Need* is a value loaded term. The statement amounts to: we ought to have an educational system that prepares people for the twenty first century. We can hardly agree with this until we have unpacked the clause following 'educational system'. In that unpacking we will find a particular view of the content of education, one which requires further elucidation and with which, ultimately, we may or may not agree.

Programmes for education are often about doing one thing rather than another and, as such, involve considerations of value. That one thing ought to be done rather than another is a value judgement. To offer a programme with one kind of knowledge rather than another is to make a value judgement. It is to commend one kind of knowledge rather than another. Some value judgements are apparent: '*We ought to educate for the needs of industry*' has an immediate signal because it employs the term *ought*. Less obvious though, is the fact that there is a double value function in this. Needs is value loaded. Something one needs is something one ought to have. The needs of industry is value loaded since it really means what industry ought to have.

Values in the kinds of knowledge we offer people reflect wider disagreements about what we feel it is important for people to know. **Consequently, current disagreements about, for example, vocational versus liberal education don't simply reflect the clash between the two theories of the meaning of mental terms. They also reflect differences about what we value for people in our society.** Do we think that it's important for people to have a breadth of knowledge or do we favour preparing people for work roles?

We may, or may not, have problems with the following statements:

- (a) Education needs to produce people with relevant skills.
- (b) Not everyone needs a breadth of knowledge.
- (c) For something to be called knowledge it must result in a performance which can be measured.

However, opponents may simply ask why we need to concern ourselves with values in public programmes. Perhaps, more radically, and in a postmodernist ethos, the issue may be raised as to whether we are capable of contending with values. Have values, and therefore value controversies, not been slain with modernism? Or is it perhaps the case that postmodernism is simply like the vintage claim that a given activity or position is 'value free'? Whilst it has been possible to respond to the latter with a trite, 'but that claim is itself a value judgement'; can the same be said for post-modernism? The issue has to be considered if we are not to embed post-modernism as the angel that sweeps away all the old rules and gives us that freedom to reconstruct into some idyllic world.

In fact the angel does not give us freedom. Consider the drastic objection in the field of values, which draws on post-modernist disillusionment with epistemic rationality and claims that democracy is primarily a matter of taste rather than epistemically rational choice. On this construction, the normal voter functions in a democracy do not require knowledge, merely the exercise of preferences of the kind one indulges in when shopping. Yet as it stands, the objection will have to be revised. A rational choice in terms of postmodernism is merely a choice consistent with individual preferences or tastes.

I acknowledge that the term tastes is frequently abandoned now and that there are some ingenious attempts to link utility frameworks with non-hedonistic perspectives, but for the immediate discussion I shall take tastes in the narrow sense of the word, as some kind of hedonistic pleasure index. Such a position suffers from all the general weaknesses of postmodernism, especially its failure to admit that the most important influence at breaking down modernist constructions of the epistemically rational individual has been the highly rationalistic and quantitative model of the market. Indeed, the critique of modernity is inseparable from an indictment of epistemic rationality. On this view, postmodernity is modernity without illusions.¹ The discipline of the market, for which nothing less than advanced mathematics will provide any elucidation, has been utilised to convict the ethical chooser in a democracy. The individual is a rational chooser for postmodernism only so long as he or she behaves within the market construction of choice; apart from the market, rational ethical choice crumbles.

Talk of epistemic rationality again leads to further postmodernist objections, especially the inability of people to obtain and exercise propositional knowledge, and the contention that accepted canons of knowledge are breaking down. These objections seem incongruous in a society that readily demands knowledge of its occupations and conducts its political affairs very largely in the paradigm of the market. It is arguable, too, both that the demands of any analysis of what is

the analysis of market behaviour has become ever more exclusive. For example, models of Nozick's conditional theory of knowledge demand that the individual should track the truth, making a dynamic theory of knowledge² ([p], [Bap], [~p ~Bap], [p Bap]) rather than the earlier and passive model of justified true belief, (p,Bap,JBap).

Where these models are not in evidence, as in English vocational courses, however, a situation reminiscent of Plato's Republic arises. What obtains for vocational course members is essentially 'knowledge by luck'³, in the form of competence models of learning. Attempts by recent competence schemes to include what is termed, 'underpinning knowledge' merely serve to illustrate the incoherence of the competence framework. On the one hand, there is a behaviourist model in which mental terms have no causal role to play and users are judged competent on the basis of outward behaviour. On the other hand, so-called competence models now include 'underpinning knowledge' with the implication that mental concepts do have a causal role to play. The competence model embodies a profound suspicion of all things intellectual and a socially divisive policy of reviving the old Mechanics Institutes.

The situation raises profound ethical problems. The vocational course member is condemned to low level vocational occupations with no values education and no preparation for a wider role within the society of which they are apart.

Perhaps even more alarming from the point of view of values education is the deep irrationality in post-modernism, in terms of its failure to examine the market system in a critical light. Instead, it returns to a worship of the "hidden hand". The global nature of the market, its ability to perform a reductionism in cradles of value-loaded activities from politics to philosophy, and its hygienic coating of self-interest, make it the guru of post-modernism. Writers such as Smart claim that the post-modern political condition is premised upon the demise of grand narratives and an associated abandonment of redemptive forms of politics against ethnocentrism. In fact, post-modernism is the abandonment of rational critical thought in the face of the all pervasive model of the market.

In the case of education, the market, under the guise of postmodernism, has secured the commodification of knowledge and the subordination of education to the demands of 'consumers'. Market jargon looms large, especially in the case of vocational courses, colleges and centres, in such phrases as "the needs of industry", meeting the needs of our customers", "targets", "objectives", "mission". The commodification of knowledge gives an education which deprives pupils and students of the conceptual sets necessary to demystify the market in the first place. The individual is not equipped to seek a form of life in post-modernism, because the form of life is provided by market reductionism. Instead, then, of an individual equipped as a chooser, the outstanding feature of a post-modernist education for the mass of the people is socialisation for a passive role in society and a reliance on the naturalism of Benthamite utility, which, it is assumed, we all possess. Hence, through its massive reductionism and its imposition of utility, the market alters our conception of democracy into a shopping spree in which we are all tasters, workers, and earners. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the vocational education sector, with its massive instrumental orientation.

One of the extraordinary things about the post-modernist reduction of choice is that it has occurred at a time when the market has extended its system of description from the traditional area of economics, to politics and education. The market system of description is a sophisticated and quantitative one, yet, traditionally, and apart from some sophisticated developments to be considered later, its construction of the voter is a highly simplistic one of taste and preference, and, above all, self interest. We have then, a highly sophisticated model, using premises of human behaviour based on a morality of crude naturalism. Of course, one can still talk of 'ethical voters' in this system, individuals, who will put the public interest before their own yet, in crude market constructions, such persons are aberrations. While the market, under the cloak of post modernism, denies rationality to any kind of ethical chooser, we are left with democracy couched in market terms of taste and preference. What counts as good is equated with private satisfaction, what counts as bad is a function of public good. In such a paradigm, there can be little ethical challenge to those who wish to claim a wholesale monopoly for vocational courses in post-school education. But for conceptions of democracy which envisage a rational moral chooser, one who might prefer the public interest even at a private cost, and, in particular, one who sees democracy as an instrument of development for the individual, post-compulsory institutions could provide an opportunity for continued educational, rather than simply vocational development, an important commitment in a democracy. Market systems, however, represent one system of description of social institutions and behaviour; we are not compelled to endorse such a system, our values may be different.

Finally, amongst the postmodern malaise, it is quite evident that the market is a feature of stability and above question. Utilitarianism is quintessentially the philosophy of the market. It is itself a postmodern philosophy which rejects the epistemic rationality of the enlightenment for the naturalistic features of pleasure, pain and harmony. Yet it does not disown rationality per se; it substitutes the rationality of the utility maximiser. Epistemic rationality is absorbed by a web of consumer rationality that is essentially an idealisation. Yet epistemic rationality models continue apace, as we have seen in the case of Nozick's conditional theory. The ideal consumer, beloved of market economists, is used to create a web of mathematical concepts that cannot be demystified by the post-modern consumer. The postmodern consumer is condemned as epistemically bankrupt by a system that has grown up by objectifying a print of the same consumer. In that sense, post-compulsory education and training is the postmodern consumer education product. It completes the gap between the postmodern consumer and the market, the latter of which underlies all assaults on the enlightenment. It completes the postmodern commodification of knowledge. It seals not merely a wholesale reductionism in terms of philosophy from active to passive citizens and their respective conceptual families, but seals it in terms of creating reductionist institutions, such as post-compulsory education and training, financed and epistemically packaged to produce the passive citizen of the market.

One of the pre-requisites of free enquiry is that it should be capable of challenging the self-images of the age. Such an enterprise requires:

1. A determined effort in values-education which resists reductionist programmes.

2. Texts which demonstrate and encourage the mounting of such challenges.

It is to be hoped that this journal will assist in providing the offending texts.

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¹ Toulmin, S. (1990) *Cosmopolis. The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*. New York. Free Press. See also, Bauman, Z. (1993) *Postmodernist Ethics*. Oxford. Blackwell.

² For further details, see Dancy, J. (1987) *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*. (Oxford, Blackwell)

³ Harper, W. (1996) *Knowledge and Luck*, in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 34. pp 273-283.