

Free Expression, or the Teaching of Techniques?

The light dove, cleaving the air in her free flight, and feeling its resistance, might imagine that its flight would be still easier in empty space.

Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason*, 1929, p. 47.

The so-called 'Great Debate' in Britain on the reappraisal of educational aims and achievements has brought to the surface a major controversy on general policy which has been for some time a strong undercurrent. The crux of the issue can be broadly summarised as a conflict between, on the one hand, freedom of expression, to allow unrestricted individual development, and on the other hand, the teaching of techniques. This is one of the central issues, with respect to language learning, of the Bullock Report.¹

There has been for many years a pronounced swing away from the 'bad old days' of an educational policy whose overriding emphasis was on the formal imparting of knowledge, and teaching of techniques. But there is a growing body of opinion that, in many spheres, the reaction has taken the form of a swing to an equally damaging opposite extreme of permissiveness, in some cases amounting to patent absurdity and incoherence. To cite an example, on a recent visit to North America I was told of a dance professor who refuses, as a matter of principle, to offer any teaching and to make any assessment of her students' work, on the grounds that to do so would be an illegitimate restriction on individual freedom of expression and development. She insists that there must be no such external 'imposition' of standards and techniques, but that each student should be free to develop in his own way, and to decide what is and what is not of artistic value. Hence she was able to raise no objection when some of her students, as their dance performance, simply sat on the floor of the studio eating crisps [potato chips].

This may be an extreme example but it is a manifestation of a general attitude to education which is encountered all too frequently. Yet it is radically misconceived. For instance, it should be noticed that it is often those in positions of authority who are guilty not only of inconsistency, but of implicitly imposing inconsistency on teachers. For, ironically, teachers employed by such authorities usually find that they are effectively not free to adopt any policy other than a 'free' one. Moreover, it is typical of the muddled thinking which surrounds this attitude that the dance professor to whom I alluded above, as a consequence of her students' actions, lost her job. Yet in fact her 'misconduct' consisted merely in carrying consistently and sincerely to its logical conclusion a policy towards her subject which was well known to and therefore, presumably, implicitly approved by those who employed her. It was *they* who were confused and inconsistent.

¹ *A Language for Life: Report of the Committee of Inquiry appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science under the Chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock (HMSO, 1975).*

It is again characteristic that although these authorities approved of, or at least were prepared to countenance, a 'free' policy, there was nevertheless an underlying conviction that it was incumbent on them as responsible educationists to demand standards in those they employed. In this they were substantially right. For although the contention is unpopular, and arouses heated opposition in some quarters, it is surely clear that no one can teach conscientiously, at any level, without some form of assessment. A teacher needs to know whether and to what extent his pupils are understanding and learning, and he can achieve that only by assessment. Hence if a teacher is not interested in assessing his pupils' understanding, he is not interested in whether he is doing his job properly. What *form* that assessment should take is, of course, another matter.

That there is a serious misconception inherent in this kind of extreme, subjective, student-centred policy can be revealed by considering the case of language-learning. Roughly, a language is an expression of a conception of reality. So that in learning linguistic techniques and practices a child is inevitably learning to see and understand the world in its terms. But it would be palpably absurd to suggest that this understanding is especially imposed and restrictive, and that consequently, for *real* freedom of individual development each child should grow up alone on a desert island, where he can acquire *his own* concepts and understanding of the world, independently of the limitations set by conformist influences. Clearly, so far from conferring *greater* freedom of thought, such a course of action would severely restrict the child's possible freedom of thought and individual development.

A person with an inadequate grasp of the techniques of reading, spelling, grammar and vocabulary suffers a consequent *limitation* of individual freedom, and capacity for free expression. To take a clear example, many teachers in higher education have had unfortunate practical experience of the consequences of such deficiencies in their students. For instance, some undergraduates lack a sufficient competence in linguistic skills for the understanding and expression of the precise, subtle, and complex conceptual issues involved in philosophy. As a consequence, they are limited, in this respect, in their freedom for expression, experience, and individual growth.

Nevertheless, it would be rash to assume that, because of these considerations, the 'free expression' school of thought can be dismissed as *totally* misconceived. That is far from the truth. Such a policy could hardly have attracted so many sincere adherents if that were so. It arose as a justifiable reaction against an educational policy which undoubtedly *was* restrictive in, for example, misguidedly elevating the ability to produce correct grammar to the status of an end in itself, rather than recognising that it should be regarded as a means to the end of giving the child the possibility of greater freedom of expression. Thus, imagination and initiative were stifled in a mistaken over-emphasis on stringent standards in *modes* of expression, at the expense of a concern for *what* was expressed.

The creative genius of a very few, such as D. H. Lawrence, survived the system. Perhaps genius will usually surmount any system. But there was little opportunity for the majority to escape the conformist pressures, in order to be able to develop individually. Nevertheless, it significantly underlies the conceptual point to which I am drawing attention that even a D. H. Lawrence was free to castigate the system *only* because he had mastered the techniques conferred by that system. For instance, he condemned too much reasoning as morally and emotionally crippling, in that it leads to a calculating and insufficiently spontaneous nature. Yet, inevitably, he had to support this contention with persuasive *reasoning*.

The philosophical misconception which seems still to underlie some educational thought is that to have the opportunity for *really* free individual development is to have been exposed to no influence, to have acquired *no* techniques, to have received *no* teaching. The conceptual error encapsulated in that kind of assumption is aptly exposed in the quotation from Kant which I cited as a preface to this paper.

It is important to try to locate the source of this fundamental misconception. It can, I submit, be traced to the conflation of two contributory factors. The first of these is a failure to recognise the distinction between the psychological and the philosophical issues involved. The valid and important insight of the 'free-expression' school of thought is a psychological one, namely that there are attitudes to and methods of teaching which can stifle individuality, imagination and self-confidence. This is a quite different point from the philosophical or conceptual one for which I am arguing, namely that if certain techniques are not acquired, whether of language, the arts, or any other subject, children are not allowed but *deprived of* certain possibilities for freedom of expression and individuality.

Perhaps the misconception arises in this way. It is correctly recognised that *some* teaching of techniques leads to restrictions on freedom. From that it is erroneously assumed, at least implicitly, that to remove *all* teaching of techniques is to remove *all* restrictions on freedom. Thus a valid psychological insight is taken to such an invalid extreme that it becomes a conceptual confusion.

This kind of misconceived and pernicious subjectivism is still widely propounded as an article of faith in many areas of education but it is, perhaps, most obviously prevalent in the arts. Moreover, such an attitude is by no means limited to education, as T. J. Diffey, Editor of the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, points out in a recent article (1977), in which he aptly characterises it as: 'the cant of the age [which] commands us each to find his own meaning in a work of art, for it has none, we are told, but what each can find'.

The point was well illustrated in an article in a local newspaper on a footballer who attributes his success to a *lack* of coaching: 'I have been left to do

my own thing and been allowed to play my own game ...I've been lucky that it (natural ability) has been developed fully and not coached out of me'. Yet it is significant that he acknowledges: 'I'm still learning the game and will continue to do so for the rest of my life'. This is an implicit recognition of the need to acquire technical skills, even if he prefers an unconventional method of acquiring them. Moreover, although there may be disagreement about which techniques are necessary or desirable, and although some techniques may be more suitable for some people than others, this is not in the least to deny the principle that without technical skills freedom is restricted.

The second contributory factor to the subjectivist misconception we are considering is more complex. It arises from a common misapprehension about the individuality of a person. What underlies this misapprehension is a failure to recognise the significance of the intimate and complicated interdependence between the identity of an individual personality and the character of the society in which he lives. It is easy enough to understand that a society is necessarily composed of individual people, but much more difficult to understand the converse relation which is of far greater significance for the issue under consideration, namely the way in which individual personality is logically dependent on the language and practices of a society. And by that I mean that no sense could be made of the notion of the individual apart from that language and those practices.

Central to the common misconception on this issue is an oversimplified notion of individual personality as an entity logically distinct from its social context. That is, there is an implicit tendency to think of the real person, what he really is, his essential individuality, as that which underlies and is independent of 'extraneous' factors such as the social practices in which he engages. This sort of misleading tendency is also sometimes manifested in theories of 'self-actualisation' and 'self-realisation', which imply that the real character of the individual can be fully revealed only by ruthlessly stripping away such distorting and irrelevant accretions. This kind of assumption is particularly tempting where someone exhibits widely disparate and perhaps conflicting dispositions and attitudes. In such a case it is plausible to assume that there must be some underlying unity buried beneath the scattered confusion on the surface. But such an assumption is misleading, for what is loosely dispersed on the surface *is* the truth about the character of the individual. The individual personality is not something *other than* what he does and says. We may be able to make sense of the notion of individual personality apart from *some*, but certainly not from *all*, his actions. As Wittgenstein put it: 'In order to find the real artichoke we divested it of its leaves' (Wittgenstein 1958: § 164).

One can appreciate why it is plausible for someone with this misleading preconception about individual personality to regard the teaching of techniques as inhibiting, for these will inevitably appear to be extraneous

influences, obscuring its essential character and hindering its free and natural development.

Yet this kind of conception is fundamentally mistaken, and, as we have seen, can have pernicious educational consequences. With reference to the question of how is it that we can understand other people, D. Z. Phillips (1970) makes the point:

The problem is not one of discovering how to bridge an unbridgeable gulf between a number of logically private selves, contingently thrown together. On the contrary, unless there were a common life which people share, which they were taught and came to learn, there could be no notion of a person ... Our common ways of doing things are not generalisations from individual performances, but the preconditions of individuality. The public is the precondition of the private, not a construct of it. This being so, what it means to be a person cannot be divorced or abstracted from these common features of human life (Phillips 1970: 6).

Now of course this is not in the least to deny the importance of the so-called 'inner life', that is, thoughts, feelings and experiences which are not publicly expressed. It is to deny that any sense can be made of the notion that the thoughts, feelings and experiences of an individual personality can be regarded as logically distinct from the public practices of a society. Yet the enormous significance of this point is frequently overlooked. For example, Argyle writes:

It looks as if what is being expressed in music is an elaborate sequence of inner experiences including various emotions. It is because music can represent these experiences so well that it has been called 'the language of the emotions' (1975: 386 and see also p. 384).

This clearly implies that the 'elaborate sequence of inner experiences', exists in the mind prior to and independently of any possible expression in a public medium, and that, as a matter of contingent fact, it can be expressed in music. The notion is that such experiences are, as it were, stored in the mind awaiting the availability of the most appropriate form of expression so that they can be most effectively articulated. According to this conception, the inner experience is not necessarily related to its overt expression in music. Thus it would have to be intelligible to suppose that such experiences might continue to exist indefinitely without ever being expressed since, for instance, their owner might never learn the requisite musical techniques. But in that case how could they be identified? Since they are not necessarily expressible, what sense can we make of the assertion that they do exist? Or, to put the point another way, since, on this hypothesis, their existence cannot be verified even in principle, how different is this from saying that they do *not* exist? Moreover, it would be a consequence of such a view that it could intelligibly be said that a dog could have such experiences but that it just so happens he has not mastered the musical techniques necessary for the expression of them.

It is significant that Argyle writes of music that it can represent the relevant experiences *so well*. This clearly implies the possibility of comparison, i.e. that other forms of expression could in principle be tried, but that music can be shown to be the most effective. Yet no sense can be made of the suggestion that perhaps the same experience as that expressed in the music could be expressed in some other way, even if not so well, since, on this hypothesis, nothing could count as the same experience. On this model, it would have to be intelligible to suppose that a poem or painting could be found to express the inner experience even better, so that the music became redundant. Thus, on a cold night one could say: 'Don't bother to go to the concert. Stay at home and read this poem which expressed the same experience even better than the symphony'.

The implication of this common misconception is that there is no impossibility in principle, but only in practice, about the expression and experience of these emotions in other forms. But it is not simply a *practical* difficulty which prevents what is expressed in a symphony from being expressed and experienced in an alternative way. It is a logical impossibility, by which I mean that it makes no sense to suppose that it could be experienced in some other way. That is, the notion of a contingent connection here has to be rejected as unintelligible. The inner experience is necessarily related to, uniquely identified by, the possibility of its overt expression in music. The point could be brought home to anyone who was inclined to continue to defend this 'subjectivist' conception by asking him to *which* experience he was referring. For the *only* way in which he could answer that question would be by reference to the relevant piece of music.

It is his recognition that the identification of inner experience is dependent upon its overt expression in social practice that leads Collingwood (1938) to remark: 'Until a man has expressed his emotion, he does not yet know what emotion it is. The act of expressing it is therefore an exploration of his own emotions'.

The subjectivist notion of the experience itself, in isolation from its possible expression in a public medium, is unintelligible. For example, no experience could possibly count as that of making a check-mate move in isolation from the context of the practice of playing chess. Apart from that practice, with its rules and conventions, whatever physical movements were performed, they could not count as giving the same experience. It is of the first importance to be clear that the context of the social practice is not something *extraneous* which is, as it were, merely the convenient *means* by which such an experience can be expressed. For the experience could not *be* what it is if there were no such social activity. Moreover, it is only by acquiring a grasp of the appropriate techniques that an individual could have such an experience.

The consequences for education are of seminal importance, for it should be remembered that the cases we have considered, such a music, are merely particular examples of an approach to educational policy which is held as a general principle. At most, it is the thesis of this common form of subjectivist conception, if it were intelligible, that the relevant experiences could not be, or could not be adequately, *expressed* without the appropriate medium of expression; and thus that the contribution of education is to provide an opportunity for the possibility of their expression. But the rejection of that conception, and the recognition of the character of a coherent one, reveals a position of enormously greater significance for education with respect to the responsibility for the development of individual potential. For it transpires that if, for instance, there were no art form of music, the respective experiences would not be merely inexpressible, but, much more importantly, they could not intelligibly be said to *exist*. And that is to say that the *individual* could not *have* such experiences unless he had acquired some grasp of the techniques and objective criteria of the art form of music in his society.² Thus, in this respect, the existence of the *social* practice, and the learning of its techniques and criteria, are necessary preconditions of the possibility of individual experience and development.

This clearly exposes the fallacy that freedom for unrestricted personal development depends upon the *avoidance* of the teaching of techniques. On the contrary, the freedom of the individual to experience the relevant feelings necessarily *depends upon* his having learned those techniques.

The examples we have considered are merely manifestations of a general misconception to the effect that ideas, thoughts, experiences and feelings are only contingently connected with their overt forms of expression in social practices. One of the most seriously misleading manifestations of this general misconception is expressed in the common assumption that language is symbolic. For, in the way that assumption is most naturally construed, this expresses or lends support to the prevalent misapprehension that language is merely a system of signs or symbols to convey messages which are formulated prior to and independently of language.³ Thus it is often proposed as an intelligible supposition that it is possible to think without any medium of expression, even if one requires language to communicate the thoughts. Yet it is a consequence of this assumption that one could intelligibly suppose an owl to be capable of profound philosophical ideas, even though it so happens that he has not managed to learn the language in which to express them. Clearly however wise owls may be in fable, such a supposition makes no sense, since, without the requisite ability to express oneself in language, nothing could *count* as having the ability for profound philosophical ideas.

² I argue that artistic judgements are as fully objective as scientific judgements in a paper entitled 'Objectivity in Artistic Appreciation', forthcoming in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*.

³ This misconception is clearly evident in Argyle's book (1975). I criticise this kind of misconception more fully in chapters 8 and 9 of a recently published work, i.e. Best (1978).

And that is to say that the learning of linguistic techniques is a necessary precondition of the capacity in an individual for philosophical thinking and ideas. It is in this sense that the teaching of techniques, so far from inhibiting or distorting freedom of thought and individual development, is the only way of making it possible.

It is a seminal fallacy to regard language as a mere convenience, supervenient to the thoughts, ideas, activities and experiences of individual people. On the contrary, language provides the standards of truth and falsity; it gives the structure of possible reality, as the expression of the form of life of a society. With respect to the grounds of the reasons which are adduced in scientific proofs, Wittgenstein remarks: 'We are quite sure of it' does not mean just that every single person is certain of it, but that we belong to a community which is bound together by science and education (1969: § 298).

The common, oversimple notion of individual personality is, then, radically mistaken, since one's possible ways of thinking and experiencing are inextricably bound up with the language and practices of the society of which one is a member. A consequence of my thesis is that the concept of personal identity is necessarily very flexible and indeterminate and, correlatively, so is that of a society. This carries implications, which I can only briefly adumbrate here, of another area of significant difference from essentialist notions of the individual, often implied in talk of 'self-actualisation', and 'self-realisation'. For the notion of 'the *real* character' of a person seems to convey a picture of something static and permanent below the superficial changes on the surface. Yet there is an important sense in which it is more appropriate and intelligible to regard a person as being in a constant state of creation. It is an important insight of existentialism to conceive of each person as faced with an indefinite range of choices which will progressively determine the character of his own individuality. This conception has the added psychological benefit of emphasising the active possibility, indeed inevitability, of responsibility for what one is, and it is more constructive in that it allows for change where one is dissatisfied with one's self. However, in one important respect the existentialist view is seriously misleading, for clearly there are limits to the possibility of change. One's possibility of choice is obviously not logically unlimited. On the contrary, it will depend not only on inherent abilities, but also on the language and social practices which one has learned.

The consequences for educational responsibility are considerable. For, in contradistinction to the permissive 'subjectivist' view, it transpires that the educationist carries an unavoidable responsibility for the individual personality development of children. It is undoubtedly enormously difficult to oppose the conformist pressures, for instance of television advertising and the so-called 'pop-culture', towards a bland, superficial uniformity of cliché phraseology. But a person with only trite forms of expression is a person who is capable of only trite possibilities of experience. The point underlies this trenchant passage from Oscar Wilde:

The intellectual and emotional life of ordinary people is a very contemptible affair. Just as they borrow their ideas from a sort of circulating library of thought ... and send them back soiled at the end of each week, so they always try to get their emotions on credit, and refuse to pay the bill when it comes in (1962: 501).

To appreciate the point I am trying to make here, imagine that one were trying to understand the ways of thinking of an individual from a very different society. At anything above a very primitive level, such as understanding that he was hungry, this would be impossible without to some extent coming to understand the concepts and practices of his society. As we have seen, no sense can be made of the notion of subjectively isolated thoughts, discoverable only by introspection, since without the concepts given with the language and social practices they could not intelligibly be said to exist. In this respect it is significant that we attribute such thoughts only to human beings. We do not speak in this way of the thoughts of a fish, a tree, or a clock. This is because such thoughts are possible only for a creature with a language, and a language is impossible for an individual in isolation. It requires a society.

There is an illuminating analogy here between facial expressions and verbal expressions, in that the meaning of both is often imprecise and capable of subtle change. More importantly for the case I am arguing, both require a social context, of interaction with and understanding of other people. Hence, in order to understand the meaning of linguistic and facial expressions, it is necessary ultimately to understand the way people in a society conduct their lives together. So that this brings out in another way the significance of the point that *individual* personality is grounded in *social* consciousness expressed in language and practices of a society. Peter Winch writes:

Unlike beasts, men do not merely live but also have a conception of life. This is not something that is simply added to their life, rather it changes the very sense which the word 'life' has when applied to man. It is no longer equivalent to 'animate existence'. When we are speaking of the life of man, we can ask questions about what is the right way to live, what things are most important in life, whether life has any significance, and if so what (1972: 44).

The conception of life of an individual must be expressible, and in that sense it is dependent on the social forms in which it could be expressed.

The capacity for individual development in thought and experience, so far from being restricted by, actually *depends* upon, the learning of techniques. It is seriously misleading to crave for and aim towards the unintelligible 'ideal' according to which individual potential can be fully realised only by avoiding all formative influences. Let me extend the quotation from Kant with which I introduced this paper:

The light dove, cleaving the air in her free flight, and feeling its resistance, might imagine that its flight would be still easier in empty space. It was thus that Plato left the world of the senses, as setting too narrow limits to the understanding, and ventured out beyond it on the wings of ideas, in the empty space of the pure understanding. He did not observe that with all his efforts he made no advance – meeting no resistance

that might, as it were, serve as a support upon which he could take a stand, to which he could apply his powers, and so set his understanding in motion (Kant 1929: 47).

There are, of course, no clear, definitive, general criteria. The abstract philosophical principle may be a valuable guideline, but particular solutions will always require sensitive and informed judgement. This is why there is no substitute for high quality teachers who can judge the time and methods appropriate for the teaching of techniques, so that individual potential in children is fulfilled, not inhibited.

I welcome what appears to be the beginning of a shift in the climate of educational thought, from the sometimes misguided permissive extremes of the 'free-expression' school, to a recognition that individual ability can be fully developed only if a child is taught a disciplined structure of thought and action. Only such a structure can give him a firm foundation on which to stand, and from which to progress. He cannot stand on, and thus move forward from, nothing.

In short, I submit that the commonly assumed opposed polarity between freedom, and the teaching of techniques, is radically misconceived.

Kant's light dove would, both literally and metaphorically, be brought down to earth with a bump if it could attain its imagined ideal of escaping the resistant air in order to achieve complete freedom for flight.

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