

# EDUCATIONAL THEORY: A CRITICAL DISCUSSION OF THE O'CONNOR-HIRST DEBATE

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## ABSTRACT

A discussion of educationally relevant aspects of the philosophical views of O'Connor and Hirst is followed by a critical review of their very different positions concerning the nature and scope of educational theory. It is argued that O'Connor's restricted definition of educational theory is inadequate as anything more than a very partial delineation of the area of enquiry and that Hirst's multi-disciplinary approach, while more satisfactory in many ways, does not emphasise sufficiently that any comprehensive theory of education must in the last analysis be ethical.

The debate between D. J. O'Connor and Paul Hirst centres on the way in which philosophy and other types of non-scientific knowledge contribute to educational theory. From basically similar philosophical positions, Hirst and O'Connor reach very different conclusions about the nature and scope of this area of theoretical enquiry. Following a brief discussion of the emphasis on clarification, a central feature of the contemporary analytical school of philosophy to which both subscribe, there will be a more extensive treatment of their respective views on metaphysics and the justification of value judgments – two areas of philosophical enquiry which are of particular importance for education. Then from a critical review of the very different concepts of educational theory which each develops from the general standpoint of the analytical philosopher, this article will argue that O'Connor's restricted view of educational theory is untenable as anything more than a very partial definition of the area of enquiry, and that Hirst's multi-disciplinary approach, while more satisfactory in many ways, does not emphasise sufficiently the logically prior role of ethics in the formulation of theory in education. Finally it will be argued that although at a superficial level it is possible to resolve the controversy between Hirst and O'Connor by means of a careful definition of the term 'educational theory', such a resolution conceals persistent and important points of difference between them. Moreover both fail to recognise that educational theory must in the last analysis be ethical.

The last forty or fifty years have been characterised by a changed conception of the nature of philosophy, sometimes called the 'revolution in philosophy', from which the modern analytical school has developed. The analytical philosophers consider the primary function of their discipline to be the clarification of abstract terms, and of the issues involved in complex problems, by means of rigorous linguistic and conceptual analysis. These techniques are not in themselves new – Plato, for example, uses conceptual analysis frequently. Modern philosophers, however, have cumulatively developed them to new levels of sophistication. Almost all contemporary philosophers, whether or not they are wholly committed to this or other aspects of the analytical position, have been influenced by its emphasis on clarification.

A less generally accepted tenet of the analytical school is that metaphysical questions cannot fruitfully be explored by philosophers. As metaphysical beliefs have an indisputable influence both explicitly and implicitly on the formulation of many educational principles, the philosophical debate concerning their logical status is relevant to the present discussion. O'Connor

takes an extreme position in this controversy, asserting that attempts by philosophers to answer metaphysical questions cannot be taken seriously because no metaphysical system 'has ever proved to be publicly testable by experts in the same field and coherent with the rest of established knowledge' (O'Connor, 1957, p. 45). Reid argues the opposite point of view, and criticises O'Connor's 'over violent repudiation of metaphysics' (Reid, 1962, p. 14). He explores the implications of O'Connor's assertion that public testability is a necessary condition of a system of thought being meaningful, and argues, convincingly in my opinion, that philosophical statements can be tested rationally otherwise than by formal deduction or by the empirical methods of verification used in the sciences. Reid presses the claims of moral, aesthetic, and religious experience as being properly significant in philosophical discussions, and maintains that such subjective experience is not as private and incommunicable as is sometimes argued. Hodgkin makes a similar claim for the validity of subjective, intuitive, and imaginative experience, and for the need to cultivate this in teaching (Hodgkin, 1970, pp. 18-19). Reid sums up his statement by using the analogy of the barrister. The philosopher does not strictly 'prove', but 'builds up a case' – a rational procedure requiring insight and judgment as well as logic, and one which can be applied usefully in assessing the grounds for metaphysical arguments.

Hirst does not participate in this philosophical controversy, although he implies that he would support a more sympathetic approach to metaphysics than that taken by O'Connor, whom he says many contemporary British philosophers would criticise for dismissing metaphysical beliefs and moral values too lightly (Hirst, 1966, p. 38). Hirst's attitude towards metaphysical statements is related to his view of philosophy as a 'second-order subject' which 'seeks to describe and explain the way in which first-order subjects (e.g. the sciences or the humanities) seek to explain the world' (Hirst, 1963, p. 60). Hirst maintains that metaphysical beliefs are an important part of the subject-matter of philosophy in this second-order sense. Moreover, such beliefs, whatever their logical status is considered to be, form part of the evidence on the basis of which educational principles are formulated. Hirst's main criticism of O'Connor's treatment of metaphysics is that he fails to realise that the validity or otherwise of metaphysical beliefs is in practice immaterial in assessing their significance in educational theory.

Two main points emerge from this discussion. The first concerns the status of metaphysical statements, and on this question I feel that O'Connor's total repudiation of metaphysics, arising from his neglect of the philosophical significance of the wider types of experience, to which Reid and others make reference, is completely unjustified. The second point relates to the place of metaphysics in educational theory. To my knowledge Hirst has not published a comprehensive discussion of the grounds of metaphysical statements, but, in his submission, a resolution of the philosophical problem is unnecessary in order to demonstrate the importance of metaphysics for the theory of education. This follows directly from the obvious truth that people hold beliefs of a metaphysical nature, and that these influence their views on education (Hirst, 1966, p. 41). Hirst's argument is adequate as an objection to O'Connor's exclusion of metaphysics from educational theory. However, simply to treat the existence of metaphysics as a fact of educational decision-making is not adequate in any serious attempt to work out from first principles a valid and comprehensive theory of education. As these first principles often include metaphysical beliefs, and as some of these beliefs are more justifiable than others, there must in any attempt to create a comprehensive

educational theory be recognition that metaphysical beliefs exist, and also procedures aimed at validating those particular beliefs by which any specific theory is influenced.

The justification of value judgments is the area of philosophical enquiry most closely linked to educational theory. That the concept of education implies the transmission of what is thought to be *desirable* has been well argued in several places by Peters (e.g. Peters, 1965; Peters, 1966; and more recently Hirst and Peters, 1970, pp. 19-21). Hirst's view of the nature of the relationship between ethics and educational theory is that the former provides part of the data on the basis of which educational principles are formulated. This relationship is not, however, seen by Hirst to be completely parallel to that existing between metaphysics and educational theory. Although Hirst does not investigate the various procedures by which philosophers attempt to justify value judgments, he would not argue, as in the case of metaphysics, that the validity of the values underlying educational principles was in any sense unimportant. On the contrary, he puts forward the view, although with some reservations, that there is much to be said for considering educational theory, along with other practical theories, as a sub-division of ethics (Hirst, 1966, pp. 52-54). The idea basic to this position, that questions of value are logically prior to other considerations in educational theory, is one that I find convincing, and which I feel Hirst is wrong ultimately to dismiss. I will return to this point later.

O'Connor also recognises the importance of the justification of value judgments for education. He states (O'Connor, 1957, p. 13) that it is 'the most important and most obvious point of contact between philosophy and education', and in Chapter 3 he discusses the problem at length, only to conclude that it is as yet unresolved. He sees the main functions of philosophy in this area of enquiry as being to clarify and elucidate the concepts involved, to make explicit hidden value judgments, and to keep looking for an answer to the problem of their justification. O'Connor's position is that this whole area of philosophy, while relevant for educational theory, is separate from it; whereas Hirst includes ethics among the many areas of knowledge from which educationalists draw the evidence they use in the formulation of educational principles, and labels this whole enterprise of establishing what ought to be done in education 'educational theory'. This is more than just a verbal quibble about the meaning of the term. O'Connor does not minimise the importance of value judgments in education, nor does he play down the problems connected with their justification. Thus it could perhaps be argued that he and Hirst differ more with regard to the particular types of statement to be subsumed under the heading of educational theory, than with regard to the areas of knowledge which are relevant for education. In my opinion, however, it is irrational to define the justification of value judgments out of a body of theory, the function of which is to prescribe ends as well as means, and which must therefore have a fundamental concern with values.

The preceding discussion, although purporting to be concerned with more general metaphysical and ethical issues, has inevitably included references to educational theory, since education is the area of practical activity in which both O'Connor and Hirst are most interested. These references have been mainly illustrative, however, and I shall now review their respective views on the nature and functions of educational theory in a more systematic way.

O'Connor sums up his discussion of the nature of an educational theory as follows: '... the word "theory" as it is used in educational contexts is generally a courtesy title. It is justified only where we are applying well

established experimental findings in psychology or sociology to the practice of education. And even here we should be aware that the conjectural gap between our theories and the facts on which they rest is sufficiently wide to make our logical consciences uneasy' (O'Connor, 1957, p. 110).

The logical paths which O'Connor follows in order to reach this conclusion are sometimes ill-defined, but I shall extract three points from his summary, and consider critically the arguments on which each appears to be based. His first point is that the term 'theory' is often misused by educationalists. Certainly it is often used loosely to cover what Reid calls 'a rag-bag containing all reflection and all talk about education' (Reid, 1965, p. 19). It is, I think, necessary for progress that this reflection become less diffuse, and that the questions which emerge from it become better differentiated into logically separate issues, scientific, philosophical, historical etc., which can then be discussed in an appropriate way, and validated by appropriate criteria. O'Connor's way of tidying up the concept, however, is to exclude from it all reflection based on beliefs and values, rather than on empirical evidence. Such a procedure is indefensible in an area where these non-scientific elements are of such fundamental importance.

This leads on secondly to O'Connor's assertion that the term 'theory' is properly used in educational contexts only when it refers to the application of 'well-established findings in psychology and sociology'. As argued above, this 'scientific reductionism' as Hirst calls it (Hirst, 1966, p. 41) is totally unacceptable when applied to an activity which is concerned with the formulation of ultimate goals as well as with the discovery of efficient means. Philosophical knowledge and methods of enquiry must contribute to the theoretical background of such an activity as well as relevant scientific knowledge. O'Connor's reluctance to recognise philosophical theorising as a legitimate part of educational theory seems to stem from the comparative lack of agreement about its conclusions compared with the relative certainty of well-established scientific findings. This line of thought can be faulted from two directions. On the one hand absolute certainty and absence of controversy are unattainable even in the most highly developed sciences, and on the other hand the amount of agreement about proper procedures and about conclusions reached is often underestimated both in philosophy and in other non-scientific branches of knowledge. The conclusion must be that neither agreement among experts, nor the lack of it, logically implies validity in any form of theoretical activity, scientific or non-scientific. I shall now develop these points.

Expert consensus is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of theoretical validity or usefulness. Indeed it has been argued by Feyerabend (1963, pp. 3 ff.) that the continuous creation of alternative theories is necessary for scientific advance. 'Plurality of theories must not be regarded as a preliminary stage of knowledge which will at some time in the future be replaced by the One True Theory. Theoretical pluralism is assumed to be an essential feature of all knowledge that claims to be objective' (Feyerabend, 1963, p. 6). I would agree with Feyerabend that conjecture and controversy contribute in a positive way to scientific progress and that to disallow these is to encourage dogmatism. Altogether O'Connor appears to have a rather naive notion about the nature of scientific truth. No-one would deny that the hypothetico-deductive method has proved a very powerful tool for discovering regularities in nature. Nevertheless the logic of the method is that hypotheses are accepted as long as they resist refutation, and the history of science provides plenty of examples where laws accepted as irrefutably established have been overturned

by the emergence of new theories. There is no reason to suppose that this process has now stopped.

But having made these points, that certainty is relative even in the developed sciences, and that there is no logical connection, although there is often an empirical correspondence, between the validity of a theory and the proportion of experts in the field who accept it, the opposite point must also be emphasised, that the amount of agreement concerning ways of assessing the validity of types of knowledge not amenable to empirical verification can easily be underestimated. O'Connor (pp. 123-4) does not deny that such ways of knowing exist (religious beliefs are an obvious example), but he does claim that they are non-rational, by which he means that they do not require to be justified by means of evaluating the evidence which can be produced to support them. This proposition hinges on the precise meaning given to the word 'evidence'. I would argue (and I think Reid would agree – see the discussion of metaphysics above) that there are procedures properly described as rational by which these ways of knowing can be assessed, not with absolute certainty, but in such a way that there is a considerable measure of agreement among people who are in sympathy with the type of 'evidence' – not necessarily empirical but necessarily communicable – which is appropriate. To summarise this present argument – I reiterated my rejection of O'Connor's narrow scientific definition of educational theory, arguing that a theory which prescribed ultimate goals must include philosophical elements. I speculated that it was the lack of certainty characteristic of philosophical debate (compared with findings in the sciences) and the disagreements among philosophers which made O'Connor uneasy about including philosophy in educational theory, and finally, I argued that this uneasiness was unfounded for three reasons: 1, that absolute certainty is an illusion, even in the most highly developed sciences; 2, that expert consensus is no guarantee of theoretical validity; and 3, that there are rational procedures, which can lead to a considerable measure of agreement, by which the validity of types of experience not amenable to empirical verification can be assessed.

The third point emerges from O'Connor's reminder of the 'conjectural gap' between theory and practice, which he maintains is conspicuous when the findings of the social sciences are applied to education. The implication in the quotation from O'Connor is that 'conjectural gap' is less common in the natural sciences than in the social sciences. This is a valid point, but it is an over-simplification to suggest as O'Connor does that the gap between theory and practice is attributable almost entirely to the present under-developed nature of the social sciences. He appears to argue that the primitive state of these sciences gives rise to modes of explanation logically distinct from those characteristic of the natural sciences. For example, he claims that 'science is a self-correcting procedure', but states a little further on that where the sciences involved are 'of a primitive and rudimentary kind (as in educational contexts) theories do not confirm or refute themselves, as they do in a well-developed science' (O'Connor, 1957, p. 74). The assertion that the findings of different branches of science differ in logical status does not stand up to examination. Philosophers of science are currently interested in extending the concept of scientific explanation to cover explanations expressed in terms of probabilities as well as those reached by the classical experimental method. It is not only the growth of the social sciences which has led to a growing interest in this area of enquiry, but also the fact that probabilistic methods are being used increasingly in the natural sciences. Various types of explanation are used in most branches of science, the relative frequency of any type

depending on the nature of the phenomena being investigated. In the social sciences, for example, the classical experimental method often cannot be used, either for ethical reasons or because of the large number of uncontrollable variables. Data must in such cases be treated statistically and results expressed in probabilistic terms. I would argue, however, that it is the nature of the subject-matter which exercises the strongest influence on the procedures used rather than, as O'Connor suggests, the stage of development of the particular science in question. In any case no branch of science has a monopoly of one particular mode of explanation which makes it logically different from other areas of scientific enquiry.

The inadequacy of O'Connor's characterisation of educational theory can be summed up by saying that he fails to appreciate the complexity of the area, and the number of organised bodies of knowledge which must be used within it, besides psychology and sociology. The most obvious omissions, apart from ethics and metaphysics which have already been discussed, are history and comparative analysis, both of which help the educationalist to examine the system of which he is a part in a more objective way, and also economics, social philosophy, linguistics, systems theory, and the theory of organisations and of administration.

The complexity of educational theory is emphasised very strongly by Hirst in all his treatments of the topic (Hirst, 1963; Hirst, 1966; and Hirst and Peters, 1970). Of the areas of knowledge listed above, Hirst claims that philosophy, history, psychology, and sociology are of particular significance for educational theory which he defines as 'the whole enterprise of building a body of rational principles for educational practice' (Hirst, 1966, p. 41). Hirst distinguishes two quite different but, he maintains, equally legitimate meanings of the term 'educational theory'. The first is O'Connor's definition – the body of scientific knowledge relevant for the practice of education. The second meaning is wider, and covers the whole activity of formulating practical principles in education. It includes the narrower meaning of the term, but extends beyond it to many other forms of enquiry and also takes account of limiting factors which are of a purely practical nature. O'Connor's error, according to Hirst, is not so much that he wishes to restrict the use of the term to the narrow scientific meaning, but that quite apart from what it is called, he fails to recognise the existence of the distinctive area of theoretical discussion which is educational theory in Hirst's wider sense. Hirst thinks that this is the more significant usage and thus that O'Connor seriously misrepresents the content of educational theory (Hirst, 1966, p. 41). He also argues that the theory of education, a practical activity, necessarily has a different function, and a different logical form, from scientific theories. The function of the latter is to predict and to explain observed relationships between variables, whereas the function of the theory of a practical activity is to prescribe and justify what ought to be done in practical situations. This normative aspect inevitably brings in forms of knowledge other than the sciences, because as many philosophers from David Hume onwards have pointed out, it is logically impossible to argue from statements of what is to statements of what ought to be.

I accept Hirst's characterisation of educational theory as far as it goes, but I would argue that, of the many branches of knowledge which contribute to educational theory, philosophy (and in particular ethics) is logically prior to all the others. Hirst considers the view that educational theory is a subdivision of moral philosophy (Hirst, 1966, pp. 52-53). He allows that there is a great deal to be said for this position, but ultimately rejects it firstly on the

grounds that the moral questions involved in educational theory are necessarily limited by the restricted nature of the practical activity in question, and secondly on the grounds that other types of evidence are required, as not all the questions dealt with in educational theory are essentially moral. Hirst's reservations about classifying educational theory as a form of ethical enquiry have sometimes been overlooked, most recently by Bantock (1971, p. 4) when he refers to Hirst's view that 'an educational theory is perhaps best classified as a form of moral knowledge'. This is essentially my position, but it is wrong to ascribe it to Hirst, as it is a view which he considers and ultimately dismisses.

Hirst presents two arguments which lead him to reject the view that educational theory is basically ethical, but before considering these it will be useful to elaborate on Hirst's distinction between two types of educational theory. In my view the essential difference between Hirst's wider use of the term and its more restricted meaning, which is accepted by O'Connor, is not that the former uses knowledge from many disciplines whereas the latter uses only the evidence of psychology and sociology, but rather that the former type prescribes ultimate goals as well as ways to achieve them, while the latter type of theory is more restricted and prescribes merely efficient means to agreed or assumed ends. In the former case prescriptions are normative, whereas in the latter they are instrumental only. All comprehensive theories of education must be of the former type – on this point Hirst and I are in agreement. We differ, however, about the importance of ethics in such a theory relative to the other areas of knowledge which contribute to it. In my opinion ethics is of fundamental importance in such a theory of education, but Hirst argues that it is misleading to think of educational theory as basically ethical, because the moral questions that arise are highly specific and of limited applicability and must be justified by procedures different from those appropriate for the justification of more general moral principles. I agree that moral questions in educational theory are often specific to a particular educational situation, but although they may originate in this restricted context, the process of resolving them involves appeal to moral principles at a higher level of generality, and must, if disagreement persists, include procedures whereby attempts are made to justify these. Many educational debates which involve normative prescriptions derive in the last analysis from fundamental differences of opinion about such high-level moral principles, and thus in my view the educational theorising which sustains these debates is essentially ethical.

Hirst makes two points in presenting a second reason for dismissing the view that ethics has a special position in educational theory. First he stresses again the need in educational theory for many types of specialised knowledge (a view with which I have already expressed agreement), and secondly he says that 'by no means all the questions (in educational theory) are essentially moral' (Hirst, 1966, p. 53). He elaborates this second point by pointing out that purely technical questions concerning teaching techniques and administrative efficiency feature in educational theory, and he draws a parallel between these aspects of educational theory and the theories of other practical activities such as engineering. When the principles prescribed by a theory are of the instrumental 'cook-book' type, as in engineering, or in the sort of activity which O'Connor would recognise as educational theory – then I would agree with Hirst that not all the questions are essentially moral. Indeed the only moral questions involved in theories which issue only in instrumental prescriptions are those concerned with procedural principles. Otherwise the

only appropriate criterion by which to assess instrumental prescriptions is their effectiveness in achieving their ends, which is a matter for empirical investigation. But Hirst's statement is never true when the prescriptions concern goals as well as means, as they must in any comprehensive educational theory. Other branches of knowledge besides philosophy are very relevant to educational theory in this wider sense – they help clarify possible courses of action, they predict likely outcomes on the basis of scientific knowledge or of historical or comparative analysis, and so make the procedure of formulating practical principles better informed – but when all these factual matters have been taken into account the questions which remain are ethical questions and must be tackled appropriately. All educational theories which involve normative as well as instrumental prescriptions are essentially, but not exclusively, moral.

At a superficial level, the O'Connor–Hirst debate concerns the meaning of the term 'educational theory', and at this level the controversy can be resolved by clearly defining, and renaming, the two meanings distinguished by Hirst. 'Comprehensive theory of education' and 'scientific theory of education' might be appropriate labels. Such an exercise, however, resolves little, because O'Connor, while recognising that some forms of non-scientific knowledge are relevant for education, does not acknowledge the existence of the distinctive area of theoretical enquiry which constitutes educational theory in the wider sense. Hirst's characterisation of this area rightly emphasises its complexity and thus the large number of different types of knowledge which must contribute to it. In my view, however, Hirst fails to accord to ethics the special position among these various branches of knowledge which the essentially normative nature of the theory demands.

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