

# Russell's contribution to philosophy of education

by William Hare

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RUSSELL OCCUPIES an uncertain position in philosophy of education. Assured, of a permanent and distinguished place in the history of philosophy, he is commonly thought barely to qualify as a philosopher of education at all. His extensive writings on education, a body of work which begins before World War I and continues until the 1960's and which includes two books, several and numerous magazine articles, are dismissed as of little philosophical interest. Joe Park, for example, states that "considerable care has been taken [by Park] to speak of Russell's ideas as a theory and not a philosophy of education."<sup>1</sup> Leslie Perry remarks that Russell's philosophy "is singularly separated from his writings on education. He did not subject educational questions to close philosophical analysis."<sup>2</sup> If we view Russell's contribution to educational theory as part of his general work on social and political questions, then we may include here John G. Slater's judgment that Russell made no contribution to political philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Probably A.J. Ayer captures the sentiment best in his assessment that Russell's writings on social and political questions "express the moral outlook of a humane

<sup>1</sup> *Bertrand Russell on Education* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1964), p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Perry, ed., *Bertrand Russell, A.S. Neill, Homer Lane, W.H. Kilpatrick: Four Progressive Educators* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1967), p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> "The Political Philosophy of Bertrand Russell", in J.E. Thomas and Kenneth Blackwell, eds., *Russell in Review* (Toronto: Samuel Stevens, Hakkert, 1976), pp. 135-54.

and enlightened man" but lack depth and theoretical interest.<sup>4</sup>

These explicit judgments are reflected in the general literature on philosophy of education, where Russell is all but ignored. A good example is the widely used *The Logic of Education* (London: Routledge, 1970) by Paul Hirst and Richard Peters, which contains not a single mention of Russell in the six pages devoted to further reading in philosophy of education and general philosophy. And yet, as we shall see, Russell has important things to say about many of the topics discussed in this book. Other examples are not hard to find. A surprising one is John White's *The Aims of Education Restated* (London: Routledge, 1982), which manages not a single reference to Russell while bemoaning the dearth of work on this topic. Again, we shall see that Russell had a sustained interest in educational aims. This general neglect carries over into the teaching of philosophy of education. Certainly it was possible twenty years ago to study it at the graduate level in Britain and Canada without being put on to Russell, except perhaps for the deprecating suggestion that "there's always Russell." It would surprise me if, with some honourable exceptions, Russell looms large in philosophy of education classes today. One notes in this context, especially with respect to courses for teachers, the now fashionable view that Russell is dated. Mary Anne Raywid, for example, quotes Russell on the problem of propaganda in education and comments: "Admirable, perhaps, but extensively irrelevant to the indoctrination danger as we are now coming to perceive it."<sup>5</sup>

The neglect by philosophers of education can to some extent be explained if not ultimately defended. Contemporary philosophy of education emerged in the mid-1950's and sought rather self-consciously to become a respectable member of the philosophical family. When Peters and Israel Scheffler came to write their pioneering works, inspiration came from the dominant approach to philosophy, the analysis of concepts. Scheffler noted that "the prospects for philosophical inquiry into education, in the spirit of contemporary analysis and with the help of its methods" seemed encouraging.<sup>6</sup> Peters, in a similar vein, claimed that conceptual clarification was an urgent necessity.<sup>7</sup> This, of course,

was the very time when Russell was heaping scorn on general philosophy as then practised. It was concerned, you will recall, with the different ways in which silly people can say silly things. It amounted to "philosophy-without-tears" where the central text was Fowler's *Modern English Usage*.<sup>8</sup> And Russell's famous anecdote about his inquiring the shortest way to Winchester was not calculated to win friends in the philosophical community by which he felt neglected.<sup>9</sup>

We must also acknowledge the fact that in his writings on education Russell makes no attempt to limit his contribution to commentary of a philosophical kind. He is quite willing to offer empirical generalizations based on psychology, general observation and common sense. For example, he tells us that the impartiality of the learner is best secured by exposing him to teachers with opposite prejudices.<sup>10</sup> This is a point which has appealed to other philosophers,<sup>11</sup> and it may well be true, but it is evidently not something which can be known through philosophical reflection. Some of his short essays indeed are *mainly* psychological in character,<sup>12</sup> but typically perhaps we find different disciplines freely drawn on. This diversity immediately put Russell out of step with the trend towards an emphasis on the distinctive nature of philosophy of education exemplified in the 1954 statement of the (American) Committee on the Nature and Function of the Discipline of the Philosophy of Education.<sup>13</sup> Peters also denounced the undifferentiated approach and viewed what he called the "omnibus conception" of the philosopher's task as "a relic of the old conception of the philosopher as a kind of oracle".<sup>14</sup> There is also in Russell a penchant for the general pronouncement, the value judgment presented as an obvious truth, the "high-level directive" to use Peters' expression. We may or may not agree with Russell that the headmaster should have freedom in the choice of textbooks (*Prospects*, p. 255), that the best

<sup>4</sup> "Bertrand Russell as a Philosopher", in Thomas and Blackwell, pp. 177-202. See also Ayer, "An Appraisal of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy", in D.F. Pears, ed., *Bertrand Russell: a Collection of Critical Essays* (New York: Anchor Books, 1972), pp. 6-22.

<sup>5</sup> "Perspectives on the Struggle against Indoctrination", *Educational Forum*, 48 (1984): 137-54.

<sup>6</sup> *The Language of Education* (Springfield: Thomas, 1960), p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> "Education as Initiation", in R.D. Archambault, ed., *Philosophical Analysis and Education* (London: Routledge, 1965), p. 88.

<sup>8</sup> *My Philosophical Development* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), pp. 230, 231.

<sup>9</sup> *Bertrand Russell Speaks His Mind* (New York: World, 1960), p. 16.

<sup>10</sup> Russell in collaboration with Dora Russell, *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization* (New York: Century, 1923), p. 255.

<sup>11</sup> Kai Nielsen, "The Very Idea of a Religious Education", *Journal of Education* (Nova Scotia), 2, no. 2 (1974-75): 36-8.

<sup>12</sup> For example, "Modern Tendencies in Education", *The Spectator*, 146 (13 June 1931): 926-7; and "Free Speech in Childhood", *The New Statesman and Nation*, n.s. 1 (30 May 1931): 486-8.

<sup>13</sup> Commissioned by the Philosophy of Education Society, the text is reprinted in Christopher J. Lucas, ed., *What Is Philosophy of Education?* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1969), pp. 111-13.

<sup>14</sup> "The Philosophy of Education", in J.W. Tibble, ed., *The Study of Education* (London: Routledge, 1966), p. 64.

teachers are not impartial (*ibid.*), that the atmosphere of most progressive schools is too pleasant and too easy-going to be an adequate preparation for modern life,<sup>15</sup> or that the examination system leads students to view knowledge from a purely utilitarian point of view;<sup>16</sup> but we may all agree that these observations are not particularly philosophical in character. The question, however, is whether or not they adequately represent Russell's contribution.

It must also be allowed that a would-be defender is not helped by some of Russell's own comments about his work on education. Slater has quoted Russell's comment that he did not write *Principles of Social Reconstruction* in his capacity as a philosopher ("Political Philosophy of Russell", p. 138). Referring to the books, including his two books on education, quoted by Goldstein in his affidavit submitted during the City College of New York controversy in 1940, Russell asserted that "the books and opinions mentioned are no part of my philosophy and cannot be correctly described as philosophy at all."<sup>17</sup> And in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, Russell suggests that there is little or no connection between his works of philosophy proper and his writings on education although others had claimed to find one.<sup>18</sup> Before these remarks are taken as decisive, however, some mitigating points may be mentioned. Certainly, in 1940, Russell had reason to distinguish sharply between his more theoretical writings and those with a practical emphasis, since his teaching at City College would be confined to the former. But applied philosophy has come to be regarded as a legitimate aspect of general philosophy in recent years, and Russell may well have been employing an overly sharp contrast between the technical and theoretical on the one hand, and the popular and practical on the other. We should not, I think, go along with the suggestion that wanting to improve the world and speaking in plain terms *excludes* philosophy. But the real test, of course, is whether or not any philosophy can be found in his writings on education.

My own view is that Russell's main contribution to philosophy of education is twofold. First, he makes an important contribution to our understanding of that fundamental distinction which we have come to speak of as the distinction between education and indoctrination. And

second, he formulates and defends a conception of teaching appropriate to the ideal of education. Let us consider these points in turn.

### 1. *The nature of education*

Russell rightly sees that questions about the aims of education are fundamental: "Before considering how to educate, it is well to be clear as to the sort of result which we wish to achieve."<sup>19</sup> But a consideration of aims might degenerate into a rhetorical defence of certain outcomes. In the general literature on education, we encounter vague but appealing comments, for example that education is of the whole person. Disconcertingly, we also run into the view that "any good education must be narrow."<sup>20</sup> These remarks could in themselves only be deemed philosophical in that broad sense which applies to a person's general outlook. What would turn a discussion into something more genuinely philosophical would be an attempt to explain what a certain aim involves, to provide an interpretation and characterization, or to show why a certain aim matters. Ironically, Park complains that Russell "has failed to formulate a comprehensive, yet direct, simple and concise statement of the aims of education" (*Russell on Education*, p. 130). This complaint totally misses the point that what Russell has done is critically to examine the aims of education while formulating his own.

Contemporary philosophers of education have shown that the concept of education implies certain criteria to which learning, teaching and the work of schools should but do not always conform. This thesis has been supported by appeal to analogy, examples, what we would say in certain cases and so on. Russell does not argue for this point in any detail, but it is clear that he recognizes it. He tells us, for example, that the modern teacher is appointed by an education authority but dismissed if he is found to be educating.<sup>21</sup> On another occasion, Russell says that he is conscious of being rash but nevertheless doubts whether an education designed to prevent thought is the best possible (*Prospects*, p. 250). In his own way, he is making the point that often what passes for education, what is called education, falls short of any serious conception of education. Moreover, implicit in these barbs is a conception of education as intimately connected with free inquiry and a concern for truth which runs throughout Russell's work. I think it is fair to say that a large part of Russell's concern with the aims of education is to

<sup>15</sup> "As School Opens—the Educators Examined", *The New York Times Magazine*, 7 Sept. 1952, pp. 9, 44–5.

<sup>16</sup> *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1916), p. 162.

<sup>17</sup> See Barry Feinberg and Ronald Kasrils, *Bertrand Russell's America*, Vol. 1: 1896–1945 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1973), p. 159.

<sup>18</sup> "Reply to Criticisms", in P.A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, 3rd ed. (New York: Tudor, 1951), p. 727.

<sup>19</sup> *On Education* (London: Unwin Books, 1971; 1st ed., 1926), p. 28.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Livingstone, *Some Tasks for Education* (Toronto: Oxford U.P., 1946), p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> "Freedom versus Authority in Education", in *Sceptical Essays* (Allen and Unwin, 1928), p. 187.

show how education differs from indoctrination and how conceptual clarity can help prevent confusion here. We are always in danger of failing to recognize the difference.

Russell's chief technique is to point out certain distinctions, often simple but overlooked, which serve to forestall tempting lines of thought and to illuminate the concept in question. For example, it is often assumed that indoctrination is either inevitable in teaching because children do not have the ability to exercise genuine freedom of choice at an early age, or justifiable because we should not let them make independent decisions until they are more mature. (Russell wants to know if children are to be free to swallow pins ["Freedom vs. Authority", p. 184].) His solution is to distinguish between giving freedom to the child and giving the child a preparation for freedom.<sup>22</sup> Without this distinction—and notice how similar it is to arguments used recently by analytical philosophers<sup>23</sup>—we are likely to become cavalier about the difference between education and indoctrination and easy prey for those who want to promote indoctrination.

It will be argued, for example, that respect for existing institutions is surely important, and the intuitively desirable overtones of "respect" may pave the way for political indoctrination. Here Russell reminds us of the difference between blind respect and thinking respect which is based on a recognition of merit.<sup>24</sup> That is, some forms of respect have to be earned, and we need to exercise our critical faculties to determine if respect is *deserved*. Unfortunately, as Russell sees it, state education typically attempts to instill admiration for existing institutions while repressing critical appraisal ("Freedom vs. Authority", p. 186). As we shall see subsequently, Russell is also aware of respect for persons, a respect we owe to others which does not have to be earned. The general point to be noticed here is that Russell shows how conceptual carelessness can fuel misguided theories and miseducative practices.

Russell anticipates the objection that free thought may lead people to choose or believe what is wrong rather than right (*John Stuart Mill*, p. 57). In this, of course, Russell is not merely toying with imaginary opponents. It is not difficult to find those who assert that an emphasis on the individual's critical faculties, free expression and general dis-

cussion, leads to a situation where "every truth is treated as a potential untruth, and every untruth as a potential truth. Thus the very concept of truth recedes into a nebulous background: a goal never to be attained."<sup>25</sup> And it is clear in practice that those who indoctrinate are encouraged by their own powerful conviction that their ideas are true and in danger of being ignored. Alberta's Jim Keegstra teaching that there is no evidence for the Holocaust is a case in point. Where, it will be asked, is our own professed concern and respect for truth if we tolerate open criticism? Russell, I believe, has shown us the way through this philosophical tangle.

First, he distinguishes between the wish for truth and the conviction that some particular creed is the truth (*Principles*, p. 154). He sometimes captures this as the distinction between truth and truthfulness, and he characterizes the latter as "the habit of forming our opinions on the evidence, and holding them with that degree of conviction which the evidence warrants" ("Freedom vs. Authority", p. 197). He adds that we must always be ready to admit new evidence against previous beliefs. Russell develops this distinction in several places in his writings. At times it appears as the principle of *veracity*, which "consists in trying to be right in matters of belief, and also in doing what is possible to insure that others are right."<sup>26</sup> Respect for truth then requires that we be prepared to reconsider what we have taken as true.

Second, Russell shows that a concern for truthfulness or veracity does not entail scepticism where the very notion of truth vanishes. He rejects the either-or dilemma represented by a choice between scepticism and dogmatism, and defends what he himself describes as a half-way house ("Education for Democracy", p. 529) where truth is ascertainable with difficulty to a certain degree. The rational person "accepts the most probable hypothesis for the time being while continuing to look for new evidence to confirm or confute it."<sup>27</sup> Russell would not concede that there is a contradiction between having a profound respect for truth and seeing what we take to be true as potentially untrue, as Niemeyer argues, because if our respect is indeed a thinking respect, it will accept and welcome new evidence which overturns an earlier belief. Respect for truth is incompatible with the dogmatic conviction that some particular belief is true.

<sup>22</sup> *John Stuart Mill* (pamphlet, London: Oxford U.P., 1955), p. 57. Reprinted in his *Portraits from Memory* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1956).

<sup>23</sup> See, in particular, Harvey Siegel, "Critical Thinking as an Intellectual Right", in D. Moshman, ed., *Children's Intellectual Rights* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1986), pp. 39–45.

<sup>24</sup> "Education for Democracy", *Addresses and Proceedings of the National Education Association*, 77 (1939): 532.

<sup>25</sup> Gerhart Niemeyer, "A Reappraisal of the Doctrine of Free Speech", *Thought*, 25 (1950): 251–74.

<sup>26</sup> "The Value of Free Thought", in his *Understanding History* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), p. 73.

<sup>27</sup> "Why Fanaticism Brings Defeat", *The Listener*, 40 (23 Sept. 1948): 452–3.

Third, and following from this, Russell draws the important distinction between the opinions a person has and the way in which they are held ("The Value of Free Thought", pp. 57-8). This latter aspect refers to an attitude or outlook which is central to Russell's conception of education. If we assess a person as educated or not on the basis of whether his or her beliefs are actually true, we encounter the problem that the available evidence may have led this person to the wrong conclusion. An example of this concerning Russell himself is the fact that, like many others, he accepted the Piltdown skull as genuine (*ibid.*, p. 11). What is crucial, however, is how the person reacts in the light of emerging evidence. It was this attitude which Russell attempted to describe throughout his writings on education: from his first published essay on general education in 1913, when he spoke of the scientific attitude of mind as involving an attempt to view the evidence frankly, without preconceptions and without bias;<sup>28</sup> to his final thoughts on education almost half a century later, when he characterized the undogmatic temper as involving continual search and avoidance of comfortable certainty.<sup>29</sup>

No doubt, as Stephen Jay Gould has put it, we are all locked into the "search images" of our specializations.<sup>30</sup> We notice what we are interested in, and I could not help but notice that Russell has a good deal to say about open-mindedness and its place in education. The points just mentioned obviously have a close bearing on this concept. But Russell makes the connection between education and open-mindedness explicit. It is generally well known, I think, that Russell declared that open-mindedness should be one of the qualities that education aims at producing (*On Education*, p. 43). No doubt, out of context, this must sound like the kind of grandiloquent pronouncement scorned by Peters in his reference to the image of the philosopher as oracle. But it would be a mistake to dismiss Russell in this way, for we would fail to see how he has helped to clarify this attitude.

First, Russell sees clearly that open-mindedness is not incompatible with having convictions and, therefore, does not presuppose neutrality. We noted earlier that he speaks of holding beliefs with that degree of conviction which the evidence warrants. He points out that "the difference between a rational man and a dogmatist is not that the latter

has beliefs while the former has none. The difference is as to the grounds of the beliefs and the way in which they are held" ("Why Fanaticism Brings Defeat", p. 452). The point would have been even clearer if Russell had more carefully distinguished between having an open mind in the sense of having as yet formed no view, and being open-minded in the sense of having a certain attitude; both attitudes are discussed and somewhat run together in his interesting paper "Can We Afford Open Minds?"<sup>31</sup> Certainly, Russell is right to say that if you preserve an open mind all the time and about everything, you will accomplish nothing, but this should not be construed as a reflection on open-mindedness as an attitude. Russell himself sees this because elsewhere he makes the point that the rational person "will be prepared to act upon a high degree of probability as vigorously as the dogmatist acts upon what he holds to be certainty" ("Why Fanaticism Brings Defeat", p. 452). But this point is not clear to everyone, as I have shown elsewhere,<sup>32</sup> and part of the confusion is thinking of "having an open mind" and "being open-minded" as synonymous. This last quotation also shows, I believe, that when, in a paper written in 1964,<sup>33</sup> Russell calls on philosophers to take immediate action in so far as they can to help end the arms race, he is not departing from an earlier view. He had *consistently* championed vigorous action on a high degree of probability.

Second, Russell helps us to see that open-mindedness does not mean scepticism or credulity. As for the latter, open-mindedness does not mean being willing to believe whatever you are told but being willing to consider the possibility that something is true. As Russell puts it, "education in credulity leads by quick stages to mental decay", and "Instead of credulity, the object should be to stimulate constructive doubt" (*Principles*, pp. 155, 156). This remark brings us face to face with the question of scepticism. Now certainly Russell does introduce the notion of doubt here, as he does elsewhere, to illuminate the concept of open-mindedness. And in my first book, I chided him with making the link, though I did concede that the particular comment cited occurred in a piece of correspondence, and might be interpreted as pragmatic advice.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, on reflection it seems a trifle ungenerous, given that Russell makes considerable effort to dissociate his

<sup>28</sup> "The Place of Science in a Liberal Education", in his *Mysticism and Logic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954; 1st ed., 1918), pp. 38-49.

<sup>29</sup> "University Education", in his *Fact and Fiction* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1961), pp. 150-6.

<sup>30</sup> "We First Stood on Our Own Two Feet in Africa," *Discover*, May 1986, pp. 52-6.

<sup>31</sup> *The New York Times Magazine*, 11 June 1950, pp. 9, 37-8.

<sup>32</sup> *In Defence of Open-Mindedness* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's U.P., 1985).

<sup>33</sup> "The Duty of a Philosopher in This Age", in Eugene Freeman, ed., *The Abdication of Philosophy* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1976), pp. 15-22.

<sup>34</sup> *Open-Mindedness and Education* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's U.P., 1979), p. 31.

position from that of scepticism. He sees it as equally important for education to counteract incredulity as credulity ("Education for Democracy", p. 530). It is relevant too that Russell speaks of *constructive* doubt, doubt which has a basis, and which is designed to lead to a better appreciation of the truth. Russell wants students to learn to be immune to eloquence but not to become immune to argument and evidence (*ibid.*). Indeed, his view is that "towards facts, submission is the only rational attitude" ("The Value of Free Thought", p. 102). Thus, his scepticism is a tempered and limited one, and his position on open-mindedness is a good example of what Herbert Feigl has characterized as the policy which "steers a sane middle course between the extremes of dogmatism and skepticism."<sup>35</sup>

Third, Russell recognizes that there comes a time when open-mindedness is virtually without merit from a practical point of view, though some of his illustrations, for example the disappearance of open-mindedness towards whom you might marry once you have chosen a wife, ring a little odd coming from him. But the point is clear enough. Certain decisions tend to close doors, as we cannot be always reconsidering them. Career decisions are one example. Even here, however, as Russell points out, there is a certain residual open-mindedness which is important, since circumstances *might* arise in which a decision would need to be reexamined. Russell's example is of a lawyer in a country that becomes totalitarian ("Can We Afford Open Minds?", p. 9).

Finally, Russell shows more clearly than any other writer I have encountered what the false face of open-mindedness looks like. It appears as what he calls "good form":

"Good form" is quite compatible with a superficial open-mindedness, a readiness to hear all sides, and a certain urbanity towards opponents. But it is not compatible with fundamental open-mindedness, or with any inward readiness to give weight to the other side. Its essence is the assumption that what is important is a certain kind of behaviour, a behaviour which minimizes friction between equals and delicately impresses inferiors with a conviction of their own crudity. (*Principles*, pp. 152-3)

What is important here is that open-mindedness really requires a certain attitude, and behaviour can superficially mimic this. The ascription of open-mindedness calls for judgment and cannot be mechanically read off from a check-list of behaviours. I think that implicit also is a distinction between open-mindedness and tolerance, since those with

"good form" do at least tolerate their opponents. This distinction is important, since toleration does not make the same demands on an individual as open-mindedness. I may tolerate your views but never be willing to ask seriously if they undermine my own. Hence, when Russell claims elsewhere that one source of tolerance is the realization that we may be mistaken ("Why Fanaticism Brings Defeat", p. 452), this should not be interpreted as the claim that the tolerant individual is *necessarily* impressed with his or her own fallibility.

A proper grasp of these points is still extremely relevant to the indoctrination debate. We have seen in the Keegstra case, for example, how the fundamental link between open-mindedness and respect for evidence, which Russell insisted on, can be lost sight of. We may wonder, then, why Russell's contribution here has been dismissed as largely irrelevant. The charge comes from Raywid, who takes exception to one of Russell's practical suggestions to teachers who wish to combat indoctrination, namely that they expose their students to the most vehement and terrific argumentation on all sides of every question ("Education for Democracy", p. 529). This prompts Raywid to remark, as I noted earlier, that this is admirable but irrelevant—just the kind of deprecating and dismissive comment which is all too common.

The nub of her objection is that indoctrination can occur as an osmosis-like process which infiltrates the very language we learn and indeed the whole process of upbringing. In response, two points need to be made at once. First, despite Raywid's claim that she has personally identified this new form of indoctrination, it seems abundantly clear that Russell was quite familiar with it. Russell speaks of the person who "goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason."<sup>36</sup> His reference elsewhere to the paradox of "using language to undo the false beliefs that it suggests",<sup>37</sup> shows that Russell was not unaware of what Raywid calls a ubiquitous and pervasive form of indoctrination. The suggestion of naivety is wide of the mark. Second, it is not at all clear that Russell's positive suggestion is as pointless as Raywid implies. In examining particular controversies in the manner advocated by Russell, there is no reason to assume that what one learns is confined to the details of the particular issue at hand. Students may in addition be developing habits of questioning which will lead them to be more critical of beliefs which tend

<sup>35</sup> "The Outlook of Scientific Humanism", in Freeman, p. 74.

<sup>36</sup> *The Problems of Philosophy* (London: Oxford U.P., 1973; 1st ed., 1912), p. 91.

<sup>37</sup> *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1948), p. 76.

to be taken for granted.

It would be a pity if this single reference to a practical suggestion were to create the impression that Russell has no philosophical contribution to make to our understanding of indoctrination. It would be similarly mistaken to assume that with respect to teaching itself all he has to offer is practical advice. We must recognize that any such advice he has to offer is shaped by a general view of what teaching ought to be.

## 2. *A conception of teaching*

If Russell's contribution were limited to such practical aspects of teaching as his suggestion for dealing with controversial material by exposing students to "the most eloquent advocates of every imaginable point of view" ("Education for Democracy", p. 529), the neglect of his work by philosophers of education might be justified. Interesting as these remarks are, they are no substitute for a clear and defensible account of teaching itself. I believe that we do find an important conception of teaching detailed in Russell's work, one which foreshadows an influential strand in contemporary philosophy of education. Russell's contribution here has not been adequately acknowledged. Moreover, it is a conception which blends perfectly with his account of education distinguished from indoctrination.

We can appreciate this if we pause to consider some further remarks of a rather practical nature about teaching controversial materials which might at first glance seem questionable given his commitment to open-mindedness as an aim of education. There is, for example, Russell's view that all teachers, not only those at the university level (*Prospects*, p. 252), must be free to express their opinions even if these differ from the prevailing orthodoxy. Along with some recent writers,<sup>38</sup> we may wonder if such a departure from neutrality is conducive to the development of open-mindedness in the students. Moreover, Russell qualifies the claim by insisting that no fault must be found with the actual knowledge of the students (*Prospects*, p. 252). Is this consistent with his professed belief in the fallibility of knowledge claims which justifies the call for open-mindedness? And finally, we might wonder at his suggestion that one function of the teacher is to mitigate the heat of current controversy.<sup>39</sup> How is this to be reconciled with the view that students

<sup>38</sup> For example, John Wilson, "Education and the Neutrality of the Teacher", *Journal of Christian Education*, 14 (1971): 178.

<sup>39</sup> "The Functions of a Teacher", in *Unpopular Essays* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1950), p. 152.

must be exposed to the most vehement and terrific argumentation on all sides of every question in order to offset fanaticism?

The answer to these puzzles is simply that behind Russell's particular suggestions for practice lies a view about the *attitude* which any teacher needs to bring to the task. And this attitude can be captured in two notions, reverence and humility. Russell's primary concern is not with the methods of teaching at all but with the attitude of the teacher whatever method is used. Even in those general essays where Russell deals with topics such as play, drill and class size, it is significant that he closes with the point that teachers need a more liberal *outlook* ("As School Opens", p. 45). It is true that Russell is on record as having made a vow as an undergraduate that when he became a university teacher he would place no faith in the lecture method ("University Education", p. 154). But elsewhere he makes it clear that instruction can be given in a liberal *spirit* though this does not always occur (*Principles*, p. 149). He describes his own undergraduate experience at Cambridge in the 1890's as a process of indoctrination (*My Philosophical Development*, p. 11). In considering Russell, we should not be misled by the label "progressive" to think primarily of methods.

"Reverence" is a somewhat old-fashioned term for a modern idea, namely that the teacher must respect the student as an individual. The child is not a piece of clay to be moulded into shape, but is capable of developing into an adult who can exercise independent and reasonable judgment. Teachers whose objective it is to have students adopt their opinions rather than to come to think for themselves lack reverence. The student must be regarded as an end in himself or herself ("Freedom vs. Authority", p. 201), not as raw material to be used for some other purpose. If education is to produce thought rather than belief, another distinction drawn by Russell (*Principles*, p. 153), then teachers need a spirit of reverence. Incidentally, Russell is not suggesting that students do not need to respect their teachers: "You do have to have enough respect for the teacher to enable the business of teaching to be carried on" ("Education for Democracy", p. 532). The danger is that respect for the teacher will turn into unthinking respect, which undermines independent thought. An element of authority is necessary, but for Russell it is very much a provisional authority. Freedom of opinion, which Russell regards as the most important kind of freedom, belongs also to the pupil ("Freedom vs. Authority", p. 196), and respect entails fostering free inquiry on the part of the student. Too often it is checked by dogma or stony silence (*Principles*, p. 152).

In part, Russell is setting out a straightforward moral demand when he speaks of reverence. There is also a moral aspect to humility, for he

refers to the responsibility which falls on the teacher because of his or her position of trust (*ibid.*, p. 147). In addition, however, there is an epistemological basis for these requirements. Teachers need to respect the opinions of their students because teachers may learn that their own views are mistaken. Respect for students requires a liberal outlook in teaching which Russell defines as one which "regards all questions as open to discussion and all opinions as open to a greater or less measure of doubt."<sup>40</sup> Humility is appropriate given the probability that the opinions we express as teachers will turn out to be erroneous:

... if you state an opinion, you should realize that, if you take opinions held by people three hundred years ago, you will find very few that you would think right now, and in the same way there must be few of our opinions now that are right. ("Education for Democracy", p. 533)

Here, I think, we do not need to look far for a link with Russell's general philosophical views. For example, Russell holds that the greater part of what would commonly pass as knowledge is more or less probable opinion (*Problems*, p. 81). Again, he interprets perfect rationality not as believing what is true but as attaching to every proposition a degree of belief corresponding to its degree of credibility (*Human Knowledge*, p. 415). These general epistemological ideas explain and justify the emphasis on humility. Russell dispenses with the notion of the teacher as the authoritative source of knowledge, and substitutes a view which sees the teacher as a co-inquirer, more familiar than the student with the field, but aware of his or her limitations.

In expressing his or her views on a controversial topic, a teacher with a liberal outlook is not trying to secure passive acceptance. The Keegstra case may make us incline towards teacher neutrality, but Keegstra lacked respect and humility. These function as guidelines for the teacher who wants to foster the student's independent judgment, and Russell acknowledges that teachers will simply have to *find* a way of acting in accordance with the spirit of liberty (*Principles*, p. 146). There are no hard and fast methodological rules.

In requiring that the examination of controversy not be at the expense of knowledge, Russell can be interpreted as meaning that teachers must acquaint their students with those views which are widely *regarded* as constituting knowledge. There is no excuse for ignorance and incompetence. We have already met Russell's view that submission

is the only rational attitude towards facts, and that is one kind of humility. At the same time, however, we need that humility which leaves us prepared to review what we have thus far counted as knowledge ("University Education", p. 156). Russell also recognizes that an accusation of incompetence can be used to silence unpopular opinions, hence he proposes that "teachers should be chosen for their expertness in the subject they teach, and that the judges of this expertness should be other experts" ("Freedom and the Colleges", p. 299).

When Russell suggests that one function of the teacher is to mitigate the heat of current controversy, his idea is not to play down or ignore the fact of controversy but rather to stress the importance of helping students become "rather impervious to eloquence and propaganda" ("Education for Democracy", p. 530). Students need *exposure* to propaganda, but they need to develop the critical skills which will prevent them from being taken in by it. They need to form their views on the available evidence and hold them no more firmly than the evidence warrants. Respect here means refraining from engaging in propaganda oneself in teaching, and humility involves recognizing that one is not in a position to resolve the controversy. What one can and should do as a teacher is to promote the development of impartial and disinterested judgment.<sup>41</sup>

It is important to recognize that, in calling for reverence, Russell is not indulging in any kind of romantic tender-mindedness. Students are to be encouraged to form their own opinions, but these must be based on a careful review of the evidence and an appraisal of the relevant arguments. The teacher should "try to teach impartiality of judgment, the habit of searching for impersonal truth, and distrust of party catchwords" (*Prospects*, p. 270). Russell is not defending a relativistic approach where opinions are deemed equal. Towards the opinions of others, the objective is to produce "only such opposition as is combined with imaginative apprehension and a clear realization of the grounds of opposition" (*Principles*, pp. 155-6). In recognizing the importance of creative work by students, Russell warns against encouraging students to think that they are producing great works of art. Teachers, he says, "must learn to respect intelligence and independent thought where it exists, though they need not, like some progressive educators, pretend to find it in all and sundry" ("As School Opens", p. 45). Respect for the student requires a critical stance in teaching.

Some commentators have questioned Russell's own commitment to

<sup>40</sup> "Freedom and the Colleges", in Feinberg and Kasrils, *Bertrand Russell's America*, 1: 299-307.

<sup>41</sup> Russell typically condemns propaganda where we might more naturally speak of indoctrination.

these fundamental attributes of teaching. Brian Hendley admits to having "the uncomfortable feeling that Russell wants to replace bigotry and narrow-mindedness with an intolerance of his very own,"<sup>42</sup> quotes Katharine Tait's observation that at Beacon Hill School there was never a cogent presentation of the Christian faith by a believer.<sup>43</sup> More ominously, perhaps, she reports that making up one's own mind usually meant agreeing with Russell, who invariably knew more than the pupils. Here, however, we must remember the distinction between theory and practice. Certainly at the level of principle, there is no reason to think that Russell supports a double standard. The clearest evidence of his commitment to an even-handed policy is Russell's own condemnation of state education in France, which he regarded as militantly secular and as dogmatic as the church schools (*Principles*, p. 152). This comment makes it unlikely, I think, that Russell's *attitude* can be captured, as Hendley claims, in the remark made on another occasion that he was not prepared to tell children anything he did not believe (*Dewey, Russell, Whitehead*, p. 72). This is altogether too cavalier.

Russell's emphasis on respect for the student and the importance of reason in teaching places him in our vanguard of a movement which is best exemplified in the work of Scheffler and, more recently, Harvey Siegel. Scheffler, in a well-known passage, characterized teaching as "an activity aimed at the achievement of learning, and practised in such manner as to respect the student's intellectual integrity and capacity for independent judgement."<sup>44</sup> He viewed this characterization as setting teaching apart from other activities, such as propaganda, which seek to modify the person without genuinely engaging his or her judgement. Scheffler saw teaching as requiring us to reveal our reasons to the student and to submit them to his or her critical evaluation.

Currently, the leading exponent of this conception of teaching is Siegel, who acknowledges his indebtedness to Scheffler.<sup>45</sup> Siegel speaks of the *critical manner* of teaching which he analyzes in terms of the student's right to question and demand reasons, and the teacher's willingness to subject all beliefs and practices to critical scrutiny. It is clear that the *critical manner* refers to certain criteria or standards which

teaching should meet *whatever form it takes*.<sup>46</sup> One implication of the term "manner" in this context is that the conception is not being identified with a particular methodology.

Throughout Russell's writings on education, with his consistent theme of evidence, honesty and a liberal outlook in teaching, we find the forerunner of the critical manner conception. The parallel is striking, yet equally striking is the absence of Russell's name in any list of acknowledgements. I am not aware that other commentators have drawn attention to the comparison, and I wonder at my temerity in advancing the suggestion.

#### Concluding comment

Park has suggested that "Russell's ideas on education should be treated as hypotheses, formulated by a widely read and very wise man, which remain to be substantiated by scientific investigation" (*Russell on Education*, p. 129). This remark may apply to many of Russell's educational ideas, but it completely ignores all of those ideas, such as we have examined here, which are not advanced as scientific hypotheses at all but as conceptual commentary on certain educational ideals. Russell's task is the traditional philosophical one of clarification and justification. His achievement is to have improved our understanding of education and teaching as ideals, with an analysis which is still relevant. All of the crucial points which we need to sort our way through the Keegstra tangle, for example, are to be found in Russell, set out with inimitable clarity. When the dust settles on the skirmishing in recent philosophy of education, Russell will be seen as an important contributor to the development of the discipline and not as a dinosaur out of place in a new world.

*Departments of Education and Philosophy  
Dalhousie University*

<sup>42</sup> *Dewey, Russell, Whitehead: Philosophers as Educators* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois U.P., 1986), p. 71.

<sup>43</sup> *My Father Bertrand Russell* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p. 94.

<sup>44</sup> "Philosophical Models of Teaching", in Peters, ed., *The Concept of Education* (London: Routledge, 1967), pp. 120-34.

<sup>45</sup> "Critical Thinking as an Intellectual Right", p. 41. See also Siegel's forthcoming book, *Educating Reason: an Essay on Rationality, Critical Thinking and Education* (London: Routledge, 1987).

<sup>46</sup> See the work of John Passmore, who has also emphasized the critical spirit in teaching. He seems to identify the critical spirit with particular methods, notably the discussion method. On the other hand, one might interpret his remarks not as practical, methodological advice but as suggestions about further *criteria*. i.e. teaching, whatever form it takes, must manifest the spirit of *discussion*. See his "On Teaching to be Critical", in Peters, ed., *The Concept of Education*, pp. 192-211; "Education and Adaptation for the Future", in Donald J. Ortner, ed., *How Humans Adapt* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1983), pp. 457-76; and esp. *The Philosophy of Teaching* (London: Duckworth, 1980), Chap. 9.