

# ON LEARNING VOLUME 2

Philosophy, concepts and practices

Edited by David Scott



UCLPRESS

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*Philosophy, concepts and practices*

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# Preface

The latest edition of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK was concluded in 2021. This is part of a series of national assessments (formerly known as Research Assessment Exercises) of the quality of research in British universities going back to 1986. The Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) and the equivalent bodies in Wales (Higher Education Funding Council for Wales [HEFCW]), Scotland (Scottish Funding Council [SFC]) and Northern Ireland (Department for Education and Learning [DEL]) are responsible for organising the REF, and are accountable to the various governments for doing so. As a result, HEFCE and the other three bodies allocate research monies to UK universities using a formula that is decided after the exercise has been completed. The reasons given for having a Research Excellence Framework are: to inform the allocation of nearly £2 billion in public funding invested in research annually; to provide accountability for this public funding; to benchmark and establish reputational yardsticks for universities, and for departments within them; and to inform university strategic decisions and understand sector-wide trends (among others).

In 2021, 157 institutions submitted the research outputs of 52,077 research staff members for scrutiny and assessment. For each submission, three elements were assessed: the quality of outputs (for example, publications, performances and exhibitions), their impact outside the university sector, and the environment within each university that supports research. In total, the members of 34 subpanels were required to read 185,594 individual research outputs and grade them on a scale which ranged through 4\* (quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour), 3\* (quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour, but which falls short of the highest standards of excellence), 2\* (quality that is recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour), 1\* (quality that is recognised nationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour) to unclassified (quality that falls below the standard of nationally recognised work). In addition, they were required to read 6,781 impact case studies.

Some panel members have admitted that they were advised to spend roughly twenty minutes on each piece, which might be a 250-page book, a 10,000-word article in a learned journal or a 15,000-word chapter in a book. Time constraints meant that only a superficial reading of the pieces could be made, and it is therefore possible to conclude that the longer and more substantial the piece of work, the less reliable was the judgement being made of it. One consequence of this was the mistaken assumption made by research directors in universities that researchers should submit refereed articles rather than books or book chapters, an output model that members of natural science bodies felt more comfortable with than those working in the humanities or in some parts of the social science community. The judgements made by panel members were meant to be criteria-referenced, although subsequent accounts of the deliberations that were made after the initial assessments were completed have confirmed that adjustments were made to these initial assessments to bring the 34 subpanels into line with each other, thus providing contradictory evidence to the claims made by university research directors that their internal assessment exercises were in line with, or accurate predictions of, actual results. This has been a costly exercise in knowledge production. The result is predictable: a weak, detheorised, reductionist and regressive form of knowledge.

The Research Excellence Framework is a form of instrumental rationality, and it can be understood as a means for controlling the types of knowledge produced in the academy, and as a process of delimiting the notion of research itself. Such discourses and judgements, and consequently (although not inevitably) practices around the world, have been dominated over the last twenty years by empiricist knowledge frameworks and forms of instrumental rationality, exemplified by new public management structures and reductive evidence-based policy prescriptions. The various authors of this book address these philosophical issues, albeit through different lenses and framings.

Consequently, knowledge cannot be treated unproblematically, as it is by many politicians who separate out facts from values in an unreflective way, and by journalists who refuse to accept that their carefully managed accounts of events and happenings in the world are always ideologically framed, both in relation to their content and in relation to how they are presented, and, of course, by many academics – not least in the field of education, in which I work – whose brand of knowledge is both dangerously reductive and philosophically naive. So, for example, some argue that the knowledge frame for any claim in the world, and therefore for its truthfulness, has to be reduced to concepts and relations between them that

can be measured – a strategic argument that concludes with the admonition that this is the only way we can proceed, even if we are not able to be absolutely precise in everything we say – or that it is not possible to judge between different and rival theories about the same social object – even though they make such judgements in their personal and professional lives.

There have recently been calls to adopt approaches to the study of the social world that deny the need to address ontological and epistemological issues. Advocates for these approaches give the impression that they are operating outside of, and in opposition to, philosophical framings about the nature of the world and how it can be known. Their purpose is to support and strengthen a particular ideological view of human behaviour, which favours those forms of research and judgement that can be described as empiricist and technicist. For them, ontological and epistemological beliefs do not underpin the development and use of strategies and methods that they employ as empirical researchers. Pragmatists, using this term in its ordinary language sense, argue that it is possible to separate out these beliefs from the adoption of methods and strategies. These methods and strategies are determined by how useful they are, and even by whether they are fit for purpose. Pragmatists of this type therefore deny the necessity of the relationship between ontological and epistemological frames and those strategies and methods that they use in the research process.

Knowledge about, for example, the social categories of gender, race, religion, dis-ability, intelligence, sexuality and class, is always framed by sets of ideas and moral ordinances, and, as a consequence, cannot be treated unproblematically. This book is an exercise in knowledge development, and it seeks to shed light on the workings of these social categories, because a proper examination of them is an essential starting point for understanding how the world and objects in that world are arranged and ordered. These categories are discursive constructions. However, what needs to be said time and time again is that a discursive arrangement can never be a simple determinant of identity, behaviour or action. Discourses are structured in a variety of ways, and both this meta-structuring and the forms it produces are relative to time and place. This meta-structuring refers to constructs such as generality, performativity, reference, value, binary opposition, representation and legitimacy.

Nothing in this book proscribes a social dimension to the development of knowledge, and, in turn, the book's contention is that this has to be carefully monitored by those committed to some form of truthful inquiry. Research, which is the principal mechanism for knowledge development, is both descriptive (understood in a non-representationalist

way) *and* developmental and proactive, that is, it gives an account of reality and in the process changes the nature of that reality, although not in every instance. It redescribes and reformulates the object of the investigation, and in some cases this is quite clearly its intention. It is incumbent on us, however, to treat all knowledge development as work in progress, as work yet to be completed.

Instrumental rationality is an example of a knowledge framework that now dominates in faculties and disciplines around the world. This book, as you can see from its title, is about learning, or at least about the concept and practice of learning. What the contributors to this volume are focusing on are two meta-concepts, knowledge and learning, the relationship between the two, and the way these can be framed in epistemic, social, political and economic terms. Knowledge and learning, as meta-concepts, are positioned in various networks or constellations of meaning, principally, the antecedents of the concepts, their relations to other relevant concepts, and the way the concepts are used in the lifeworld.

In this book, we explore a number of important concepts that are relevant to the idea of learning. These are meta-concepts such as epistemology, inferential role semantics, phenomenology, rationality, thinking, hermeneutics, critical realism, pragmatism and valorisation, and meso-concepts such as probability, woman, training, assessment, education, system, race, friendship, *Bildung*, curriculum, ecology and pedagogy. All of them have a direct relationship with learning, and can be positioned in the field of learning or education. However, these positionings need to be made explicit, or, at least, good reasons need to be provided for their inclusion in this field.

There is a need to distinguish between different types of concepts, because if their functionality is different, then we can only use them in particular ways. For example, meta-concepts can be distinguished from peripheral concepts, in relation to how important they are in the argument that is being made or the discursive configuration of which they are a part. Some concepts are dispositional, some have denotative contents. All concepts are normatively and ethically framed, and what this means is that every time we use a concept, discursively or as a praxis, we are giving a value to something in the world. However, some concepts are strongly framed as value-carriers, while others are only weakly framed. Some concepts have a supersessional form, and consequently are hierarchically arranged; others do not.

A note is in order here about the languaged concept of learning. As with all concepts, to understand and use a concept in a book about our experiences in the lifeworld is also to position it within antecedent,

contemporaneous and applied networks of meaning. This means that we are not using the concept in essentialist, detheorised or positivistic ways. We are acknowledging that language and language systems are value-impregnated, and we are using the term to suggest that there are several different interpretations of the concept of learning. The issue about language that this raises will come up time and time again in this book, and it is of some significance.

I can only repeat what I said at the conclusion to the preface of the first volume of this set of books, *On Learning: A general theory of objects and object-relations*. This book, *On Learning: Philosophy, concepts and practices*,<sup>1</sup> like the first volume, is a response to empiricist and positivist conceptions of knowledge; detheorised and reductionist ideas of learning that have filtered through to the management of our schools; regressive and degenerative notions of learning, as in social realist approaches; simple messages about learning, knowledge, curriculum and assessment that abound in disciplines and subdisciplines such as the sociology of education and leadership and management; the employment of punitive forms of power in our universities, in our colleges and in our schools; the use of bureaucratic power mechanisms in new public management strategies; and the denial that values are central to understanding how we live and how we should live – the normative dimension to social policy and social theorising. This book is also an attempt at a *Bildungstheorie*.

## Reference

Wittgenstein, L. (1969) *On Certainty*. New York: Harper and Row.

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1 This book, *On Learning: Philosophy, concepts and practices*, and the first book in the set, *On Learning: A general theory of objects and object-relations*, both have the first title of 'On Learning'. This is a reference to a book by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1969), *On Certainty*.



# 1

## The concept and practice of learning

David Scott

In the first volume of this work (Scott, 2021), I argued (provided good reasons, or so I thought) for a philosophy of conceptual or dispositional realism with regards to the concept and practice of learning (with learning being understood as a meta-concept that has an important role in connecting knowledge to the world). This is a mediated form of realism,<sup>1</sup> and it is opposed to the many direct forms of realism, positivist or otherwise, that have been developed.<sup>2</sup> The argument was complicated, and providing a brief account of it here is likely to impair or distort it. However, this account is needed because there are connections and relations (as you would expect) between *On Learning: A general theory of objects and object-relations* and this book, *On Learning: Philosophy, concepts and practices*, and these need to be made explicit. In the first volume, I argued, following Martin Heidegger (1962), that knowledge of the world and of the self is framed or, as he preferred to call it, enframed. (In the German that Heidegger wrote in, he used the word *Gestell*, which translates as frame, positioning, underpinning, stand or enframing.)<sup>3</sup>

This enframing comprises a reasoned argument to support a claim about some aspect of the world, whether universal, meta-conceptual, meso-conceptual or empirical, and consequently there is a need to give

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1 I could have substituted 'critical' here to replace 'mediated'. This would also have tied the debates to those taking place within the critical realist movement and siding with early Bhaskarian philosophy (see Bhaskar, 2011) against Archer (2007) and others. Critical has a fuller set of meanings than mediated.

2 Examples of this are Ayer (1936) and Archer (2007).

3 This is a word used by Martin Heidegger (1962) to denote those social, geo-historical, temporal, epistemological, political and discursive frames within which our utterances are ineluctably embedded. Translating a word from German to English, for example, requires much more than a word-to-word change.

expression to this enframing as it relates to ontological, epistemological and methodological issues. This requires a theory of mind, and therefore a theory of the relationship between mind or minds and the world. In addition, concepts, such as learning, can be polysemic and used in a number of different ways, and they are enframed in a form of life.<sup>4</sup> All this and more needs to be made explicit before the central argument of this or any other book can be attended to.

There are five object-types in the world: discursive objects (for example, a philosophy of learning), material objects (for example, a classroom), relational objects (for example, an inferential relation), structural-institutional-systemic objects (this object-type includes discursive configurations such as a school effectiveness discourse, and material configurations such as a school system) and people. People have to be treated differently from other types of objects, not least because they operate through dispositional concepts and volitions, and all that this implies. Each of these object-types has different characteristics and, because objects have a morphogenetic structure, in rare circumstances may change their status as objects; indeed, what constitutes an object-type is also morphogenetic.

In an object-ontology, human beings have acquired dispositions. These are conceptual relations, which cannot be fully determined as to their meaning in definitional and essentialising ways, but only in terms of how they are used in a way of life. What I am suggesting is that when I make a truth-bearing statement, I am not providing a description of an experience but making a claim about it in what Wilfred Sellars (1997) describes as 'a space of reasons'. Reasons are different from, and operate in different ways to, physical causes. There are also good and less good reasons for doing something. What follows from these two assertions is that we can and should understand and use concepts specifically in relation to current and future-oriented networks or constellations of meanings. Reasoning within this space involves the giving of and asking for reasons, where this activity is understood as making a commitment in the world and to its consequences (for a fuller exposition of this relational ontology, see [Chapter 3](#)). This book is about the concept and practice of learning, and those objects and object-relations that characterise them.

The relationship between knowledge and the world also needs to be addressed. This involves a rejection of crude versions of representationalism

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4 Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) made this point time and time again, although this attracted a huge amount of criticism.

that have dominated historical and current theories of learning and curriculum, such as behaviourism and cognitivism. Representationalist theories of mind identify an inner realm of representations and an outer realm of objects in the world, which are placed in some form of identity relation. If we reject this approach, the focus of our work should be the relationship between the two. An alternative version of this relationship is that we should prioritise expression or inference before representation in the semantic process, that is, in the determination of meaning. An activity of the mind is not a representation of an action in the world. Epistemic judgements bring about something; they do not act exclusively as reflectors of a pre-set reality.<sup>5</sup>

We (the contributors to this edited book, writing from different perspectives and framings)<sup>6</sup> also make the case (provide sufficient reasons for making a claim of knowledge) for values (epistemic, ethical, logical, temporal, relational, spatial, personal) as being centrally implicated in both our descriptions of the world and in our life choices. There are two dimensions to this claim. The first is ontological, and this is a claim that objects in the world and human beings are valorised in relation to each other and to other object-types. A second dimension is that values are epistemological. If we accept that knowledge is always valorised and authored in some form or another, and that we inevitably make prejudgements about the world in our investigations, then being in the world is understood as a practice, primed for investigation, but resistant to algorithmic and devalorised methods for describing it.

I am making a series of claims here, some of which are about authorship. This is an edited book, which means that each chapter has been written by a different person.<sup>7</sup> Each of these authors has a set of beliefs that they share with their fellow authors, and, in addition, I think I can say with some confidence that they have some beliefs and belief-sets which they do not share or have in common with their fellow authors. This authorship puzzle or conundrum is further compounded by the editor of the book also being one of the individual contributors. My work, as you can see from the single-authored first volume,<sup>8</sup> is underpinned by a dispositional and conceptual realism, which may or may not be endorsed by the other contributors, in full, in part, or in its application, although all

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5 See Taylor (1985; 1998).

6 Authorship and the making of knowledge claims in an edited book is a complicated affair. The editor of this book, who is also one of its authors, is making here a number of limited claims that he thinks might be shared by all the other writers. He could have overreached himself.

7 The last chapter in this book was written by two people.

8 Scott (2021).

of them, I believe, subscribe authoritatively to the enframing of the social world, including our knowledge of it. Authorship in this book – using this phrase to refer to the book as a whole rather than to conventional understandings of authorship in an edited book – is therefore multi-perspectival and is focused or centred on the particularity of the concept assigned to each of the chapter authors. I say assigned to them because my first task was to assemble a number of authors willing and able to write a chapter for this book to a set of loosely framed criteria about a particular concept or conceptual frame. I am therefore committing myself here to a particular and specific concept of authorship.

Further to this, I am committing myself to the possibility of identifying a type of meta-knowledge, the truth of which does not lie in specific instances of knowledge construction, but in a set of preconditions for the operation of knowledge disciplines and practices. The argument then becomes that our utterances always and necessarily presuppose a set of conditions that are in effect universal. These include context-transcending notions of truth and morality<sup>9</sup> and the rejection of domain-specific notions of correctness. Acts of referring therefore cannot take place without a background of an operating referential system; acts of lying cannot take place outside a system of truth-telling; and acts of writing cannot credibly take place without a notion of authorship.

Concepts, and this after all is the principal focus of this book, cannot be fully determined as to their meaning in definitional and essentialising ways, but only in terms of how they are used in a way of life. And, further to this, all knowledge, including knowledge of learning, uses or is enframed in criteria, whether these criteria are implicit or explicit. In addition to the use of criteria, any investigation into the meaning of a concept has a judgemental element: does this object that is being primed for investigation conform to the criteria that are appropriate to the making of a judgement of this type? An answer to this question then needs to incorporate some understanding about reasons (for making these sorts of judgements) and about whether reasons can qualify as evidence for a knowledge claim (see [Chapter 3](#)).<sup>10</sup>

The third of the object-types within an object-ontology is an object-relation. If we are able to distinguish between different objects and we want to build into our conception of the world ideas of change, reconstitution, metamorphosis, temporality and continuity (over time), then we need to

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<sup>9</sup> These hinge relationships are not explicated in any great detail in this book.

<sup>10</sup> In [Chapter 3](#), issues to do with reasons, reason-giving and rationality are addressed.

understand what these are and how they occur. This is predicated on the idea that object-relations reside in those objects as characteristics of the object. They are thus interactive, powerful, dynamic and object-specific, and, further to this, processes of classifying and reclassifying change the nature of objects, object-relations and object-configurations. All references to the world involve the identification (the action or process of identifying someone or something, and positioning that action or process in the public domain), manipulation (the action or process of proactively changing the form or meaning of the object in the world), transformation (the successful achievement of this action in the world) and reconstruction of the categories (the successful achievement of positioning these actions in our three semantic networks: antecedently, contemporaneously and in use), and we cannot avoid this<sup>11</sup> (see [Chapter 8](#)). The scientific method, with its claims for the possibility of positional objectivity, that concepts can be reduced to measurable constructs, and that we should adopt a representational ontology, is negligent of these.<sup>12</sup> The strength of the boundary between two contrasting manifestations of a concept influences how learning institutions (buildings, temporalities, pedagogies, identities, syllabuses, teachers, assessments, curricula, environments and the like) are constructed; for example, if a strong boundary between vocational and academic education is in place, this means that children are assigned to different types of schools, are taught in different ways, follow different curricula and learn in different environments.

In this book, the chapter authors focus on some important ideas in the history of thought: what concepts are, the relationship between knowledge and learning, the possibility of universal knowledge, excellence in a practice, what evidence is, the distinction between epistemology and ontology, the role and positioning of values in our descriptions of the world and in the world itself, the idea of difference, different epistemic categories, powerful practices and the notion of a

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11 This is one of those necessary truths, having a universal and transcendental status, which consequently needs a reason or set of reasons to legitimise it. I address this issue in [Chapter 2](#) of *On Learning: A general theory of objects and object-relations* (Scott, 2021: 37), the companionate volume to this book: 'I examine interrogatively three dimensions of the knowledge-construction process. The first is the possibility of some universal or transcendental elements. The second refers to those epistemic properties that result in forms of knowledge in a community, such as: the means for determining what is true knowledge; the arbitration of good practice; the semantic formulation being used; the type of values that are attached to concepts; and the types of power mechanisms that are in place. And the third refers to the development of a credible account of epistemology and ontology and the relationship between them.'

12 As Susan Haack (2007) makes clear, the scientific method as a concept is plurisemantic. This is only one version.

sentient human being, while at the same time drawing out meanings that we can give to particular concepts and conceptual frames (epistemology, inference, phenomenology, categorising, hermeneutics, criticality, pragmatism, feminism, rationality, system, race, probability, friendship, thinking, curriculum, ecology and pedagogy). All of these concepts and conceptual frames are related to each other, and to learning as a concept and as a practice. In this chapter, they are named and pointed to, rather than being given extended and in-depth treatments, as they are in the chapters that follow.

## A theory of learning

A theory of learning, given a more explicit rendition in the first volume of this work (Scott, 2021), pivots on the idea that there is an entity called, for the sake of convenience, a person, and that this entity has a relationship (both inward and outward) with an environment. It also positions learning as the key connecting link between mind and world. As a concept, learning is fundamentally related to knowledge, and, therefore, if we are concerned with learning and the practices of learning, we also need to make reference to what is to be learnt, and typically what we are aiming at in such considerations is some form of knowledge. As social expressions and activities, these different forms of knowledge are given different statuses or have different attachments of importance. These valorised ascriptions do not lie exclusively in the intrinsic nature of each knowledge form, but also in the way these knowledge forms are realised in societies.

There are three sites of knowledge (to use a spatial signifier): the world and its contents (Immanuel Kant's noumena);<sup>13</sup> the mediating arena between the contents of the world and objects in the mind (this is what we might want to call learning sites, which are also contentful); and the contents of the mind that allow us to make judgements, perceive the world and reflect on what we have perceived (Kant's phenomena). To separate out these three sites is itself to make a judgement about the contents of the world and how we can access them. It is also to make a claim that there are always non-conceptual external constraints on what we perceive to be the contents of the world – we cannot make limitless claims about its contents because the world does not allow us to do this.

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13 Kant (1903; 1992; 2007). This is one reason as to why we should consider learning to be an important hinge concept.

A prior question that needs an answer is: what is knowledge?<sup>14</sup> For only then, having answered it in a satisfactory way, can we begin to understand the relationship between knowledge and learning. Further to this, if these two hinge concepts can be construed in different ways (they are polysemic), then we would have to accept that there is a variety of possible relations between them. The key to understanding what these relations might be lies with those relational concepts that are an essential element of any discursive configuration, given that we (the various chapter authors) want to position the knowledge–learning complex as central to our work in this book. Examples of such relations are: maturation, progression, narration, possibility, projection, praxis, edification, justification, teleology, pluralisation, strength, rank or order, development, enablement, constraint, convergence, divergence, framing, categorising, subsumption, contiguity and so forth. Only some of these relations are relevant to the knowledge–learning dyad in a fundamental sense.

An example of a type (an enframing) of knowledge that has specific and particular relations with learning is positivism,<sup>15</sup> or, in its philosophical form, empiricism.<sup>16</sup> Philosophical issues tend not to occupy a prominent place in books on learning or in accounts of research and knowledge development. Being concealed in the research and knowledge process, they seem to be speculative and abstruse and, to a large extent, apparently unnecessary in relation to the immediate practical task of getting research and understanding going and bringing it to a successful conclusion. There seems, therefore, to be no pressing need to integrate them into the knowledge process itself. Another reason why philosophical and, in particular, epistemological issues are concealed is related to the power of positivism and its associated representational realist metaphysic. Even when researchers are not conscious of working within the general parameters of positivism, the latter still exerts a powerful influence; an influence which considers reflexive questions to be both undesirable and unnecessary. However, we can say that, whatever its source, this quality of concealment means that the place and significance of philosophical issues only becomes apparent after the research has been conducted and after the learning activity has taken place.

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14 These matters were addressed in a fuller sense by David Scott and Robin Usher (1998) in their book *Researching Education: Data, methods and theory in educational enquiry*.

15 See Comte (2009: 71): 'Every science consists in the coordination of facts; if the different observations were entirely isolated, there would be no science.'

16 Empiricism was originally a theory that all knowledge is based on experience derived from the senses.

In this book, we (this collection of authors) will try to reverse the marginalisation of philosophical issues and bring them more to the forefront of the knowledge-development process,<sup>17</sup> and by this means recognise how central they are to our lives. We will make the assumption that philosophical issues are integral to knowing and learning, and cannot be ignored. The contemporary situation is such that all of us now need to think loudly and publicly, not just about methods, outcomes, consequences and applications, but also about the knowledge-development process itself, and to think in this way not after the event but during it. What is it, then, that we need to think about when we come to do this? One possible response is to assume that the activity itself is simply a matter of following the right procedures, rules or methods. This assumption, however, needs to be questioned because it misleadingly portrays research and knowledge development as mechanistic and algorithmic, and not as a learning activity. If we uncritically accept this portrayal, we forget that knowledge development is a social practice, and that it is therefore contextualised, conceptual and embodied. One thing we can do in terms of becoming more aware of what we are doing is to recognise that it is not a technology or set of fixed behaviours, but a practice, and that it is not individualistic, but social.

Another possible response to the question of what we should think about when engaging in these activities is to do with the powerful binary, *quantitative–qualitative*,<sup>18</sup> and the privileging of the former over the latter, with the implication that quantitative research is better, in the sense of being more legitimate. It is not so long ago that qualitative research tended to be totally discounted as soft, imprecise and subjective, with researchers always having to justify their unconventional methodology, and having to work hard to prove the validity of their outcomes. Of course, this situation is now not so prevalent; qualitative research of a certain type has become more accepted, and with this the argument has tended to shift from the legitimacy of qualitative research to its compatibility with quantitative research, given their apparently radically divergent assumptions about the nature of knowledge.

However, this is not to say that the continuing struggle to get qualitative research fully legitimated no longer takes place. This struggle is not so acute within the field of education itself, since it is conceptualised as being more about the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ disciplines of the social sciences, with

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17 In particular, the philosophical issue which needs most attention, but is rarely given it, is the relationship between knowledge and the world, and this has to be understood as quintessentially a learning matter.

18 In Scott (2021) arguments are made that this dyadic distinction is meaningless.

education usually lining up with the latter, and the former calling on the ‘ultra-hard’ natural sciences for support. While this is obviously still an important struggle for educational researchers, they are also very much aware that qualitative research is itself not unproblematic; in many ways, it has as many problematic features as quantitative research, with many of these being surprisingly similar. At the same time, there is reason to suppose that educational researchers might be rather bored by these debates. Many of the problematic elements arise precisely because of the search for legitimacy, and increasingly, many are beginning to question whether legitimacy is that important anyway. This takes us back to the compatibility issue. Whether or not qualitative and quantitative methods are compatible, the very foregrounding of issues of compatibility functions to maintain legitimacy within its own self-defining terms, terms which have provided the reference points or ‘rules of the game’ for all research and knowledge development (and learning, I think we can say) approaches.

The debate now is whether, rather than continuing the somewhat pointless argument about what is legitimate and what is not, maybe we should problematise the very desire for legitimacy; in doing this, we might well come to recognise that what is most needed is a space for scrutinising the assumptions that shape the meaning of knowledge and knowledge development, whether it be quantitative or qualitative, or reflexive or propositional. Increasingly, many are asking whether we need to think about ways in which the whole enterprise can be reconceptualised or reconfigured. However, reconfiguring it is no easy task, and questions of legitimacy cannot simply be made to vanish. To understand why this is the case requires a consideration of mostly neglected epistemological issues, and it is such a consideration which is vital to uncovering what we should be thinking about when we are addressing these issues.

Epistemology has traditionally been concerned with what distinguishes different knowledge claims; specifically, with what the criteria are that allow distinctions to be made between what is legitimately knowledge and what is simply opinion or belief. Epistemology is supposed to answer the question: how do we know what we think we know? Historically, it is an aspect of the Enlightenment’s<sup>19</sup> dismantling of tradition and experience as sources of knowledge. With this dismantling

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19 The Enlightenment was an intellectual and philosophical movement that dominated Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it has had a profound influence on modern cultures and peoples. The Enlightenment can be understood as a range of ideas focusing on human happiness, the pursuit of knowledge obtained by reason and evidence from the senses, and ideals such as natural law, liberty, progress, toleration, fraternity, constitutional government and the separation of the Church from the State.

came the question of how any knowledge claim could be considered valid, or indeed how it was possible to know anything. What epistemology was essentially seen as doing was creating a set of rules for knowing by drawing boundaries and setting up mechanisms to police those boundaries. By applying rules, only certain kinds of knowledge could be considered valid; the rest would be refused that status. Very quickly, the rules or grounds for this validity came to be found in a scientific method in the form of measurement, in testability and in the use of reason (understood in a particular way, see [Chapter 3](#)). Through empiricism, sense experience (rather than life experience) gained through observation and experiment became the given, the source or grounding of knowledge. Epistemological issues came to be seen purely in empiricist terms, with science as the privileged model of investigation.

However, any research or accounting of the world, whether in the natural or social sciences, makes knowledge claims, and for that reason alone is implicated in epistemological issues. Indeed, it could be argued that all research has an underlying epistemology, even though this is rarely made explicit. Most of the time, its epistemology is either unrecognised or taken for granted. It is simply assumed that the research will be positivist-empiricist in its epistemology, and therefore unproblematic – hence, the power of quantitative methods most obviously located within its parameters. Nowadays, this taken-for-granted approach to epistemology is no longer considered adequate. For example, making a knowledge claim cannot just be a matter of appealing to universal rules of validity, because claims are always justified within collectively held conceptions about the world and how we can relate to it. It is the social conceptions that are embodied in an epistemology, the most powerful of which is the conception that holds up the methods and procedures of the natural sciences as the model for producing valid knowledge claims. Consequently, the rules for policing knowledge claims are themselves culturally located – epistemologies and the judgements that follow from them<sup>20</sup> therefore become as much about politics or power as they are about logic or the truth of the matter.

Positivism is an epistemological position which affirms the facticity of the world. It argues that, since the only possible content of true statements is facts, it is the scientific method that reveals facts about the

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<sup>20</sup> An example of a series of judgements is the Research Excellence Framework in the UK (referred to in the preface), which purports to be about the truth of the matter, but in reality is more about politics or power.

world – it is always a fact(ing) activity.<sup>21</sup> Scientific method is the set of rules which guarantee accurate representation; a correspondence between what reality is and how it is represented in knowledge. There are fundamental laws expressible as universal generalisations governing both the natural and the social worlds, and discoverable through scientific activity. Positivism therefore equates legitimacy with science (albeit an idealised picture of science) and scientific method (in the sense of a set of general methodological rules). All this involves a number of assumptions. First, there is a clear distinction or separation to be made between subjects (knowers and learners) and objects (the world). Facts are to do with the world, and are therefore ‘objective’, whereas values and concerns are to do with the ‘subjective’, which must not be allowed to interfere with the process of discovering facts. Second, assertions about the world, and hence the validity of knowledge claims, are about observable measurable phenomena. Furthermore, different observers, given their possession in common of a reasoning faculty, should come to the same conclusions about what they observe, and in how they make judgements about that world. Third, the social world is not essentially different from the natural world. There are order and reason, patterns and cause–effect forms in the former, just as in the latter. It follows from this that all the sciences share a common logic and method of inquiry.

Although these assumptions are significant and need to be problematised, foregrounding them can convey the impression that positivism is simply an abstruse epistemological doctrine without much purchase in the real world of day-to-day research and day-to-day living. This, however, is misleading, since positivism defines not only a way of doing research but also a way of theorising social reality, and ultimately of working out what we should do in life. However, the most significant characteristic of positivism for our purposes here is that it is not simply an epistemology but more importantly a way of theorising social reality. Positivism is a continuation of the grand narrative of the Enlightenment that only a society based on science and its universal values can be rational and therefore truly free. This is a narrative of cultural progress where modernity is depicted as a process of science replacing not only religion and tradition but also practical wisdom and experience as the foundation of social organisation, and where the law-like generalisations

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21 A notion of fact(ing) is discussed further on in this introductory chapter.

of science form the basis of expertise (developed through research) that informs and justifies policy- and decision-making, and, perhaps more importantly, learning approaches and strategies.

There are many who would argue that there are few who nowadays believe in positivism, and there is much truth in this argument, since positivism has undoubtedly been subjected to a great deal of hard critique, probably to the extent where few would wish to support it purely as an epistemological position. Yet it would be a serious mistake to think of positivism simply as a philosophical curiosity, fit only for the dustbin of history. It could be argued, on the contrary, that this is far from being the case, since it still remains a dominant philosophy in practice, and, of course, it is particularly alive and well in the practices of technical-rationality, itself still influential in educational research, practice and policymaking.<sup>22</sup>

To understand why this is the case, it is also necessary to recognise that positivism and technical-rationality are themselves not the whole story. Another layer is provided by the conceptual framework of representational realism, a framework that is presupposed by positivism and the practices of technical-rationality (see [Chapter 4](#)). Although conceptually there are many variants of realism, they have certain common features. The best known variant could be characterised simply as common sense expressed in philosophical language, which is perhaps what makes it so powerful, yet at the same time masked in its effects. Our common-sense intuition tells us that the world exists independently of our lives and sociocultural practices, including the practices of research, knowledge development and learning. We feel that the world is ‘real’, that it exists around us ‘out there’, indifferent to our hopes, beliefs and desires at any particular moment. This independent,<sup>23</sup> ‘objective’, world is the yardstick against which we must measure our hopes, beliefs and the like, in order to assess and establish their truth and reality. The nature of the world out there is something about which we can make discoveries through research, and our knowledge increases with every discovery. Thus, research in the scientific mode brings us closer to true descriptions of the world in the form of theories that express these truths.

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22 For an example of this type of educational research, practice, and policymaking, see the work of the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). The most obvious example is the technologisation of knowledge implicit in the reforms to the English education system since 1988.

23 This notion of independence is usually used to indicate a sense that the person or organisation has no interests and makes no commitments to the particular issue at hand. However, this is only one way that it can be used.

In direct forms of realism,<sup>24</sup> the relation between theories that explain the world and the world itself has to be understood on the model of the external perspective, the God's eye<sup>25</sup> point of view. We come to know about the world but without being in it. The world consists of independently existing objects of which there can only be one true description – a description that is guaranteed by the elimination of researcher bias and ambiguity of language. Truth is a matter of correspondence between statements about the world contained in theories and the way the world is, its reality. It is the presence of reality, therefore, that determines truth, which is, in effect, the measure of truth; presence is the *voice* of nature, the origin, the authorising centre, which places necessary restrictions or limits on how the world can be described, and how it can be known. It eliminates any distortion in representing or knowing the world, so that the latter can be represented in the language of knowledge and in the language of learning. The priority or pre-existence of the world 'as it really is' over any descriptions we make of it implies that the role of language is to act as a transparent medium that enables the world to be accurately represented. Language is tied to the world through relations of correspondence between names and sentences *and* objects and states of the world. For the empiricist, the only language that counts is language which is referential and literal, with pure and unambiguous meanings, free from the distortions of interpretation and the figural (see [Chapter 6](#) for an alternative to this).

Embodied in representational realism is a picture of a universally correct standard of rationality operating according to the laws of inferential logic.<sup>26</sup> Individuals are considered to be endowed with the capacity, although to varying degrees, of exercising this rationality; a rationality that is seen as an essence of a natural kind, rather than an outcome and function of the norms and practices of particular societies. Knowledge can be systematically extended by deploying this invariant and universal standard of rationality. For representational forms of realism, therefore, the history of science is that of a cumulative, linear progression from ignorance to knowledge, a steady and inexorable movement away from incompleteness and error.

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24 The position that I take in this opening chapter of the book is one of indirect, mediated or critical realism. Margaret Archer's work (for example, 2007), under the guise of a critical realist philosophy, is an example of a direct form of realism.

25 A God's eye point of view denotes a position taken by a speaker or writer which assumes a level of knowledge which only a god could have. It appears most often in biblical and other religious texts, where a claim is made that the source of knowledge, and therefore its justification, is divine.

26 This is not the only type of inference that can be made.

The positivist/empiricist philosophy and method (see [Durkheim, 1995](#)), which I have referred to here as an example of a particular knowledge/learning configuration,<sup>27</sup> incorporates an idealised view of scientific activity, and it is characterised as a set of general methodological rules. Although all these assumptions are significant in their own right, they give the impression that positivism and empiricism are simply highly idealised doctrines; however, such theories have important social consequences and speak as authorities in the world about these social and physical matters, and fundamentally about learning and learning perspectives.<sup>28</sup>

Knowledge, or so I am arguing here, is fundamental to the four principal types of learning: cognitive (relating to propositions), skill-based (relating to processes), embodied (relating to bodily accomplishments) and dispositional (relating to the characteristics of a person). Knowledge and learning are homologous concepts, and what is meant by this is that both operate in the same way, and that they share properties and meanings (see [Chapter 3](#)). Prior to cognitive, skill-based and embodied forms of learning is a set of dispositions, without which they would be unsustainable. Cognition comprises the manipulation of those symbolic resources (words, figures, idioms, terms, numbers, characters, signs, pictures, images and the like), which points to (though not necessarily in a mirroring or isomorphic sense) something outside itself. Skill-based knowledge is different from cognition because it is procedural and not propositional. Embodied knowledge refers to knowledge which primarily relates to the body or has a corporeal impulsion. Distinguishing between knowledge of how to do something (process forms of knowledge), knowledge of something (judging that claim in terms of its relations within and to a network of concepts, and making the subsequent commitments that this entails), conceptual knowledge (interacting with the world in a specific way) and embodied forms of knowledge (assimilating an action and being able to perform in the spaces associated with that action) is important; however, they are in essence all knowledge-making activities, and consequently can be formulated generically as acts of learning.

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27 In Richard Gunton et al.'s (2021: 1) 'A general theory of objectivity: Contributions from the Reformational philosophy tradition', they argue, from a representational form of realism and from a scientific perspective, that 'objectivity can be understood as characteristic of representations that attempt to portray a subject in an earlier relation-frame than that in which it characteristically functions. In short, objectivity is projection.' This conception of objectivity is, as always, founded on a representational realist framing.

28 See Young (2005), although he is confused about this matter; see also [Chapter 10](#) for a detailed discussion of it.

An alternative view of learning and knowledge (a learning–knowing configuration; see [Williams and Standish, 2015](#)) has a triadic form, comprising propositional, procedural and acquaintance modes. The first of these modes is propositional. There are two claims being made here: learning as a concept and as a practice is an epistemic activity – it could be nothing else – and propositional knowledge refers to something which it is not. Some examples of propositional knowledge are: a particular person lives in a house that is surrounded by other houses (an urban complex), and that urban complex is surrounded by a large number of green fields that are used for agricultural and leisure purposes; contradictions are configurations of a number of mathematical symbols that are never true regardless of the value substituted for the variable ( $x$ ), that is,  $x+1=xx+1=x$  is a contradiction; and the philosopher René Descartes was born in 1596 and died in 1650. These are fact(ing) activities,<sup>29</sup> which is a form of knowledge development that conforms to the second mode: procedure or process. Other examples of procedural knowledge are: retroducting, where the person identifies the circumstances without which the concept that is being used could exist (it is therefore backwards looking and genealogical); painting a wall – a highly skilled activity; and learning by doing (see [Dewey, 1938](#)).

The third mode of knowledge for Williams and Standish (2015) is knowing-by-acquaintance, which for them is different from propositional and process forms of knowledge. This mode is sometimes referred to as knowing with a direct object – when we know something we do so directly or through some form of immediate experience. It works, or so the argument goes, through the learner having some familiarity with something or someone. An example of this type of knowledge is repeatedly listening to the works of a composer of music, Johann Sebastian Bach for example, to develop, or come to know, his music. Here, the type or constitution of the knowing activity is directly related to how it is learnt, thus reaffirming the binding relationship between knowledge and learning. (In [Chapter 15](#), these distinctions, between knowing-that, knowing-how and knowing-by-acquaintance are given a fuller expression in the field of educational praxes.) These distinctions are also frequently used in an identity sense: to divide people into those who are good with their brains, those who are good with their hands and those who are good in making judgements, with all the subsequent valorisations that can be attached to them. As with all these identity divisions, they involve

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29 See [Chapter 3](#) for a fuller explication of the notion of fact(ing).

simplifications and reductions (they may also be hegemonic), an example of which is that knowing how to do something also requires a mastery of certain theoretical rules and procedures, which can be best expressed in a propositional form. All three of these knowledge modes have a history, and thus a semantic morphogenetic element.

For example, knowing-that or propositional knowledge has come to mean knowledge that is largely divorced from singular and detheorised subject matter (and in some circumstances has been appropriated to form a subset of knowledge known as *powerful knowledge*<sup>30</sup> – see [Chapter 10](#)). In like fashion, knowing-how or process forms of knowledge have come to show that mastery of a body of knowledge means that the person can apply this mode of knowledge invariably and repeatedly in a number of different contexts. Furthermore, as Williams and Standish (2015) make clear, all these current and antecedent views of knowledge and learning, and the relations between knowledge and learning, are conceptualised within a framework of representationalism (see [Chapter 4](#)) and its picture of the learner as a disengaged subject, who is separate from, and stands in a particular relationship to, an inert and passive world of objects. A particular notion of knowing-by-acquaintance may be able to correct this, while also offering at the same time a more sophisticated view of knowledge and learning. Stanley Cavell (1979) has developed a view of knowledge and learning which goes something like this: responding to a new experience in the world, or making an aesthetic judgement about the world, is, rather than having a comprehensive grasp of some fact or theory about the new object, or mastering some procedure for judging it, an activity of knowing and learning-in-feeling (or developing a view of the object through an acquaintance with it). Knowing-by-feeling and learning-by-feeling, then, is a matter of making or exercising a type of judgement, which is different from, and more sophisticated than, a conceptual or processual response in learning. It also points to the transformative dimensions implicit in learning, and thus to the *Bildungstheorie* that we are trying to develop (see [Chapter 5](#)).

Learning then, and consequently, can be understood dualistically, as a concept and as a practice (a concept is not exclusively a practice). They need to be analysed separately because they are different types of object, and what this also requires, then, is an explanation of how they are interrelated at both ontological and epistemological levels. This key relation

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30 The notion of powerful knowledge is used by Michael Young and his associates (see [Young and Muller, 2007; 2010; 2015; Young, 2005](#)) to give credence to a weak argument and to its components.

in the lifeworld is between the world itself and our knowledge of it. In this book, we explore a number of important concepts that are relevant to the idea of learning, that is, they have strong relations with all the different manifestations of the object. These are meta-concepts such as epistemology, inferential role semantics,<sup>31</sup> existentialism, rationality, thinking, hermeneutics, critical realism and pragmatism, and meso-concepts such as probability, woman, training, assessment, education, system, race, friendship, *Bildung*,<sup>32</sup> curriculum, ecology and pedagogy. Knowledge and learning, as meta-concepts, are positioned in various networks of meaning, principally the antecedents of the concepts, their relations to other relevant concepts, and the way these concepts are used in the lifeworld. All of these meta- and meso-concepts have a direct relationship with learning, and can be positioned in curriculum and knowledge fields. However, these positionings need to be made explicit or, at least, good reasons<sup>33</sup> need to be provided for their inclusion in these fields.

Throughout this book, we (the authors) focus on learning, as a concept and as a practice, and its historical, archaeological and genealogical connections and relations.<sup>34</sup> These methodologies are framed by time, although this core category is configured differently in each of them. A further shared element is that they produce configurations of discursive objects. In subsequent chapters of this book, we trace some of the antecedent, contemporaneous and applied meanings attached to the concept and practice of learning. The key to understanding what these are lies with the types of relations that exist between objects, object-configurations and persons in their formation and reformation. An important dimension of learning, then, is time and temporality. This

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31 Inferential role semantics (also having relations and connections with conceptual role semantics, functional role semantics, procedural semantics, semantic inferentialism) is a component of a theory of meaning that identifies the meaning of an expression with its relations to other expressions (these relations are typically inferential relations with other expressions).

32 Gert Biesta (2003) conceptualises *Bildung* by tying knowledge to the political in a *Bildungstheorie*, but not in a crude sociology of knowledge sense (such as Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Clearly, one of the precepts of a *Bildung* is that the epistemological always has a relation to arrangements of objects, object-relations and object-configurations in the past (this then requires a genealogy of conceptual understanding), currently and, perhaps most importantly, in the future (this refers, then, to possible iterations of the human being, the self, progression and those political arrangements that provide the contexts of learning).

33 The issue of what a good reason might be is addressed in Chapter 3.

34 See Foucault (2000). Foucault in his later work (for example, Foucault, 2010) extended this notion of discourse to show how over time governments use power strategies to effect the transformation of social, political, ecological and human relations with regards to the management of populations. The Foucauldian concept of governmentality can be understood as the way governments produce citizens that are best suited to government beliefs and policies, and as those organised practices (thoughts, rationalities and techniques) through which subjects are governed.

works through activities such as progressions and trajectories of the learner, knowledge formations, progression and emergence of learning objects and relations between them, the proposed *Bildung*, logical prerequisites of learning objects and relations, institutional temporal relations, age-related competences and so on. Indeed, it could be said that time and temporal flows are essential to understanding the concept, process, institutionalisation and practice of learning.

This is the easy part: describing or giving a credible account of knowledge production and curriculum formation with regards to the concept and practice of learning. The difficult part is making a judgement about what those forms of knowledge might be and what they cannot be. This can be expressed in the form of a question: what are those dispositions<sup>35</sup> (for example, being intelligent, being courageous, being moderate in judgement, being liberal, being magnificent, being generous, being ambitious, being patient, being friendly, being truthful, being humorous, being modest and being judicial), cognitions (for example, having and being able to use stores of propositional knowledge developed by other people in important areas of life, such as astronomy, biochemistry, biophysics, biology, chemistry, genetics, geology, zoology, history, geography, sociology, psychology), processes and procedures (for example, making a table out of wood, making an inferential judgement, word-processing and much else) and embodiments (for example, sexuality or sexual preference, physicality and motility) that we think are appropriate for inclusion in a curriculum. This is not a directory of pedagogic knowledge, because the object to be learnt has logical and other types of inferential connections and relations with the way it can be learnt, and thus its pedagogy is derived from the constitution of the learning object, its learning *modus operandi*, and the characteristics of the learning environment. It also comprises a series of rational choices, and consequently the giving of reasons for those choices (see [Chapter 3](#)). In short, this *Bildungstheorie* (see [Chapter 5](#)) is future oriented, semantically conceived, fundamentally values- and virtues-based, ethically and

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35 These are derived from Aristotle's (2018) doctrine of the mean. A number of well-known objections have been made to Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, not least Bernard Williams's (1985: 36) characterisation of it as unhelpful and depressing: 'Aristotle's views on [virtue] are bound up with one of the most celebrated and least useful parts of his system, the doctrine of the mean, according to which every virtue of character lies between two correlative faults or vices ... which consist respectively of the excess and the deficiency of something of which the virtue represents the right amount. The theory oscillates between an unhelpful analytical model (which Aristotle himself does not consistently follow) and a substantively depressing doctrine in favour of moderation. The doctrine of the mean is better forgotten.'

compassionately driven (at curriculum, pedagogic and learning levels) and lifelong, and it fulfils Martha Nussbaum's (2000) requirement for a philosophy of equal esteem for all human beings – the equality principle. The key relations in this *Bildungstheorie* are: maturation, progression, narration, possibility, projection, praxis, edification, justification and teleology.<sup>36</sup> This has been a brief summary of the contents of the argument I made in the first volume of *On Learning*. Although that volume provided some examples of practical reasoning operating in the world, the notion of praxis was only addressed superficially.

A praxis is not just an action, for this would render the concept as meaningless insofar as everything we do in the world would be a praxis. It involves some form of conversion of thought into action, or at least the construction of a particular thought or set of thoughts in such a way that certain actions inevitably flow from it and other actions are set aside. As with all thoughts or thinking, this praxis is embedded in histories, archaeologies and genealogies of that thought or concept, and what that thought or set of thoughts allows or disallows. This last point can be best illustrated by a close reading of some examples of educational praxes, with regards to the conceptual and practical field of learning.

Praxis has four elements: practice on practice, practice on thought, practice on ourselves, and practice unfolding from thought. The first of these refers to doing something in the world. The second refers to thought working on the practice of thought over a period of time, and in response to a particular conceptual issue such as learning. The third possibility is practice on ourselves, and this locates the source of practice in individual reflection. There is a fourth sense that can be given to the notion of praxis, and this is where work on thought drives practice in a particular way – thought and practice are so intertwined that in criticising, endorsing or subverting the one, we are also criticising, endorsing or subverting the other. These four discursive formations offer alternative perspectives on an important aspect of social life. Another way that this can be expressed is by making explicit the conceptual framings of praxical notions such as dataficing, fact(ing), statisticising, informing and evidencing.

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36 Referring to John Dewey's idea of learning as experimental, Roland Reichenbach (2007) suggests that we should understand the *telos* or endpoint of the *Bildungstheorie* as uncertain or not well-defined.

## Facts

Any observations that we make about the world, including those that are integral to the research process and can be construed as ‘facts’, are always conditioned by prior understandings we have of the world. Some word-objects and some conceptions, such as a fact, a statistic, information, data<sup>37</sup> and evidence,<sup>38</sup> are understood as basic and foundational, and thus as having a positive truth-value – a fact cannot be disputed, data is unchallengeable, a statistic is a truthful representation of something in the world, gathering information allows us to go on in life with some certainty, and evidence is required for us to assert that something is true. However, fact-based epistemic or semantic theories<sup>39</sup> are unable to determine how the real relations in social life, those between knowledge of the world and the world itself, operate. The real question then is to ask if anything can really be given, beyond reproach or criticism or questioning.

Facts are given, they are out there, they cannot be disputed. But in reality, facts are simpliciter propositions, knowledge fragments, valorisations, processes, utterances, evaluations, embodiments and dispositions, which have attached to them a truth component. They are a means by which we can understand what is true or authentic; and, in addition, truth is frame-specific and valued in relation to the way we can see the world, whether in atomic, associational, functional, causal, actual, linguistic, hermeneutic, structural, semantic or holistic framings.<sup>40</sup> The truth of something because it is frame-specific has ideological leanings. However, we must be careful here for two reasons: ideology is a hinge concept,<sup>41</sup> and it therefore has certain properties, such as being semantically contested, networked, interactive, powerful and dynamic; in addition, the polysemic nature of the concept means that we can use it in a variety of ways.

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37 Data, for example, is one of these integral constructs. There are questions to be answered (and answers are only rarely given) about the provenance of data, the relationship of data to truth, the placing of data at the centre of our inquiries, the way data seems to have an objective value-free dimension to it, the sense in which data cannot be questioned, the cohabitation of data and fact, the exclusion of interpretation at this basic level, indeed the ascription of this level as basic.

38 Becky Francis, the Chief Executive of the Education Endowment Foundation, speaking about the potential return of grammar schools recently, warned the government to ‘focus on the evidence, not ideology’, and thus in this apparently innocuous statement reaffirmed the absolute relationship between truth and evidence, or at least a certain type of evidence.

39 This includes Wittgenstein’s early representationalist theory of the *Tractatus* (1961) and Searle’s (1995) status object theory.

40 Much more is said about these framings in subsequent chapters of this book, and especially in [Chapter 15](#).

41 Wittgenstein (1953) developed a notion of *hinge propositions*: propositions that are assumptions or presuppositions of our languages, conceptual schemes and language games.

A first set of meanings that can be given to the notion is that ideology is an action-focused set of beliefs, and consequently consists of a reason or reasons for doing something in the world. It is local and specific, in that it does not refer to any type of worldview or *Weltanschauung*, except insofar as all ascribed meanings have a relation to meta-concepts such as truth, objectivity and reality. A second set of meanings that we can attach to the concept understands it as an obfuscation of reality. People are deceived about the actual conditions of life that they find themselves in. What this means is that given the right conditions and circumstances, ideology could be stripped away, and we would see the world as it really is, and we could live our lives with and through a noumenal – to use a Kantian word in translation – rendering of this world.

A third, and perhaps more significant, set of meanings we can give to the notion of ideology is that all our dealings with and in the world are in some sense or another ideological. All our actions in the world, our beliefs about this world and about ourselves, the way we conduct ourselves and can conduct ourselves in the world, the use of our sensory apparatus, our deployment of meta-concepts and conceptual frames, come from a particular and specific set of ideas or from an ideology. There is nothing else: there is no sense of an ultimate reality that we can access. What matters is our *Weltanschauung* or worldview, and this is clearly in conflict with another, or even several other, *Weltanschauungen* or worldviews. What it does not mean, however, is that we always act, see the world, believe things, that are necessarily in accord with our worldview or a worldview. Human beings are sometimes misguided or confused. This interpretation of the notion of ideology is different from our second rendition, because it makes a strong case for there not being a correct version of reality, only that reality is always ideologically mediated, even if certain key concepts and conceptual frames are deemed to be universally apt.

There is also a much used notion of ideology, deployed especially by politicians and policymakers, which contrasts ideology with pragmatism. As with all the meanings attached to concepts, both concepts are valorised, or, perhaps, valorised and revalorised many times over, so that pragmatism (used in a non-philosophical sense) is given a positive value and ideology is given a negative value. Ideology is then understood as a committed and transparent set of policy prescriptions, with a clear and open relationship to a coherent set of values and ideas. Pragmatism is understood, in contrast, as a set of policy prescriptions, which are not transparently connected or related to any larger set of ideas or frameworks. They are not enframed in any real sense, or so the argument goes. This is a mistake, as all human activities are enframed in some sense or another,

and this knowledge claim, in itself, points to the need to accept that some meta-claims have a universal or transcendental status.

Consequently, human action and human learning in its many guises cannot be separated from meaning-making, with our experiences organised through preformulated interpretive frames. The field of study is the meaningful actions of social actors and social institutions. These frames or enframings comprise accounts of, or reasoned arguments to support a claim about, some aspect of the world, whether conceptual or empirical. We can also argue that any claim to knowledge we might want to make can be, or perhaps has to be, justified, or at least that we should provide good reasons for making this claim (see Haack [1993] for a discussion of her reconciliation of foundationalist and coherentist justificatory elements, which she called foundherentism, and Leaton Gray and Scott [2023] for a further discussion of this important principle).

## Concepts

In this opening chapter, I am providing a brief summary of the arguments that will be made in the subsequent chapters, to allow the reader some purchase on the general argument that will be made in the book as a whole. The general thesis is that a philosophy of learning as of necessity focuses on notions of semantic-inferentialism and meaning-making. The meaning of a book is manifested through each of its chapters (the parts), and consequently each chapter's meaning depends on the meaning of the whole book. In like fashion, the general argument of the book can only be understood in relation to the specific arguments that are developed in the chapters or parts of the book, and those specific arguments are enframed in their turn by the general argument being expressed in the book as a whole. The general argument, then, is that concepts have three reference points or conceptual frames: antecedent, contemporaneous and in use, and that, if we are to understand what those concepts are, we have to search for traces as to how they operate in these three frames. However, what has to be acknowledged here is that these summaries, brief as they are, cannot do full justice to the specific arguments in each of the chapters.

The first chapter in this book focuses on a series of meta-concepts (epistemology, inferential role semantics, *Bildung*, critical realism, pragmatics and others – headings and pointers, and little more than that) and meso-concepts (critique, pedagogy, ecology and others) and their relations to the concept and practice of learning. In [Chapter 2](#), Tone Saevi explores those relations between learning as a concept and as a practice

and what we might broadly want to call phenomenological views of the world. Phenomenology is a meta-philosophy that focuses on the three key aspects of learning: the relationship of the individual to and with the world, involving a process of change; the subsequent conception and activation of being in the world; and how our descriptions, words, schema and theories can provide us with some purchase on that world. The focus is on the givens of immediate experience, and phenomenology is an attempt to capture that experience as it is lived, both by the individual herself and by the external observer. Phenomenological views of the world have consequences for how we can understand and develop the concept and practice of learning. She does this by conceptualising the notion of the adult–child relationship, and by exploring how this conceptual configuration, a *Pädagogik*, is powerful, plurisemic, dynamic, interactive and networked.

In [Chapter 3](#), I examine the issues of rationality, reason-giving and reasons as they relate to the concept and practice of learning. Reasons are different from, and operate in different ways to, physical causes. There are also good and less good reasons for acting in the world. Robert Brandom (2000: 61) has argued that when we talk about distinguishing between good or bad reasons, or at least determining what is a better reason for doing this rather than that, we are making an inferential judgement about the specific merits of the two sets of reasons we are considering. These inferential judgements are commitments that we make in the world, and consequently, on every occasion that we make a judgement about a good or bad reason, or a better or worse reason, we are also making a series of knowledge claims about the world, those claims being implicit in the three semantic networks or constellations within which any utterance we make, rational or otherwise, is enframed. Those three networks are the antecedents of the concepts, their relations to other relevant concepts, and the way the concepts are used in the lifeworld. Rationality or being rational is a strong normative evaluation.

Rationality as a concept and as a praxis is fundamentally hermeneutic in the way it can be understood. Every educational moment is hermeneutical, or, in a characteristically hermeneutical circular confounding of model and what is being modelled, every hermeneutical event is educational. Philosophical hermeneutics has implications for the theorisation of classroom interaction, the selection of curriculum content, the aims of education and a *Bildung*. Of particular interest at this point of the argument is the contention that where many contemporary accounts of learning focus on the knowledge that is to be learned, and associate that knowledge with the ‘object’ of learning, they do not adequately pay

attention to the hermeneutical subject matter that emerges in the encounter between teacher, student and a selected curriculum object. Additionally, contemporary debates about transmission of, and dialogue around, knowledge content inadequately account for the hermeneutical insight that all learning is dialogic, and that the background against which learning takes place is always already in play and cannot be transmitted to a learner.

In [Chapter 4](#), Henrik Rydenfelt examines issues that relate to pragmatism, anti-representationalism and learning. Philosophical anti-representationalists contest a starting point that they argue some philosophers have endorsed: the contention that our thought and talk aim to copy, represent, mirror or describe reality. The anti-representationalist Richard Rorty (1979) famously enlisted the pragmatist John Dewey (1931) as a precursor to his position. While pragmatism in general, and Dewey in particular, are also influential in the philosophy of education, little attention has been paid to the consequences of anti-representationalism with respect to a notion of learning. This chapter explores those consequences while critically examining the attribution of anti-representationalism to Deweyan pragmatism.

In [Chapter 5](#), I examine the notion and practice of *Bildung*, understanding it specifically as a learning configuration. One of the dimensions of a *Bildung* is that the epistemological always has a relation to arrangements of objects, object-relations and object-configurations in the past (this, then, requires a genealogy of conceptual understanding), currently and, perhaps most importantly, in the future (this refers, then, to possible iterations of the human being, the self, progression and those political arrangements that provide the contexts of learning). This chapter sketches out a possible route that this *Bildungstheorie* can take. It is, however, still a work in progress.

In [Chapter 6](#), Robert Isaksen draws on different aspects of critical realism – its meta-methodology, its interpretation of scientific knowledge production, its recommendations for empirical research, and its critical impulse – to explore various and to some extent differing learning theories, and as they are connected to this philosophy of science. The meta-methodology, immanent critique, has affinities to scaffolding and differentiation and, by extension, to sociocultural theories of learning. The interpretation of scientific knowledge production as centrally about actively involving learners in problems is related to a pragmatist, and in particular to a Deweyan, conception of learning (see [Dewey, 1931; 1938](#)). As a philosophy of science, it endorses interdisciplinarity, retroduction and considerations of both structure and agency when researching the

topic of learning. Its critical impulse is to support learning as an ideal, and yet also to problematise the neoliberal drive for teaching quality and teaching excellence.

Bushra Sharar, in [Chapter 7](#), discusses another strong normative evaluation: the development and institutionalisation of learning systems. All education systems inculcate values or ethical perspectives as they develop knowledge and pass it on to future generations. This happens both intentionally and unintentionally through the activities that both teachers and learners find themselves involved in. In reality, the avowed intentions of the teachers, administrators, curriculum designers and politicians are often at variance with the existence of hidden curricula, inherent within the very processes involved in teaching, learning and the organisation of systems of education. Additionally, education systems do not exist in a vacuum. They are a part of what critical realists call a stratified world (see [Bhaskar, 2011](#)). Any educational system exists within particular global and national circumstances, and all those working within it are both constrained and empowered by the existence of various structures which need to be taken into account, and which influence what may or may not happen. Stratification exists in time also, because all educational systems have a past which influences the way in which they operate, a present in which they actualise some potential developments and fail to actualise others, and a future which is to come. Ways of thinking about striations and valorisations take various forms. Consequentialist theories, which prioritise the consequences of taking an ethical position, and deontological theories, such as utilitarianism or teleological approaches, which prioritise movement towards specific end goals, are ways of giving value to a particular entity or process. In this chapter, Sharar combines a critical realist philosophical stance with an Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics in order to explore the connection between educational systems and those strong normative evaluations that are central to our activities in the world.

The second part of this book is an account of some strong normative evaluations expressed as meso-concepts. Charles Taylor ([1998: 1](#)) suggests that strong evaluations are the 'background of distinctions between things which are recognised as of categoric or unconditioned or higher importance or worth, and things which lack this or are of lesser value'. Strong evaluations give shape to who we are as human beings as generic members of a species. The very notion of a strong evaluation points to the need to distinguish it from the interests and desires of the 'simple weigher' ([Taylor, 1998: 1](#)). These *weak* preferences lack the reflexivity, articulacy and depth that allow strong evaluations to define

‘the kind of beings we are or want to be’ (Taylor, 1998: 1). A central proposition in Taylor’s work is, therefore, that the modern self is constituted through strong normative evaluations.

In [Chapter 8](#), I examine a key epistemic and conceptual issue, that of orderings and arrangements in and of the social world (and, in particular, with regard to the concepts of training, education, assessment, woman and probability). An important binary that has had real effects in the space of learning – the area of life that is fully focused on learning – is the education/training binary, an oppositional coupling of two concepts, and this implies a set or series of relations between them. In addition, the strength, type and probative force of this relationship is central to any education discourse that we use. We therefore need to examine, in the first instance, its characteristics. This important binary, and how it functions, acts as a cultural conditioning agency for many of the institutions and systems that exist in the field of education and learning. The strength of the boundary between two contrasting manifestations of a concept such as this influences how learning institutions (syllabuses, pedagogies, disciplines, curricula, environments and the like) are constructed. In addition, I explore in this chapter, notions of assessment, woman and probability, all of which have important connections and relations with learning.

In [Chapter 9](#), Jon Nixon focuses on another strong normative evaluation and concept, friendship, in this case, between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher. This chapter is about a relationship that was formative in Arendt’s thinking about learning. Having fled from Nazi-occupied France to the USA, Arendt and Heinrich Blücher remained together – as man and wife, and friends and colleagues – throughout their remaining lives. Blücher was, by all accounts, a supremely passionate and engaged conversationalist in both English and German, but felt the loss of his mother tongue keenly. Unlike Arendt, he rarely returned to Europe, in spite of the many opportunities to do so. He settled relatively easily into his adopted country, but he was – as an ex-member of the German Communist Party and of the Spartacus League – ill at ease with its affluence and increasing consumerism. He was always Arendt’s fierce champion and steadfast friend: the still point to which she returned from her many and various travels. In a world in which each had experienced chronic insecurity and statelessness, home was where the other was. Theirs was a relationship that combined both *eros* and *philia*, and that enabled each to flourish. It was within this relationship that Arendt developed her thinking about learning – in large part from Blücher’s inspirational and highly influential teaching at Bard College. This chapter

draws on Arendt's work, Blücher's lectures and the published correspondence between the two.

The next five chapters are focused on different learning configurations: critique, ecology, feminism, play and pedagogy (through a notion of objecthood). In [Chapter 10](#), Alex Moore with David Scott endorse a notion of error,<sup>42</sup> or a practice of operating with and through a flawed theoretical perspective, treating this as an important concept and conceptual practice. In doing this, Moore and Scott examine a particular theory of curriculum knowledge (see [Young, 2005](#); [Young and Muller, 2007](#); [2010](#); [2015](#)). Despite its imperfections it has been enormously influential. Moore and Scott want to suggest that it is incorrect and can be doubted, that is, doubted in a philosophical sense. The question, then, which immediately comes to mind is: what are the grounds for saying this, both in relation to this theory and generally? If we want to critically examine a theory in the world, then we have to do two things: first, set out a more complete or adequate theory and provide compelling reasons as to why this theory is complete or fundamentally sound; and, second, show that the original theory that is being critically analysed fails to satisfy the standards or criteria implicit in our second theory. Two inferences can be made from this: the first is that all knowledge is flawed or incomplete or inadequate to some degree and for good reasons, and thus, the judgement that is being made here is one of the relative inadequacy of our first theory in relation to a set of criteria in which there is an acknowledgement that it can never be perfectly adequate or sufficient. And the second type of inference that can be made is that it operates through and with criteria that have some universal and transcendental properties.<sup>43</sup>

In [Chapter 11](#), Ronald Barnett examines the ecological ideal. The idea of ecology has a number of meanings and aspects, one of which is to point to an interconnectedness between entities. On this basis, we can refer to, say, a knowledge ecology or a learning ecology, having in mind

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42 Error is a concept in its own right, and, as such, can only be understood in relation to a set of prior knowledge arrangements, which have some legitimacy. When I write something, for example, I might chose a word, which I want to use to express something, and I am unsure what it means. So I look up the word in a dictionary, and use that word or not use the word in what I am writing – in effect, what I am doing is acknowledging that there is a correct way or series of correct ways of using the term, even if this is sometimes difficult to identify. What there is, however, is a definitive judgement that the word cannot mean and cannot be used to mean anything we want it to mean. The world imposes limitations on meanings and their uses.

43 In particular, Young and Muller ([2007](#); [2010](#); [2015](#)) justify their curriculum conception by invoking a notion of powerful knowledge. It is a concept and a practice that is empty of meaning and sense.

the entities involved in each case – the elements of systems of knowledge and their relationships, or the spaces of learning in society and their connections. We can, on this basis, seek to inquire into impairments in such ecosystems, such as failures of the entities involved to be properly connected (disciplines work disconnectedly by themselves; in a wealthy society, adults exhibit high levels of illiteracy). This perspective raises large issues and, indeed, challenges for learning in the context of higher education and the university, especially when set against the horizon of a world in incessant motion, and which presents continuous uncertainty. Learning has to be lifelong: that is a commonplace. But what kind of learning? For learning may have deleterious effects (global warming, concentrations of power, manipulations of human beings on a mass scale). Particular kinds of responsibility, ecological responsibilities, it could be said, fall on higher education and the university, if they are to live up to the potential that those very concepts – higher education, university – contain, both at institutional and at personal levels.

In [Chapter 12](#), Sandra Leaton Gray examines the concept and practice of a feminist pedagogy. This requires an explication of two key concepts: feminism and pedagogy. In relation to both of these, and as with all concepts and conceptual frames, to understand and use concepts in the lifeworld is also to position them within antecedent, contemporaneous and applied networks of meaning. This is also an acknowledgement that language and language systems are value-impregnated to their core, and, consequently, if we examine a discursive configuration such as the male/female dyad, it is possible to suggest that it is plurisemantic. Here Leaton Gray restricts herself in the main to the terms, *woman* and *women*, and this does not signify an attempt to use a concept in a non-normative or positivistic way – a concept without any sense of value attached to it – since a woman is not linguistically a man and is not linguistically an intersex person. Because its subject matter is a configuration of two concepts – feminism and pedagogy – this chapter also addresses the meanings that we can give to both of them, and the relations between them.

In [Chapter 13](#), I explore the concept and practice of pedagogy, since this must play a part in any theory of learning that we develop, and particularly in a *Bildungstheorie*. A concept, such as pedagogy, is both a material and a discursive object, and consequently it has all the characteristics that we have come to associate with these types of objects. In the real world, boundaries are drawn between objects. As a discursive object, the concept of pedagogy has several properties, such as being polysemic, semantically contested, networked, interactive, powerful and

dynamic. In addition, as an object it has causal powers, both as a conceptual object and also because it is in the world, or at least in a world.<sup>44</sup> The concept of pedagogy, then, can in part be understood by and through the trace-objects that constitute its past; these are, however, only fragments of meanings that people gave to this notion, and, in this chapter, to a notion of play.

The final learning configuration that we explore in this book is that of objecthood and thingness. Western epistemology has been haunted by the fear of the object, the thing. Since René Descartes, to Immanuel Kant, and then to Jean-Paul Sartre, the struggle between subject and object has defined the way we think of ourselves, of others, and of our surroundings and environment. ‘Object’ and ‘thing’ have become bywords for a lower, meaner and dehumanised existence, form or being. The triumph of the subject has led to a troubling paradigm of anthropocentrism and the era of the Anthropocene. In [Chapter 14](#), Søren Bengtsen analyses the concepts of object and thing in the works of Graham Harman (for example, [Harman, 2017](#)) and Alphonso Lingis (for example, [Wheeler, 2018](#)), and shows how they open up a world of wonder, charm, strangeness and surprise. The key concept being examined here is pedagogy. In line with Harman and Lingis, Bengtsen argues that a renewed interest in objecthood and thingness will enable a much overdue breakout from the hegemonic subject, and unleash the human being into a more diverse and sustainable world. He argues that our educational institutions need an object-oriented pedagogy in order to break free of the bonds of the subject and enable the emergence of new humanisms. More specifically, he focuses on the current state of universities and higher education. Discussions of the future of higher education are, still, directed towards the human subject, human society and human being. The university, however, has the unique potential to release humans from their subjectivity, and to root and anchor them within the natural, spiritual and ecological realms that sustain their existence. In a time where discussions of the future of higher education are much influenced by subject-bound ideologies, he argues that our higher education futures have to become object-oriented and thingful.

In this book, we (the chapter authors) explore a number of key concepts that are relevant to the idea of learning. These are meta-concepts, such as epistemology (see this chapter), phenomenology (see [Chapter 2](#)), rationality (see [Chapter 3](#)), anti-representationalism (see [Chapter 4](#)),

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44 Pedagogy, then, can be understood as a concept in the traditional propositional sense, and, in addition, as a practice.

*Bildung* (see Chapter 5), critical realism (see Chapter 6) and ethics (see Chapter 7), and meso-concepts, such as social divisions and boundaries (see Chapter 8), friendship (see Chapter 9), curriculum (see Chapters 10 and 15), ecology (see Chapter 11) and pedagogy (see Chapters 12, 13 and 14). Knowledge and learning, as meta-concepts, are positioned in various networks of meaning, principally, the antecedents of the concepts, their relations to other relevant concepts, and the way these concepts are used in the lifeworld.

Finally, in Chapter 15 Bushra Sharar and I argue that the recognition of a conceptual domain of time-oriented change in social phenomena means that generative mechanisms exist that underlie the occurrence of learning events. These generative mechanisms may be resistive, oppositional, adversarial and so on, and they comprise a state of affairs which is in opposition to another state of affairs. There is a variety of such mechanisms (the idea of a mechanism is not understood here as mechanistic and determined, but as a set or configuration of objects and object-relations, including those that relate to persons) or apparatuses: counter-conductings, emancipations, decolonisations, immanent critiques, textual readings, decategorisations, absentings, praxis(ings), trans-framings, reflections and textualisings. These are examples of practical reasoning, and not expositions of them in this chapter, where the intention is to change a state of affairs in the world, although most mechanisms or apparatuses do not change very much. Although this book is an attempt at developing a *Bildungstheorie*, further work is inevitably needed. *Bildung* is a recurring theme in the pages of this book (see, in particular, Chapters 2, 5, 8, 13 and 15).

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## Part One

# Meta-concepts

Meta-ontologies delimit what we can say about the world and its contents, although its contents are not directly related to our utterances, evaluations and narratives. In this part of the book, the authors address some of these contents from a universal or transcendental position (see Volume 1, *On Learning: A general theory of objects and object-relations* [Scott, 2021], where the argument was made that this cannot be avoided). In [Chapter 2](#), Tone Saevi explores those associations and connections between phenomenology and the concept and practice of learning, focusing in particular on the adult–child relationship. In [Chapter 3](#), David Scott examines the nature of social orderings. In addition, he addresses a key concept in any epistemological and ontological theory, that of the hermeneutic dimension to the social world and our utterances about it. Following Paul Ricoeur (1984; 1985; 1988), we now might include in this meta-ontology: mythology, exegesis, psychoanalysis, metaphor and narrative theory. In [Chapter 4](#), Henrik Rydenfelt sets out an anti-representationalist view of the complicated connection between mind and world. In [Chapter 5](#), David Scott investigates the notion and practice of a *Bildung*. In [Chapter 6](#), Robert Isaksen explores those important relations and connections that might exist between the meta-ontology of critical realism and the concept and practice of learning. Critical realism is not a homogeneous idea, as is evidenced by the divergent contributions of the early work of Roy Bhaskar (for example, [Bhaskar, 2008a](#); [2008b](#); [2011](#)), his later work (for example, [Bhaskar, 2002](#)), and Margaret Archer (for example, [Archer, 2007](#)), although these have some affinities and similarities. In [Chapter 7](#), Bushra Sharar explores how values and valorisations play out in learning systems and at learning sites.

Each of these chapter authors frames or enframes their work in a particular onto-epistemology: Tone Saevi's work is framed by a phenomenological perspective; David Scott's work in both [chapters 3](#) and [5](#) is enframed by a dispositional and conceptual realism; Henrik Rydenfelt adopts a pragmatist (in a philosophical sense) ontological framework; Robert Isaksen assumes a critical realist stance on knowledge and the world; and Bushra Sharar uses an Aristotelian ethical frame ([Aristotle](#),

2018). These enframings are very different; however, they have one common element, that of a belief in the normative or valorised nature of the social world and how we can know it. What each of them allows is a sense of agency and volition in social theory.

The normative dimension comprises a state of affairs in which an action, disposition or minded state is justified through a norm or valued marker or criterion. The most obvious application of this is in the area of ethics – every ethical concept or category has normative elements of one kind or another. These kinds might include: moral transgressions, virtue-dispositions, eudaemonic states of being and so on (see [chapter 7](#)). Each of these kinds entails a judgement about whether a person’s actions are apt or correct – whether the reasons given for these actions are satisfactory or not (see [chapter 3](#)). In turn, this raises questions about the justifications and rationales that can be given to this reason-giving ontology.

Issues of normativity and valorisation, for some, should not – this is an axiological claim – be restricted to ethics and morality. Some philosophers and social theorists claim that knowledge, indeed all those activities which we might want to call epistemic, have irreducible normative dimensions. There are perhaps three types of normative theory: methodological normativity, where an assumption is made that we, in the learning process, select, interpret, evaluate and make sense of sensory inputs, in order to develop practical theories about the world; object normativity, where the worldly objects that concern us are in themselves normative; and meta-normativity, where the meta-theories that underpin our everyday activities are, in effect, normative claims about what the world is and should be.

A possible way of understanding these normative perspectives is to accept that values are central to understanding how we live and how we should live, and that this valuing goes all the way down, into our descriptions of the world, into those attempts we make at creating better futures and into our relations with other people. We therefore need to work at how we do and can understand the world as it is and as we would want it to be. There are two dimensions to this claim. The first is ontological,<sup>1</sup> and this amounts to an assertion that objects in the world and human beings are valued in relation to each other and to other object-types.<sup>2</sup> Objects are arranged in the world, and there could be other

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1 As in the sense of the constitution of what is.

2 In some cases, these valuations inhere in the words themselves. So, we can compare a word such as *execution* with a word such as *murder*, and we are persuaded to understand the former as being legitimate and right because it is state-sanctioned, whereas the latter has no such legitimisation. Both are in fact *killings*. And further to this, these valuations change over time.

arrangements of these objects in other possible worlds. Indeed, objects (material and discursive), object-relations, object-formations and human beings could be differently formed. Difference therefore is understood as both dissimilarity and as the construction of boundaries between objects in the world.

A second dimension to this normative claim is that, as a consequence, values and valorisations are central to a notion of epistemology<sup>3</sup> (and this, in turn, involves a claim that epistemology [see [chapter 1](#)] has ontological dimensions). This invariably elicits a complaint from those who assert that we can develop value-free knowledge of the world. (This is, in effect, a rhetorical device for claiming that one version of research or knowledge, their own, is superior to another – the assertion is semantically empty.) If we accept that a notion of value-free knowledge is conceptually incoherent, and that we inevitably make prejudgements about the world in our investigations, then being in the world is understood as a practice, primed for investigation, but resistant to algorithmic and value-free methods for describing it used in the natural sciences and used by some in the humanities and the social sciences – the division between the natural and the social used here is another example of the irreducible normativity that inheres in our accounts of the life course and in our roles in this. Again, if we accept that values are ontologically and epistemologically present in the world, and in our endeavours to understand the world in its many iterations and in its many possible iterations, then we have to consider what these values might be and what their provenance is.<sup>4</sup>

Virtue ethics is one of the three approaches to ethics that have a normative dimension.<sup>5</sup> It foregrounds the virtues or moral character of the individual, and it can be contrasted with approaches that focus on duties or rules, as in deontological ethics, or on the consequences of

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3 As in the sense of the mind's or minds' relation(s) with reality.

4 Charles Taylor (1998: 27) writes about the impossibility of operating in the world in a non-normative sense: '[D]oing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us; ... the horizons within which we live our lives and which make sense of them have to include these strong qualitative discriminations. Moreover, this is not meant just as a contingently true psychological fact about human beings, which could perhaps turn out one day not to hold for some exceptional individual or new type, some superman of disengaged objectification. Rather the claim is that living within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, that stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood.'

5 There are many ethical theories in existence, such as: axiological theories, collectivism, Confucianism, consequentialism, deontological ethics, egalitarianism, hedonism, humanism, individualism, moral realism, natural law, nihilism, normative ethics, objectivism, relativism, utilitarianism and virtue ethics.

actions, as in consequentialism. Virtue ethics is different from deontological and consequentialist ethical forms in a number of ways. They are related to dispositions, and what this means is that the ethical act comprises an inner state, which is already there (in some form or another), having been learnt, seeking to express itself in the world in relation to a problem in the world that requires some action. Dispositions, as inner states, precede, condition and have some influence over actions. A disposition is a character type, an habituation, a state of preparation or readiness, and a tendency to act in a specified way. Dispositions, then, have this persistent quality, although they can in time be modified.<sup>6</sup> They have a strong affinity with a person's chosen identity, and they are essential elements of any coherent theory of learning.

The virtues also operate at the cultural or discursive level. At this level, they are dependent on membership of a practice, and this includes how they are instantiated in that practice. They are practice-based insofar as being excellent in the practice requires a judgement to be made as to what is considered to have value in the practice. This therefore implies a relation (a type of progression) between a novice and an expert within the practice.<sup>7</sup> The pivotal issue here is that any designation of an ethical virtue is always, and can only be, understood in terms of some conception of how a society or social grouping is organised, or even perhaps about excellence within the practice. Ethical judgements always supervene on epistemological judgements.<sup>8</sup> The reason why this notion is important is that, first, the identification of the virtues requires a theory of knowledge (that is, epistemology) and of being (that is, ontology), and the identification of a relationship between the two, including a notion of volition; and, second, any ethical theory (deontological, consequentialist or virtue-based) requires a theory of intention.

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6 The argument that I am making here is that concepts are essentially acquired dispositions. In defence of this proposition, I have already suggested that even the most propositional of statements can be expressed as doing something in the world.

7 Alastair MacIntyre's (1981) notion of a practice in which virtue resides in the pursuit of excellence within that practice would also embrace witchcraft, iniquity, autocracy and the like, and thus there needs to be some notion of deontology or consequentialism attached to the particular goods that are being sought in the practice and what the practice is about.

8 One of the consequences of arguing that ethics supervenes on knowledge is that one has to look, in the first instance, for the knowledge element in any ethical judgement we might want to make, with this epistemological and ontological object-relation traditionally expressed as a relation between knowing the world and the world itself.

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## 2

# Learning as ‘the way of the self’, or learning in pedagogical relationships

Tone Saevi

## Introduction

While ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle and Socrates, and modern philosophers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, are common to the English and non-English traditions of education, many philosophers and educators that were considered to be key persons in Europe are unknown in the Anglo-American traditions. This is the case with European scholars such as Komensky, Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Pestalozzi,<sup>1</sup> later scholars such as Nohl, Langeveld and Flintner,<sup>2</sup> and contemporary pedagogues such as Benner, Oelkers and Mollenhauer.<sup>3</sup> They are all most visible and known within their own national and linguistic settings, but not much outside of them (Biesta et al., 2014). While the English-speaking traditions in education have developed along multidisciplinary lines, heavily influenced by other disciplines such as psychology and sociology, education in the non-English cultures in Europe, and in particular in the German tradition, has established itself as an academic discipline in its own right, with *Pädagogik* as its point of orientation, all with its own theory and conceptions (Biesta, 2011).

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1 Jan Amos Komensky, 1592–1670; Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, 1768–1834; Wilhelm Dilthey, 1833–1911; Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, 1746–1827.

2 Herman Nohl, 1879–1960; Martinus Jan Langeveld, 1905–1989; Wilhelm Flintner, 1889–1990.

3 Dietrich Benner, 1941– ; Jurgen Oelkers, 1947– ; Klaus Mollenhauer, 1929–1999.

Scholars working in the tradition of *Pädagogik* over the centuries have written ‘a distinctive body of work ... both within the context of formal educational institutions, and as it occurred in wider social settings’ (Biesta et al., 2014: x). However, very little of the work of these prominent scholars within the continental culture is familiar to scholars in the English-speaking world. Biesta et al. (2014) wonder if the barrier primarily lies in the differences of history, politics and traditions between the two parallel educational constructions, or if the barrier is mainly linguistic, and occurs because of the lack of academic communication between them.

In the last two decades, the lack of communication between the English and non-English traditions has slowly improved, and contact has been established, due, for instance, to scholars such as Gert Biesta, Carl-Anders Säfström, Max van Manen and Norm Friesen, among others. They are multilingual scholars who live and work in both Anglo-American and European cultures, and they therefore surmount the language barrier and are able to translate and revitalise the reception history of educational thinking and writing in the two different cultures. In addition, cross-cultural conferences, and teacher and student mobility in higher education and research, as well as regular mobility, have increased, contributing to further understandings and exchanges of ideas and knowledge. However, the practices that come out of this increased mobility, and exchange of traditions and knowledge, still have the undemocratic quality of considering the English language as a *lingua franca* in publication and professional settings, and thus the barriers are only slowly being eroded in democratic ways.

In this chapter, I intend to be a transgressor by exploring and discussing the purpose and most significant aspects of Continental *Pädagogik*, traditionally and today, and, within this, its relationship to learning, the most striking concept in education now. For Continental educators, learning is an integrated part of *Pädagogik*, which is taken for granted, and part both of the wider orientation to culture as the context of upbringing and *Bildung*, and of understanding and interpreting learning (and teaching) as complex educational practices, indivisible from each other and connected in aporetic and paradoxical ways – more meaningful to human experience than to theoretical or conceptual explanations. In *Pädagogik*, history is visible in present educational practice and thinking (which are closely connected, and which can be best understood as dialogic thinking), and as a continuum of moral awareness of how life is for the child: ‘the hermeneutic works to develop an understanding of a text in terms of the connections with its historical context and with our present-day experience’ (Friesen, 2014: xxiii).

This unending hermeneutical circle from past to present and back makes any pedagogical experience and interpretation of conflicting and contradictory past and present practices open to new interpretations and argumentations (see also [chapter 15](#)). Continental traditions increasingly orient from a democratic consciousness particularly engineered by the war experiences of the last century, as exemplified in the authorships of prominent pedagogues such as Dietrich Benner (1995; 1997; 2000; 2001), Otto Friedrich Bollnow (1959; 1960; 1964), Wilfried Lippitz (1990; 2007), Klaus Mollenhauer (1968; 1972; 1983; 1986) and Jürgen Oelkers (1994; 2001a; 2001b). In this culture, learning is traditionally on the same footing as other concepts, such as teaching, thinking, experiencing and socialising. Learning has an obvious place, but it is not put at the very top of an educational hierarchy. Rather, its place is complex, and, I would say, disturbing, as learning is among the qualities of education that goes on in the child or young person, and cannot be either visible or measurable, other than incompletely. In reality, a hierarchical structure of education has been avoided in *Pädagogik*, especially from the time when Renaissance education became public and secular – a general education, instead of an elite education provided by the church.

## Shared structures in educational practice

Wittgenstein (1969: 62e) once said: ‘it is difficult to find the beginning. Or better: it is difficult to begin with the beginning. And not try to go further back.’ This is true. First, the history of Continental education goes far back to the Greek, Jewish and Christian traditions, and I could have begun there. Second, the extent of insights and texts documenting this long history is vast and difficult to grasp, but it would not be irrelevant to start just there, either. Finally, however, the content or contents could be presented in many different ways, and several approaches could have been chosen, perhaps more or less incidentally. So, where should one begin to introduce European ways of understanding and practising education as a classic tradition built on the shoulders of existentially oriented scholars and humanists? It appears to me that a simple structure with complex undergrowth might be the best way to display the matter itself, and also, with regards to these qualities, there are several obvious candidates and ways forward.

What I would like to do by my choice of starting point is to support my underlying understanding of the basic qualities, paradoxes and even

aporias that constitute education and its purpose, contents, forms and ways. Such a simple structure can be found in the educationalist Klaus Mollenhauer's (2014) core book, *Forgotten Connections: On culture and upbringing*, first published in German in 1983, and translated into several languages before the turn of the millennium, and into English in 2014. Friesen (2014) sees Mollenhauer's book as the attempt to resist the widespread and strong tendency in educational theory to think in formal and abstract terms, instead of being attentive to the concrete person or situation. He argues that currently there is 'a focus on transferable competences', and a deliberate emphasis on any particular content that might be associated with education, and 'high stakes testing of reading, math and related skills' (Friesen, 2014: xxi-xxii). Here, education is related to rational progress and achievement, and fed by principles from biology, psychology and economics. Children are being measured by their ability to fit into standard systems, and their skills are compared to global educational statistics.

Zamojski (2014), with reference to contemporary educational bureaucracy and what he, along with Power (1997), calls the audit society of schools and school systems, shows how teachers spend their time documenting education, instead of teaching students. He argues that the contemporary production of educational documents was not meant only to give an account of education, but actually, intentionally or not, to substitute one reality for another. The documented procedures and rituals represent behaviourist methods, and, in light of this, he suggests that they 'substitute the relations and interactions between educational subjects, and education is simulated as such' (Power, 1997: 36). Zamojski sees the simulate condition of education as part of a society built on bureaucratic ideals, and urges the need for educationalists and others to unmask their own oppression and the false truth under which they work, by redefining and revitalising critical thinking and the human experience of reality. Mollenhauer, Friesen (2014: xxii) argues, contributes to unmasking this contemporary educational deceit by presenting the experience of self and life as being about 'ways of the self', a pedagogical relationship to a teacher, a parent or someone closely engaged with the child or young person, focusing on particular, significant and forming events in life, and thus deeply embedded in biography, culture and history.

Biesta et al. (2014) consider Mollenhauer's little book on general pedagogics to be a key, not only to his own authorship, but to the development and transition of *Pädagogik* after the Second World War in Germany. Before that, they suggest that '*Pädagogik* established itself as

a *Geisteswissenschaft* in line with the ideas of Wilhelm Dilthey working on the hermeneutical and phenomenological analysis of educational processes and practices' (Biesta et al., 2014: x). As Mollenhauer was the key educationalist working on critical education (*Kritische Pädagogik*), and the one who introduced the term *Emanzipation* in the Continental context in his book *Emanzipation und Pädagogik* (Mollenhauer, 1968), he is a principal element of the movement from one educational tradition to another, and, with his book *Vergessene Zusammenhänge* (Mollenhauer, 1983), to a revised and revitalised tradition within which he brought the question of emancipation back to a wider question of culture and formation, or *Bildung*. While *Emanzipation und Pädagogik* (Mollenhauer, 1968: xi) contributes considerably to 'the transformation of *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* into *Kritische Pädagogik*', *Vergessene Zusammenhänge* (Mollenhauer, 1983) partly makes the reverse movement towards a strengthened and widened educational concern, where history, tradition and cultural experience from the twentieth century are taken into a kind of second thought consideration. As I happen to have struggled with Mollenhauer's thinking and writing for nearly two decades, and am still deeply intrigued by it, I am taking the chance here to let his structure for a general pedagogic lead my steps.

## A general pedagogic – why and how

Mollenhauer begins his small book, which is in fact the edited version of lectures given at the University of Göttingen, with a quotation from Herwig Blankertz (1982: 307): 'The whole of education, of upbringing, has a meaning that cannot be subsumed to science and scholarship.' How this meaning of education and upbringing comes about, can be expressed, and is experienced, is the topic of Mollenhauer's booklet. Is there a 'basic set of issues that no one who wants to raise and educate a child in a principled manner could ignore, regardless of position held in our system of education', Mollenhauer (2014: 6) asks. The book is an attempt to address this particular question. The prominent Norwegian educationalist, Lars Løvlie, writes in the introduction to the Norwegian translation of *Forgotten Connections* (Mollenhauer, 1996: 6) that Mollenhauer purposely seems to want to keep a distance between education and the school system because schools have become specialised institutions, and education has become a branch of science. This leads to the situation in which educational questions are being handled by too few people, and are

no longer the shared concern of the culture. We have forgotten the original existential and common texture of education, and we cannot simply patch up and put together education from its bits and pieces, but should start anew by trying to find out once again what education is and should be.

Mollenhauer's little 'rough sketch of what a general study of *Bildung* and upbringing could be today' (Mollenhauer 2014: 9) is such an attempt. He offers six essays where pedagogical-existential issues are displayed through examples, pictures and stories. Each existential and relational issue is at stake in every educational act and, at the same time, initially, each issue belongs to the history of education. Mollenhauer's experiential material of biographical stories, portraits and examples 'present and represent "real" and perceptible human life where every pedagogical question has its source and purpose' and is 'not simply a means to illustrate compelling but hard-to-get-at reflections in new ways' (Saevi, 2014: 39). Rather, as Levering (1987) remarks in his review of *Vergessene Zusammenhänge* on the occasion that the book was translated into Dutch, Mollenhauer did not merely illustrate his book with historically interesting material; he also used the biographical descriptions, pieces of art and woodcuts, as sources for research. He wanted to explore and formulate present-day answers to classic pedagogical questions posed over centuries. Levering (2014), in a later paper on Mollenhauer, shows how Mollenhauer interprets self-portraits of artists such as Rembrandt, Van Gogh and Beckmann, and how he, by this effort, enters into an interpretive tradition stretching back to the Dutch psychiatrist Jan Hendrik van den Berg (1956). Interestingly, Levering argues and to a certain extent contradicts Mollenhauer's interpretation of self-portraits, and, in this, he himself represents the European way of practising an endless ongoing hermeneutic tradition. As for Mollenhauer (2014: 74), he writes: 'These [experiential stories and examples] aren't formal, scholarly descriptions of *Bildsamkeit*; they instead tell of particular situations where *Bildsamkeit* is recognizable.' He continues:

If we accept Augustine's metaphorical characterization of *Bildsamkeit* – call and response – then the self-reflexive narrative of relationship appears as the appropriate way to represent it. Such narratives illustrate the thesis that we can only talk coherently and relevantly about *Bildsamkeit* if the process that gives rise to it is translated into a narrative; for only this process allows us to deal with *Bildsamkeit* as an empirical reality. Without these narratives *Bildsamkeit* remains a fiction, albeit one that is necessary for *Bildung*

to be set into motion. Without this fiction of *Bildsamkeit* parents and teachers would make no serious effort to help nurture it. (Mollenhauer, 2014: 74)

Mollenhauer's general pedagogic approach, as well as the tradition(s) of Continental education, are founded in the relationship between the old and the new generations of human beings, where education is based on the older generation's value-laden interests in the life and lifeworld of the younger generation. The questions of education are thus 'ontological, existential and normative and directed toward how education might help the child to become human, and in this process become a democratic, free and authoritative person' (Saevi, 2014: 181). Within the multiple understandings of the meaning, content and purpose of education in the Continental traditions of the pedagogic, Oelkers (2001a: 255) identifies three common qualities in these theories. First, all educational theories orient from morality: of good and evil, right and wrong. Second, the theories have in common that their basis and starting point is the relation between the older and the younger generations. And, finally, the relationship between older and younger generations, between the adult and child, teacher and pupil, is a power relationship, where the adult's power must be bridled by the powerlessness of the child or young person.

Thus, the relationship between adult and child is an asymmetric relationship that must balance the tension between authority and freedom. Education understood like this requires 'an anthropological and experiential onto-epistemological interest in the meaning of educational events and adults' first responsibility is to be attentive to the existential meaning held within a particular educational situation and in particular how that situation is experienced by the child' (Saevi, 2015: 344). The pedagogical relation is understood as the incarnation and interpretation of life, and it commonly goes unmentioned in Continental traditions. Education as such is practised through, if in conflict with, the priority of existence over epistemology, human existence and humanity above knowledge and objects, and the experiential shared moral responsibility above social conventionality, regulations and standards. This does not mean that educational regulations, habits and outcomes were, and are still, not significant, but, in situations where the child's humanity and '*Menschenwürde*' is at stake, it is an issue to discuss if the child's human dignity should be given priority over the concerns of education and society.

## Mollenhauer's approach to the pedagogic

Klaus Mollenhauer's core placement within the Continental tradition is a strong argument for presenting his basic set of issues as the frame of this chapter. What his set of issues presupposes, in addition to the pedagogical relationship, is a hermeneutical worldview and the democratic qualities collected from classic interpretations in recent European cultures and history. As with hermeneutics, interpretation, reinterpretation and alternative understandings of texts, actions and life were natural and inevitable in Europe. *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* (human science pedagogy), as of Dilthey, was based on the human understanding and interpretation of good from evil, and right from wrong in education, as opposed to theoretical explanations of what good or right education were supposed to be. Understanding, interpretation or translation were not 'a question of access to education or cross-cultural communication ... but nothing less than finding a language for education that is explicitly *educational*' (Friesen, 2022: 39, his italics). Schleiermacher, the founder of modern hermeneutics, and his successors, Dilthey and Gadamer, see understanding as the structure of human life. Thus, 'the closeness between human existence and the personal human experience; interpretation as the experienced reality, go beyond the epistemological concerns of scientific education' (Saevi, 2012: 182). Gadamer's (1985) attempt to show that hermeneutics go beyond any methodical self-understanding of the sciences toward our human experience of the world, as well as Ricoeur's (1992) orientation to the dialectic cultural value of language and action, more than indicate that 'the human relation between adult and child ... the unnoticed basis of pedagogical activity, like the interpretation of texts, culture, and human practices, are the very preconditions of human life and action, both substantiating our experience of meaning and connection' (Saevi, 2012: 183). Mollenhauer knew that the European reader was willing and able to understand the basic aporetic complexities of *Pädagogik*, and to be intrigued by the fictional and biographical translations that he offered from their shared cultural history. As *Pädagogik* was found everywhere where adult and child met, he knew with Schleiermacher that the relation between adult and child – the core premise for pedagogical practice – has its own dignity that exists independently of theory, or, said differently, is a practice that appears previous to theory, as theory basically serves to make pedagogical actions more conscious. Mollenhauer trusted that the pedagogic dilemmas that emerged in a rather unacademic essayistic style in his

booklet were translatable to practice and reflective consideration for the European reader and pedagogue, and, thus, the unending interpretive practice of the hermeneutic circle continued.

## What should be talked about?

The normative edge in the title of this section indicates that by asking this question, one initiates a certain agenda. The title resembles Mollenhauer's title to the introductory chapter of his book. The passive past conditional tense implies that those who are the addressees are those who feel concerned, while the moral quality implies an urgent necessity. Somehow, the question attacks from two angles: the addressable (but open and anticipated concerned) community, and the responsibility of the individual human. He speaks in the continuation of a long tradition that builds directly on the traits of the human condition, expressed by Schleiermacher like this:

Humankind is made up of individual beings who happen to live through a certain cycle of existence on this earth before leaving it. And this happens in a way that those who are in the cycle at the same time can be divided into an older and younger generation, with the older being the first to leave this earth. (Schleiermacher, 1826 lecture, cited in [Friesen, 2022](#): 46)

A striking realisation while reading Mollenhauer's biographical and fictional sources is that they do not tell stories of success about the relationship between the old and the young generations. Mollenhauer has chosen descriptions of children's despair, powerlessness and sense of dependency, and often of adults falling short of understanding the meaning of being responsible and reliable to and for the next generation entrusted in their hands, or directly deprived of their care for a child. The way he brings to our attention 'the question of children's exposedness and dependence of adults, and by the same token he withholds calculated and even desired results in education' ([Saevi, 2014](#): 40) compels the question of how else we can think about adult and child, other than in terms of demands and expectations, systems and standards directed from the older generation. Mollenhauer draws a picture of the deep impossibility of pedagogical perfectionism and the unthinking trust in best practices, and instead sketches an upbringing and education that build on human experience, and always could have been, and could have become, different.

Upbringing and education are at once processes of ‘broadening and enrichment as well as narrowing and impoverishment – a question of what might have been’, Mollenhauer (2014: 2) says. *Pädagogik* is the practice of interpretation and translation of imperfect but always possible understandings and actions. The fundamental aporetic position of the adult generation’s encounter with the younger generation simply necessitates a morally interested relationship based on communication and contact, taking place in a historical cultural context, if somehow possible at all. Terms such as teaching, learning, justice, equality, dignity, authority and freedom are, in this tradition, not abstract labels to be performed in schools, but phenomena belonging to the experience of self and others, framed by the past, present and future of the person. Thus, *Pädagogik* is the incarnated and indirect anthropological and experiential interest in the meaning of educational events, rather than curriculum planning spelled out in educational and political programmes. Mollenhauer simply responds to his question – what should we talk about? – by posing a new question, even more compellingly unusual: why do we want to have children? Children, the younger generation, the newcomers or beginners, as Arendt (1958) calls them, are the future, without whom there is no future or no hope to direct to in times ahead. Mollenhauer’s educational departure is the belief that the minimum of good and right from the old generation might be brought to the next generation as they enter the fundamental pathless and unpredictable way to future events. The rest is up to them, and we, the older generation, must leave it open. His modest hopefulness by writing and thinking these thoughts encourages me to believe that pedagogical practice and theory must be sustained and kept alive by the adult generation’s moral attentiveness to the past, present and future of the child and young person, and by the continuous cultural conversation across time and place on the possible impossibility of education.

## Learning as the experience of self

What is learning? How do children learn, and from whom do they learn? These questions represent a precondition of education, and an overwhelming enterprise to discuss. Human beings are put into a world of constraints and contradictions, a world where other human beings already live and have formed their lives in particular ways. Parents, caretakers and others, who care for us in the beginning, are already present in this world the moment we enter it. Caring, learning and

teaching are performed in the particular place where we happen to be born, or where our caretakers bring us – always a place in time and space – and we are entrusted to a particular person, commonly a parent, later also a teacher, in a bodily, social and cultural relation. Hopmann (2014: 48), as a young student, realised that this forgotten missing link, the adult–child relation, the pedagogical relation, commonly hidden from us due to its naturalness, was more than a ‘weak left-over of the *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*’.

Mollenhauer himself seems to have tried to avoid the realisation of this spectre from the past in his former publications by focusing on overriding lines of the objective picture of society, rather than on the concrete educational moment. But in *Forgotten Connections*, he realises that *Pädagogik* is basically the encounter by the child with what adults present to them, and he insists upon the description of this self-reflexive relationship, as he calls it (Mollenhauer, 2014: 74), as the only way to ‘deal with *Bildsamkeit* as an empirical reality’. Children’s ‘educability’, embedded in their innate quality of unfinishedness and plasticity, is the precondition for the pedagogical relation, and is the foundational reason why the pedagogical relation has to be the starting point of education, as Nohl (1957) and Spiecker (1984) assert. The educational process, as well as the rationale for education, is poor, Mollenhauer (2014: 7) suggests, ‘when it fails to grasp upbringing as an encounter by the child with ways of life in which she or he grows up’. Children can only imagine their own life on the basis of those adult lives that they experience concretely before them as direct presentations of language, actions and structures, already displayed in the time and place where they grow up. Education is productive precisely because of the perhaps limited values of goodness that we bring to the children to whom we relate in homes and educational institutions. We have no other option than to trust that our adult ways of life at all times pass on something of value to the child, and thus contribute something of significance to the common cultural and global good.

## Pointing out an order of things

From the time that separate and specific educational institutions occur in our culture as compulsory schooling for all children, not only for a small minority, but for everyone, a science of education was developed. Children’s learning is ‘walled off’ (Mollenhauer, 2014: 33) from adults’ work, and it takes place in particular buildings designed for groups of children being taught jointly, and particular rituals and practices, as well

as formalised chronological times, are firmly introduced to them through years of living their school life. Education increasingly is specialised into levels, standards, curricula and sets of progress, and particular theories of child and youth development are constructed (for example, in psychology, in sociology, and in the systematic study of general education, special education and vocational training). Our educational system would descend into chaos, Mollenhauer (2014: 34) says, were it not for the enormous and constantly growing 'representations which are not "the things themselves" but ... instead point out things and phenomena'. The diverse representational material used in educating the young generation shares the fact that they *reproduce* the world in symbols, but are not themselves the real world. Instead, they are *representations* of the world adopted as *filters* between the unfinished child and the complex world.

The world again and again is being made more coherent and continuous by systematic teaching in schools, even though it appears increasingly meaningless when directly opposed to the child and young person. As we try to make life and world experientially, rationally and relationally meaningful and significant to the new generation, the cultural representations of ways of human life and life products hold ontological, epistemological and methodical qualities, and are affected by, and affecting in themselves, the pedagogical issues at stake (Saevi, 2012). To Mollenhauer, building on qualities of Comenius's (2012) textbook for a general *Pädagogik, Orbis Sensualium Pictus* (The Visible World in Pictures), published in 1658 (in English in 1659), every representation of the world must fit into a meaningful whole of this world, and, equally important, is a choice of representation that could always have been conveyed differently to the next generation. Thus, representing life and world to the young is an ethical act, and a responsible choice by the adults representing the older generation. As the onto-epistemological quality of every educational choice and view always is alternative and could have been different, the possible choice always exceeds the real choice. Human existence and educational practice, therefore, are not based on necessity, but are always alternatives among others.

This pointing to the order of things, representing the habitus of the culture, at the same time represents particular preferences of ways of life to the child or active self. The question of all times and cultures regarding what should be conveyed as learning material to the young has become increasingly difficult to answer due to questions vitalised with every new generation: what is a decent life, and how should we effectively, meaningfully and coherently introduce this life to children in a world of endless specialisation, digitalisation, division of labour, and optimisation

of time and efforts of institutions and individual lives? The socio-ethical responsibility to tell trustworthy and true stories about the world and life to the young is a burden the older generations, if any, must take on. The pedagogical situation presupposes as well that certainty, truth and relevance are shared, and are continually culturally and ethically debated.

## Preparedness or readiness to learn

Children's *Bildsamkeit* (developmental preparedness or educability), and their response to the opportunities of the world, are two sides of the same coin (Saevi, 2012). While *Bildsamkeit* is a child's inherent preparedness built on unconditional trust from the adults around them, and the conditions under which they live, self-activity, the child's response to this unconditional trust in them, is their own action in due time. Additional to informal and formal ways of life at all times and places displayed by the older generation to the young in all kinds of actions, systems and habituations, the new generation have the latent potential to adapt to and exceed that which are being given to them in tradition and culture.

However, from the very beginning and through childhood, the child or young person depends on an atmosphere of trust that encourages them to encounter life with openness and eagerness, conditions that form their own will and ability little by little to assume responsibility for their own self and life. Like Franz Kafka's letter to his father at the age of 36, which is one of the most astonishing documents describing childhood experiences, every childhood is impossible to describe in complete and correct detail, 'because the magnitude of the matter goes far beyond the scope of [my] memory and understanding' (Kafka, 1953: 7). This is utterly complicated by the view that *Bildsamkeit* springs from upbringing and pedagogy, teaching and learning as interdependent processes that cannot be separated or predicted.

What do we do when we are faced with such a situation? One starting point is the pedagogical relationship from where experiential moments between adult and child occur and open possibilities of dwelling with situations, issues, interests, plans and events that are given meaning *in* and *by* the expressions themselves, which all come from the outside and enter the relation (Saevi, 2013). The fundamental uncontrollability and givenness of *Pädagogik* become visible in the pedagogical relationship as an expression of life. Van den Berg (1972: 71) observes that 'the relationship between man and fellowman [*sic*] is such that it realizes itself in the form, and in the nearness or distance of world and body'. The

pedagogical relationship is far less a tool than we tend to believe, and far more a sovereign expression of life (Løgstrup, 1971) that opens the possibility of pedagogical moments with significance for those affected.

What do we do, however, when the circumstances under which we live have lost their power to educate, and are no longer reliable and trustworthy to the young, as is the situation in our market-based society, threatened by the collapse of democratic, climatic and health-related qualities? Mollenhauer (2014: 52) suggests that when everyday life no longer has an inherent pedagogical significance (as has also been the situation in the past), 'the basis for responsible upbringing has to be found in the minutest but indispensable moments of all pedagogical relationships between teacher and student'. This relationship takes place in concrete circumstances, orients to particular tasks and practices, and is not about children being citizens of an abstract global world, but being with a responsible teacher and adult in a concrete place and time. When we as adults point to the world and what matters in the world to the new generation, we do not really point out the world, but only what we take to be the world and what is important to learn among everything that is possible to learn.

## Trusting that children want to learn

How do we, as teachers and parents, encounter a life and a world that we are entrusted and expected to familiarise our children with? Upbringing and education happen in a world of social, cultural, economic and human conditions, for which education is not directly responsible, but with which it is nevertheless inevitably intertwined. How does the older generation relate to the younger generation in terms of what to transfer from all that is available of knowledge and possibilities, and how do they present it in ways that enable the young to take hold of and accept it? Or, said more precisely, how do we construct the connection between content and form of what might be conveyed in order to meet the attention and commitment of the young?

Small children willingly and enthusiastically learn by themselves how to crawl, walk and talk, but when they start school, their formerly strong motivation increasingly must be nurtured. Mollenhauer (2014: 57) understands the predicament, and names two significant dilemmas to pedagogical practice: 'How do we know that a child is beginning to engage in his or her own *Bildung*?', and 'When scholars talk about *Bildsamkeit*, they are in my view merely exemplifying this inability.' What

is there to respond to aporetic expressions such as these, which produce more problems than solutions to acute educational questions? Educability, or *Bildsamkeit*, occurs in the encounter between child and culture and those who represent the culture, at a personal and cultural level, and it is 'embodied in specific social arrangements' (Mollenhauer, 2014: 63). The child finds his or her way of life on the basis of the content and form provided by the adult caretaker passing along the path from non-socialised self to subjectivity, and to the world of intersubjective language, habits and cultural ways of life.

This process has many labels, among them socialisation, assimilation, citizenship, self-mastering and self-regulation, although none of them cover what the human ability to come into existence is, and how it happens. Children's foundational openness to learning, and their organic plasticity to changing life circumstances, are happy predispositions, but they are not enough to lead a human life if the world happens to be without human care and cultural challenges, as exemplified by, for instance, Kaspar Hauser and the Wild Child in Aveyron. A child's *Bildsamkeit* is a response to the human practice of care and culture, posed in bodily, relational, temporal and spatial human manners, leading the child via language to those who are already present in the world, and who concretely represent the intersubjective reality. Thus, 'developmental preparedness expresses a prepared potentiality in the child, not a prepared readiness' (Saevi, 2012: 187). This fragile potential quality becomes potent and durable in contact with the adult's trusting belief in the child. This is why teaching and learning are interdependent processes whose connections should not be broken. *Bildsamkeit* as the child's working on his or her own way of life is a countermovement to learning as a joint readiness to curricula and learning outcomes.

Education, rather than being a friction-free and seamless process of learning, is about being cautious of expectations of children, so that onto-epistemological qualities are supported, respected and nurtured in relational and social situations. To value and encourage the possible but yet unknown self of the child, adults act towards the developing young person *as if* this becoming person already was or had realised the qualities in question. The pedagogical intentionality and the conceptual framework that adults employ have a one-sided contrafactual character, which, to the child, makes becoming a person possible in the first place. The pedagogical relationship, therefore, is unlike all other relationships, and, as Spiecker (1984: 208) suggests, 'the fact that the infant develops in a human fashion, that she or he becomes a developing person, is not "natural" but is a human achievement'.

## Ways of life confronted with the self

How does the child or young person appropriate their inherent human educability? How does their plasticity and active potential for increasingly becoming human come to life, develop, and change during childhood and adolescence? Is the process simply a 'transformation of a natural being into a rational being' (Mollenhauer, 2014: 115), or is it, as Piaget describes, the noticeable operationalisation of internal qualities into external abilities, or is it a lasting, calculated influence by the adult forming the child to meet society's expectations? A constructivist approach to education omits the child's soul and inner life. While Pestalozzi (1951) speaks of the effort to awaken the inner vitality of the child, something he believes every human is born with, Locke would have said that the human soul is a rational potential prompted by learning from external sources (Oelkers, 1994). Questions of self and identity have exploded, and seem to be basic problems the young face today, regardless of their political and educational stance. Mollenhauer (2014: 115) writes that: 'Together with self-knowledge, identity is supposed to provide something that is no longer available from religion, from a worldview, from social arrangements or affiliation, or from nationality.' Young persons' self and identity have become prominent, if not insistent, today, a condition recognisable in educational practice and public curricula, as well as in society and politics. Mollenhauer (2014: 116) turns from psychological and sociological explanations and tools to the tangible existential experience of identity, namely as 'the relationship of the I to itself'. He considers the self-relationship to be intrinsic, unstable and anticipatory, and a relationship that represents the difference between what he calls an 'empirical reality and that which is possible' (Mollenhauer, 2014: 116). Identity is simplifications of possible selves, or, as Sartre (1994) entitles them, self-projections, or future projects of possible identities. In fact, Mollenhauer (2014) suggests that identity and self cannot be an object to objectifications or empirical explorations, but instead has qualities of fiction, something that can only be felt and sensed experientially and in their negative sense, as problems and dissatisfaction. His essential point is that a child or young person's relation to his or her self is not directly explorable in either life or research. A person's self can only be accessed by others (and partly also by the person himself or herself) *indirectly* as analogy and traces, and thus the risk of misinterpretation is high. Two consequences arise: first, that research on identity and self regardless of discipline or profession necessarily will be

based, at least partly, on illusions; and second, that adults have no other source for their interpretation of analogy and marks that the child leaves behind than their own past and present life. When thinking along these lines, upbringing and teaching is about adults' reflexive relation to themselves and, accordingly, less about forming children. Moreover, how human beings relate to their self is a problem with personal, relational, social, cultural and existential dimensions, and something that must be open to continual discussion by the self in his or her relationships, circumstances and reality.

## Concluding remarks

Mollenhauer (2014: 6) initially asks the question: 'is there a basic set of issues that no one who wants to raise and educate a child in a principled manner could ignore, regardless of position held in our system of education?' His booklet is his response to this question. Still, forty years after his book was first published, the question raises matters relevant to education, matters that, although they are not culturally, politically and historically independent, have the classic quality of being existential: belonging to the life condition of humans. I have tried to argue in favour of the Continental way of seeing education as the basis of Mollenhauer's credible structures. In conclusion, I will point out three educational qualities around which Continental *Pädagogik* rotates, and the effects of which are to restrain the classic polarities of education: the tension between child and society, the tension between tradition and change, and, with relevance to this chapter, the tension between teaching and learning, and of learning and *Bildsamkeit* or educability. Education is a profoundly anthropological task, and an endeavour bound by space and time. Digital solutions are applicable if the existential anthropological ingredients are taken sufficiently into consideration, and the technical pre-programme standardisations can be broken if required. Anthropology, literally meaning 'speaking of man', is a profound quality of education, not something that one can wheel and deal with, or apply when required. On the contrary, the fact that education pertains to human beings has far-reaching consequences with regards to the content, form and purpose of education, the direct encounter between the representatives of the two generations, and when it comes to the form and qualities of political systems.

To start with the former: educational issues are deeply political, as they are always already taking place in societies and institutions involved in political and moral struggles over what is worthwhile and what is not,

and over how the ideals of the future should be envisioned. Moreover, from political wings of both extreme right and left we have the historical experience of education as a means to shape the future. Education, however, is not the same as politics, and, as I see it, education should not be a means to political agencies of any kind. But education is an exclusive vantage point for looking at political and moral transformations taking place in our society. Continental *Pädagogik* insists on a human-oriented purpose and a pedagogical content that should be placed outside, and, to a certain degree, is independent of, the politics of the present government, the spirit of the age and the forces of political turnings.

Second, education has an indirect experiential quality starting in the pedagogical relation between adult and child, and the adult's hermeneutical ability of tactful sensibility and pedagogical judgement from moment to moment. The becoming child is protected by the adults' grown-up-ness and by the filters in cultural structures towards the complex world, without being kept away from relating to the real world in a way that children and young persons are interested in and able to. The pedagogical relation is not about children being small citizens in a vast global world, but about being with responsible adults in real places and times, an insight that brings us to the third of my points.

Benner (2001) presents a variety of ways in which the relation between education and democracy can be defined, and problematises the common understanding that education should be the state's responsibility when it comes to raising democratic citizens. While there is a required connection between politics and education, democracy is protected from the inside of democracy itself by basic principles that put a ban on democratic thinking and practice 'against forcing the way people live into any standardized form prescribed by the state and regarding up-bringing and education as an applied part of politics' (Benner, 2001: 133). Teaching, learning, socialisation and subjectification – the shared structures of education – should not be the means by which the constitution holds its power, but rather 'be freest possible ... and directed as little as possible to the political situation', as Benner (2001: 143) says, citing Humboldt and Schleiermacher. This implies that the child or young person should not first and foremost be prepared to become a (future) citizen, but should be met as a human being with humanity as a first premise. A child is first a human being, then a citizen, a partaker in productive work in society and a member of a nation, and these qualities are to be practised at the same time as the child matures. In that case, there is a chance that the next generation 'would no longer be characterized by a hierarchy of supervision and instructions but by a differentiation of

authority and responsibility' (Benner, 2001: 150). The younger generation then might be better able to discuss shared questions of common value in conflicting socio-ethical contexts and contribute to a democratic public, rather than simply being judged by how well they acquire knowledge and abilities in competition with their fellow human beings.

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### 3

## Rationality, reasons and learning

David Scott

The framing or enframing of any utterance that we make about the world comprises a reasoned argument to support a transcendental epistemic or empirical claim. We are thus in the world of reasons, rationalities and learnings. Any claim to knowledge made by a person is enframed, and this requires us to articulate and give expression to this enframing as it relates to ontological, epistemological and methodological concerns; and, consequently, any knowledge claim is enframed by a meta-epistemic theory, the type of object or objects it makes reference to, and how it can be justified. A relationship exists between a claim to knowledge and its truth-value, and this allows us to talk about true-knowledge as a useful compound word, and, following on from this, any divisions or categories that we care to use are in history and could be other than they are, and this includes ontological and epistemological divisions or differences. This requires a theory of mind, and therefore a theory of the relationship between mind or minds and the world.

There are five object-types in the world: discursive objects, material objects, relational objects, structural-institutional-systemic objects and people (see [chapter 1](#)). Each of them has different characteristics and, because objects have a morphogenetic structure, in rare circumstances may change their status as objects; indeed, what constitutes an object-type is also morphogenetic. In an object-ontology, objects, including human beings,<sup>1</sup> have learnt or acquired dispositions or properties. These are conceptual relations in human beings, which cannot be fully determined as to their meaning in definitional and essentialising ways,

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1 The word *object* is being used here to indicate a sense of being different from another object or entity, and not to suggest that human beings do not have volitional and intentional dimensions.

but only in terms of how they are used. In making a truthful statement, we are not providing a description of an experience but making a claim about it, in what Wilfred Sellars (1997) described as a space of reasons. He suggested that ‘in characterizing an episode or a state as that of knowing, we are not giving an empirical description of that episode or state; we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says’ (Sellars, 1997: §36), and what follows from this is that we can and should understand and use concepts specifically in relation to antecedent, contemporaneous and applied constellations<sup>2</sup> or networks of meaning (and this, in turn, requires us to give an account of the different relations that there are and can be between our utterances and these networks). Reasoning within this space involves the giving of and asking for reasons, where this activity is understood as making a commitment in the world, with that commitment referring to the circumstances surrounding its content and its consequences.<sup>3</sup>

Reasons are different from, and operate in different ways to, physical causes – a cricket bat hitting a cricket ball, for example. There are also good and less good reasons for doing something. Robert Brandom (2000: 61) has argued that when we talk about distinguishing between good and bad reasons, or at least determining what is a better reason for doing this rather than that (this is a form of practical reasoning), we are making an inferential judgement about the specific merits of the two sets of reasons we are considering. These inferential judgements are commitments that we make in the world and, consequently, on every occasion that we make a judgement about a good or bad reason, or a better or worse reason, we are also making a series of knowledge claims about the world, those claims being implicit in the three semantic networks or constellations within which any utterance we make, rational or otherwise, is enframed:<sup>4</sup> the network of antecedent meanings, the store of current conceptual meanings, and the way concepts are used in the lifeworld (see chapter 1).

However, transposing a reason into a commitment does not allow us to distinguish between good and bad reasons for doing something, since a commitment to anything is simply another way of saying that this is

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2 A constellation in the sense that I will be using it here arises out of a conjunction of elements that are relevant to a situation, a setting, a process, a text. The philosopher, Walter Benjamin (see, for example, 2007), used the word extensively in this way.

3 See Brandom (2000).

4 This is a word used by Martin Heidegger (1962), translated from the original German word, *Gestell*, to denote those social, geo-historical, temporal, epistemological, political and discursive frames within which our utterances are ineluctably embedded.

what I believe to be true. Calling these transpositionings inferential in turn adds very little to our understanding of how we can articulate what is in the world or say what should be there in the world. Inferential relations only have a content in relation to how they connect or attach an object to another object. Using the concept of inferentialism in the way that Brandom (1994) does tells us very little about what it is or, rather, what it can be. It is too general to allow us to understand what those relations are between language and its referent, between mind and world, and between a thought and an external object. There are a number of important conceptual relations that might allow us to do this: negating (following Hegel, this is Brandom's [1994] preferred use of the concept), absencing, categorising, contextualising, forcing and more, and, although these can be thought of generically as inferential relations, what they allow us to do, if we use them in appropriate ways, is give some content to the meanings we can ascribe to our utterances about object-relations, and thus about objects themselves. We make different types of commitments to the different types of meanings that are embedded in our three networks and, consequently, when we try to explicate semantically our utterances and commitments, we have to pay attention to the different modes of reasoning that each of them implies.

This means that we are committing to the idea that the meaning of a concept rests with three primary networks or constellations of meaning: a framework which is past-oriented, and thus refers to the antecedents of the concept; a framework of other and contemporary concepts, where a key concern is the notion of relevance; and a framework of how the concept we are concerned with is used or can be used in the present. The meaning of a concept is also, as with all objects in the world, enframed in a particular way. Here are some frames or framings within which we can position those sets of meaning: the frame of molecules and atoms, for example, neurophysiological explanations; the frame of associations between variables; the function or use-in-the-world frame; the frame of causal relations; the frame of events or event(ing)s; the linguistic frame; the universal hermeneutic frame; the frame of structure; the semantic frame; and the universal or transcendental frame. The key to understanding how we construe meaning from the three networks or constellations lies with the conceptual object itself, its core, its properties, and its relations (exogenous and endogenous).

The network of contemporaneous meanings is extensive, as the concept (and its meanings) potentially has a relationship with a large number of other concepts (and other concept-meanings). In order to understand these relations and relationships, we have to show how they

are different (two objects may be different from each other only because they do not have the same object-relation attached to them), and a number of such object-relations come to mind: pluralising (where the relation between objects is manifested as an object-to-objects relation); relational force (where this refers to the strength of the object-relation); ordering (where this refers to hierarchies of objects being created); representing what is there in the world (where this refers to an attempt to connect or relate thoughts to objects); endogenous (or exogenous) relations (where this refers to the direction of change in the original object); framing and reframing relations (where these refer to the epistemology of the change process); categorising and re-categorising relations (where the concern is with the essence or non-essence of objects in the world); negating relations (where this refers to the dialectics of the change process); and many more. The key here is their relevance, that is, we can say that in our search for the meaning of a concept, we need to pay attention to some parts of the constellation rather than others because we judge those parts to be more apposite than the others. The idea of relevance is being understood here as a concept, and it therefore has qualities (or properties) such as being polysemic, semantically contested, networked, interactive, powerful and dynamic.

There is a need to distinguish between different types of concepts because, if their functionality is different, then we can only use them in different ways. For example, hinge concepts can be distinguished from peripheral concepts, in relation to how important they are in the argument that is being made or the discursive configuration of which they are a part. Learning is a hinge concept in most knowledge-claiming discourses. All concepts are normatively and ethically framed, and what this means is that every time we use a concept, discursively or as a praxis, we are giving a value to something in the world. However, some concepts are strongly framed as value-carriers; others are only weakly framed. Some concepts have a supersessional form and, consequently, are hierarchically arranged; others do not. In our judgements, or in the judgements we choose to make, if we want to understand the meaning of a concept, we have to show how it relates to other concept-meanings and how relevant they are. These relations are object-specific, and they determine how objects interact and are constructed.

The issue, then, is how do our three constellations function in the world. They work in different ways. The first, the antecedent network, is contentful only insofar as conceptual objects have already passed on their meanings to other meanings and meaning structures, although this does not rule out sets of inferential relations persisting into present and future

actions. These inferential relations are multifaceted and only have semantic contents in their specific applications: pluralisings, praxis(ing)s, negatings, learnings, forcings and so on. Even in the most basic of thought-actions, such as identifying objects as distinct phenomena, we are engaging in inferential processes. Specific applications of our first nexus or framework might consist of exploratory discursive actions about current beliefs and activities. However, these are rare, as most people do not inquire very deeply into the origins of the commitments they make to the social semantic frameworks that these commitments belong to. However, we can say that a commitment to something, whether implicit or explicit, always has a genealogical element to it. As we articulate a belief, we also articulate the origins of that belief, and this means that in deciding to do something, we are also searching for a reason as to why we should do it, and this in turn means that we are distinguishing between good and bad reasons for its application. Consequently and ineluctably, we are exploring (consciously, subconsciously, intentionally or thoughtfully) and resourcing from a network of interactive meanings and concepts that have already been used in the world. We might, of course, be making incorrect assertions and inferences from these stores of knowledge.

The second nexus or framework has the virtue of being present to any deliberations we might make, although we may not be aware of all its manifestations. This store is of conceptual meanings – the contents of our utterances – that exist in books, on the internet, in speech patterns, in communication devices, in the use of words, sentences, paragraphs and texts, in ordinary and everyday talk, in all forms of writing and thinking and more. This store of meanings contains contradictions, disputes, divisions, plurisemantics, temporal plays and the like. The network or nexus is variegated, interconnected, and ever-present in our utterances in the world and, more importantly for our purposes here, allows us to decide between good and bad reasons for decisions we make that lead to actions, whether contemplative or praxical (see [chapter 15](#)).

The third nexus or framework is the use function of concepts and conceptual framings in the world. This clearly has a connection to, although it is not isomorphic with, the other two frameworks, with these inferential relations operating in different ways. The guiding point of our actions in the world has both a denotative and a performative functionality, so that in operating in the world (thinking, doing, saying, uttering) we are being conceptually active and acting on conceptual meanings. We cannot avoid this. Concept-use and framing can best be understood by examining an argument or set of reasons for doing something in the world, in this case, abortion or the termination of a foetus. The reason for choosing this

ethical and praxical issue is that there are profound disagreements in societies around the world about whether abortion should be allowed or proscribed, or limited to a small number of carefully selected cases.

## Abortion or the termination of a foetus

Martha Nussbaum's<sup>5</sup> idea of universal capabilities and functionings can be applied to the difficult and troubling issue of abortion or termination of a foetus.<sup>6</sup> She has argued that a good reason for terminating a foetus might be where the pregnancy is the result of rape, or where the foetus is considered to be non-viable, or where it threatens a women's life or health. (These arguments are not made explicit here.) She wants to go further than this and invoke a future condition, that giving birth or allowing the foetus to come to full-term would threaten in some circumstances the principle of giving equal dignity to all human beings in their lifetimes. This raises the issue of the status of the unborn child (as indeed does the category of an unborn child), and here we have a significant tension between and within two principles: the one concerns the point at which we should treat all human beings as deserving of equal dignity, and the other is that the woman who is pregnant may also now, and in the future, after giving birth, lose some protection from a loss of dignity as a human being if a termination is not carried out. The question arises as to which of these reasons has a greater force, ethically and epistemologically.

Nussbaum (2011) connects the idea of human dignity and the principle of equal capabilities and functionings to claims by individuals to a certain threshold level of well-being, whether material, physical or psychological – a capabilities approach to social justice. This argument has implications and consequences for the distribution of goods in society. My particular concern here is with how the principle might work in the case of abortion or the termination of a foetus, and this is compounded by the fact that allowing the pregnancy to come to full fruition can only have real consequences for women.<sup>7</sup> Men will not lose any essential dignities granted to them if a termination of the foetus is carried out.

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5 See Nussbaum (1990; 1995; 1997; 1998; 2000a; 2000b; 2001; 2011).

6 The USA Supreme Court recently overturned its fifty-year-old Roe versus Wade ruling, with the consequence that millions of women in the US will be denied the constitutional right to abortion. The judgement paves the way for the individual states to ban the procedure.

7 The conceptual issue of being a woman or a man or an intersex person is not addressed here.

The capabilities approach treats each person as an end in itself and not as a means to an end, and thus affirms the principle of equal determination of treatment and consideration regardless of biological and categorical differences. It is focused on choice or freedom now and in the future life of the person concerned, and one of its consequences is that it commits the society to promote for all its people a set of opportunities or substantive freedoms which are inalienable. This enjoins that society to redistribute goods unequally to disadvantaged groups such as women, so that they can benefit from these freedoms and opportunities. It is a compelling argument for retaining the right to abortion or termination in certain circumstances and under certain conditions. This is an ethical emancipatory theory that has some universal elements.

We have here two arguments that are dependent on the exercise of a set of deontological principles and conceptualisations, and the determination of an action that follows from the expression of those principles, those conceptualisations, their inferential relations, and those praxical conclusions that can be drawn from them. Each of the arguments makes a series of factual and conceptual claims, and then draws inferential conclusions from those claims, which are prescriptive, and thus can serve as ethical desiderata. In the first case (a set of linguistic objects and relations based around a deontological idea of the absolute sanctity of human life), the argument is that there is a fact of conception (referring here to the physical act of a beginning), which cannot be doubted, that is, its contents are aconceptual, without valorisation and involve no prior mediation. In addition, there is an exclusively valorised assertion, which has the force of compulsion, that under no circumstances and under no conditions should we sanction the death of a human being; in other words, there are no good reasons for destroying a life after conception. A human being is therefore defined in absolute terms, and after a process of conceptual mediation, as starting from the moment of conception (the unicellular zygote) and ending in the death of that sentient human being. In order to connect these three assertions or knowledge claims, various inferential relations are employed, so, for example, the conceptual determination of what a human being is acts as a logical premise for whether a termination of the foetus is an ethical desideratum.

In the second case (an argument based around the deontological idea of equal dignity for all human beings), there is a fact of conception asserted (referring here to the physical act of a beginning) and, in addition, a conceptualisation about what a human being is – being human does not start at the moment of conception, but at the first movement of the foetus, or when the foetus has the ability to feel pain, or when it has

the capacity to be sentient, that is, to operate with and through concepts and conceptual frames (see [Brandom, 2009](#)),<sup>8</sup> or, of course, at birth. In addition, there is a value judgement being made, which is that all human life is generally sacrosanct, but that there are certain circumstances in which destroying life is legitimate, such as, on consequentialist grounds, the assassination of an important and powerful individual which will both save a large number of lives and allow better conditions of life for everyone else, or, to use Martha Nussbaum's argument, sanctioning a termination would allow the person who is carrying the child to live their life in conformity with a principle of equal regard for all human beings – to allow this commitment. Again, we have here a series of premises, some valuations and some inferential relations between those conceptually mediated facts and these valorisations and reconceptualisations, leading to a conclusion, which inevitably has a certain force as an argument – the inferential relations are specific, particular and valued. Both of these arguments are inferential arguments and reason-giving arguments, although neither of them is able to determine truth or aptness in any absolute sense. (The reason for this is that there are some revalorisations and reconceptualisations involved in the process.) Reason-giving arguments, then, under this conception of rationality, can only be determined by the person making the argument committing themselves to a number of claims and valuations about the world. What this also suggests is that it is difficult to determine the aptness of the two arguments, if each of them is operating with different criteria of judgement; that is, proponents of each do not share the same conceptions and valuations with regards to the issue at hand. This is, of course, a denial that there are any universal and overarching meanings that we can give to concepts, when we are engaging in a process of working out what are good reasons and good consequences. Both these processes are forms of practical reasoning.

## Practical reasoning

Practical reasoning is a subset of a more general concept of reasoning, and, in turn, reasoning can only be understood as part of a material and discursive configuration, which we can describe as rationality, or, in dispositional terms, being rational. Rationality as a concept is plurisemic,

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<sup>8</sup> See also [Brandom \(1994\)](#).

multifaceted and discursively formed. We can give a number of meanings to it. The first of these is that it is a word whose only semantic content is that it is good. A second meaning that we can give to the word is that it connects thinking and action. If the two are properly aligned, then the relationship between thought and act is logically, semantically and comprehensively apt. A third meaning that we can give to rationality is that it is a word that denotes a truthful state of affairs. Rationality as a concept can also point to behaviours that society considers to be acceptable, whereas irrationality can point to behaviours that society considers to be unacceptable. This set of meanings is socially, temporally and spatially relative. Rationality as an object-word can also refer to a social practice such as exchanging goods, with a distinction being made between what theorists have called a perfect choice, which indicates a form that rationality might take (a person is being rational if they make the perfect choice), and an imperfect choice, which indicates a form that irrationality might take (a person has not acted in accord with the criteria of rationality that they are committed to, so that the exchange of goods is not in their best interests or those of other people in society). A rational(ity) number in mathematics represents a ratio of two integers. Rationality, in addition, can be used to denote an ethical act or an act by a person that can be considered simpliciter to be ethical. It might also refer to certain rational characteristics of a person, for example, we can represent a person as rational insofar as they have acquired certain dispositions, such as being autonomous or being self-determined (see [chapter 7](#) for a discussion of values and valorisations). Rationality as a concept can be used to suggest that a person acts from sufficient and not from insufficient reasons. In the latter case, they are acting irrationally; in the former case, they are acting rationally. Finally, we can say that rationality is an ideal state which is understood as the pinnacle of an existential process – a *Bildung* (see [Chapter 5](#)).

We are committed, then, to the human disposition of reason-giving and justifying beliefs and actions through the giving and asking for reasons. This involves both the contents of those judgements, perceptions and notions of the world, and the methodological contents of the way we can and do access the world, both empirically and meta-empirically. There are three sites of knowledge: the world and its contents (Immanuel Kant's noumena),<sup>9</sup> the mediating arena between the contents of the world and objects in the mind (this is, what we might want to call learning sites,

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9 See Kant (1903; 1992; 2007).

which are also contentful), and the contents of the mind that allow us to make judgements, perceive the world and reflect on what we have perceived (Kant's phenomena). To separate out these three sites is itself to make a judgement about the contents of the world and how we can access them. It is also to make a claim that there are always non-conceptual external constraints on what we perceive to be the contents of the world – we cannot make limitless claims about its contents because the world does not allow us to do this. What this argument cannot do is identify what those contents might be, or determine what is or what is not in the world. In order to do this, we need to identify the means by which we access the world, and show how these means (principally, learning acts) mediate the world for us. We also need to determine the normative dimension to these processes, and this inevitably commits us to an explication of the idea of rationality and, consequently, of practical reasoning. This comprises in the first instance examining an important element of the argument that human beings have the capacity to be rational, and that this comprises an alignment of their intentions to a set of normative commitments. We might want to call this capacity, or disposition, reason-giving.

There are several ways we can understand the idea of reason-giving. The first of these is that human mindedness is the ability to commune with reasons. Another view is that reason-giving can be understood as the way discursive activities work by searching for the best reasons for action, subconsciously or consciously. A third set of meanings that we can give to the idea of reason-giving is that it refers to the structures of thinking and acting, that is, material and discursive objects, relational objects, configurational objects and those embodied features of the human being, such as the capacity to speak, think, believe, move and the like. (This is endorsed by Sellars's [1997] spatial or geographical metaphor – the space of reasons.) A fourth set of meanings that we can attach to it is that reason-giving is one and only one disposition of human beings that some people have acquired, in part or as a whole, and it has universal qualities only insofar as human beings have dispositions, besides other things. In addition, it has been suggested that describing human life as reason-giving, or in the space of reasons, is to distinguish it from deterministic, scientific and atomistic views of the world – experience should therefore be understood as rational (the pursuit of reasons for action), rather than physicalist.

If we act rationally, the end that we desire may not be reached, with the understanding that whether it is reached or not is irrelevant to whether we have or have not acted rationally. This is because rationality can be construed, and is best construed, dispositionally. It has a set of

qualities that allow any reasonable observer to say that this person is acting rationally. This set of qualities might include: not acting from reasons that as far as the person can see would only benefit that person and not any other person; acting from reasons that are wholly selfless;<sup>10</sup> having clarity about whether the reasons the person thinks are driving their actions are indeed the prime motivators of those actions; and being comprehensive about (having full knowledge of) all the possible reasons there might be for acting in a particular manner with regards to a particular issue. However, in order to determine whether a person has acted in a rationally dispositional manner, we have to, in the first instance, determine a best possible set of reasons for acting in the world in a particular set of circumstances.

Since the concept of a reason is central to our concerns in this chapter, we need to understand the different ways that a reason can be understood and used. A reason can be an argumentative statement that attempts to explain a belief or an action, where an explanation also includes a surfacing<sup>11</sup> of those pre-texts, sub-texts and inter-texts that are there but which are only occasionally revealed. A reason might have an evaluative sense in that it provides a justification for an action or a sequence of actions, insofar as this justification has a coherentist, logical, rational or epistemic form, or a combination of these. A third possible meaning that we can give to the term is that we have identified a state of affairs in the world, and we wish to understand what caused it. This refers to the reasons for an event or happening in the world. A reason might be used in the world to denote a capacity or attribute of a human being, as in human beings having a reason-giving capacity or dispositional concept of reason-giving, either in a communal or individual sense. A reason might also be used to indicate a sufficient ground of explanation or of logical defence, as in a court of law. A reason might have been given the sense that it makes some event or activity in the world intelligible. A minimum set of conditions for a belief to be thought of as such is as follows: there are reasons that potentially can be made available for supporting a belief, and these reasons can be construed in evidential form; these reasons are relevant to this belief insofar as they are necessary and sufficient for holding it and using it in the world; there are no contrary reasons publicly available or imagined for not holding that belief; this set of reasons is internally coherent, and this means that the four conditions for

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10 In Derek Parfit's (1984) book *Reasons and Persons*, some reasons are provided as to why the person who is purely self-interested cannot at the same time also be rational.

11 Or, as Brandom (1994) puts it, making them explicit.

intelligibility are met (the rule of non-contradiction, the rule of conformity to a truth criterion, the need for logical connectives, and the need for conditionals/inferential methods).<sup>12</sup> A reason can also be used to mean a power of comprehending, inferring or thinking, especially in a logical and rational way, and a form of practical reasoning is that it is a general human capacity for determining what we should do. Finally, we can understand a reason as a part of the concept of rationality – a rational human belief or action is one in which a sufficient reason (or set of reasons) is provided, and this reason (or these reasons) is relevant to the belief or action.

Such an argument (about reasons, reason-givings and rationalities) only makes sense within a particular enframing of the object-world; for example, if we adopt a physicalist view of the world, with no distinction being made between mind and matter, then reasons and separately rationalisations for those reasons are literally irrelevant to true or apt explanations of these phenomena. They cannot play a part in the causal sequence that we might want to explain, and this includes learning activities. This would suggest that if a non-physicalist approach to volition and constraint is adopted, then a notion of giving and asking for reasons as the essential characteristic of the human being is needed, and this would be in accord with a view that human beings have intentions, and that these intentions are not irrelevant to any explanation we might want to make of an event or causal sequence.

The difficulty then becomes that reasons (which by necessity have a directive quality about them) are embedded in networks of reasons for doing things, which exist independently from the consciousness of the individual, although clearly the person has the potential capacity to access them. A person can have a reason for their action, is convinced that the reason that is given by them is the actual reason as to why the action took place, and believes that the action would not have taken place without the reason being developed prior to the action. And yet, the reason that is given is not the real reason for that action. Furthermore, the rationalisation of the original reason is not necessarily a distortion of that original reason; it may be a re-forming of that reason which now entails the placing of the action in wider social, political, economic and discursive contexts. The purpose is to grasp the reasoning action in its setting of rules, practices, conventions and, fundamentally, peoples' intentions. What this suggests is that there is always a volitional relationship in any

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<sup>12</sup> See O'Grady (2002).

particular action or event. This in turn implies that in most circumstances the person is a skilled knower, especially with regards to their own reasons for their actions, even if the original and motivating reason is subsequently rationalised over time.

Reasons can have a supersessional form. There are three types: simple supersessions, sequencing supersessions and hierarchical supersessions. In the first case, an event gives way to another event, where this is demonstrably or reasonably superior to the original event in some or every way – it has superior qualities. These states of affairs may be material or discursive, and can refer to different types of objects in the world (discursive objects, material objects, relational objects, discursive and material structural-institutional-systemic objects and people). With sequencing supersessions, an event is part of a sequence of other events, so that each part of this sequence demonstrably or reasonably is superior to the one directly below it in the sequence because it has superior qualities. There is no requirement for it to be of a particular length as a sequence. With hierarchical supersessions, an event is part of a sequence of events that culminates in an end-state that is perfect, insofar as it cannot lead to a higher state of being because it is complete. This form therefore suggests that all the other events are inferior or incomplete for a variety of reasons.

The qualities or characteristics of the object determine the type of supersession that can be or is made, and, consequently, I need to come to some determination about the concept of rationality with regards to its supersessional properties. Each and every concept has different possibilities, and, therefore, and as a result, different supersessional trajectories, not least in relation to the three supersessional forms I identified above: simple, sequencing and perfectional. When I say that an event is superior to another event, I am invoking a criterion or set of criteria, and this is unavoidable. I am using the concept of supersession, so that the meanings I attach to it are embedded in a way of life and do not wholly reside in a person or persons. The process, active and transformative, has an objective content. It also has normative qualities attached to it.

A supersession does not just refer to something or some object replacing another object; it also has some quality which legitimises that replacement. Some examples of supersessions are: something is more rational than something else; something is more intelligible than something else; a reason is a better reason than another reason; a thought is a better or more complete thought than another thought; a life is more pleasurable than another life; an action is more ethical than another

action; a good is perfect or imperfect, when being compared with another good; a statement connecting two propositions is more logical than another statement; and a statement connecting two propositions is more comprehensive than another statement. The most important of these supersessions is practical reasoning, which is the focus of this chapter.

## A theory of meaning

A semantic theory is one in which the specifications of meanings are determined in a symbolic system. There are two general approaches: referential approaches and use-theoretic approaches.<sup>13</sup> The first of these understands the semantic properties of linguistic expressions in a conceptual form as broadly referential, in that their primary relation is to extra-linguistic objects and other language sets. We talk and think in relation to the referential properties of these other objects. The use-theoretic approach focuses on the regularities or rules of use. Under this conception, it is these rules and regularities which account for meaning and conceptual content. However, these have weak referential relations to the outside world.

Referential theories understand a semantic theory as an explanation of the truth property of a sentence or linguistic unit in relation to what it shows, encodes or expresses in the particular context within which it is being enacted. This type of semantic theory can embrace a notion of reference or likeness, but not exclusively inference or networking. The principal problem that it has is that meaning, whether expressed linguistically (in relation to a unit of language) or objectively (in relation to an object in the world) cannot account for the way the world for us is conceptually framed. The meaning of a concept, object, proposition or meta-theory lies in the mediations and negotiations we undertake in the world. This formulation does not deny the existence of a referent, as some use-theoretic approaches are inclined to do (for example, [Derrida, 1978](#));<sup>14</sup> however, what it does do in a Kantian sense<sup>15</sup> is distinguish between an unknowable world and a world that we have come to know. This positions the truth-value of a linguistic utterance or proposition about a concept, object, object-configuration, object-relation or person in the relationship

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<sup>13</sup> See Steinberger and Murzi (2017).

<sup>14</sup> See also Derrida (1982).

<sup>15</sup> What this refers to is the distinction that Immanuel Kant (2007) made between noumena and phenomena.

between mind and world. A theory of propositions, in which the utterance represents something which is external to it, corresponds to it, is isomorphic with it, is unsatisfactory for a variety of reasons.<sup>16</sup> However, expressions and indeed propositions, in addition to a reference, also have a content, and it is this that allows them to be thought of as having a meaning. The issue still remains as to what type of content-meaning we can give to linguistic expressions, since all we have established here is the possibility of these linguistic expressions having a meaning.

I have suggested that reference cannot explain, in any complete sense, content, although I have also suggested that content cannot be satisfactorily explained without pointing to a referent, and this means that a semantic theory always assigns a value and a substance to an expression, which we can call its contents. I now need to determine the place of context or indexicality that enframes those contents (value and substance) in my picture of the world. Expressions then become context-dependent, and these contexts can be understood as belonging to different registers, constructs, modalities, modes, disciplines, texts and the like, with each of them having their own way of working. Every reference, then, of a linguistic expression must seek to show its context of utterance, and, in addition, its circumstance of valuation – how it is received in the world. There is also the circumstance in which the utterance does not just have a context, but works – in a performative sense – to create one, and this means that the meaning of an utterance depends on the state the world is in. Furthermore, utterances expressing a practical commitment have a normative or prescriptive force – they are concerned with doing, rather than with describing a state of affairs. The meaning of an utterance such as that women are badly and unequally treated in the world as it is currently arranged is a function of a world that is related to a function of an object or objects in that world, which, in turn, is related to a function of the context or indexicality of that object or those objects, which, in its turn, is related to a function of its truth-value or values.

If all sense-seeking and sense-making is through culturally and historically located interpretive frames, then knowledge of objects is perspective-bound and partial – it is relative to these frameworks. Underlying this argument is a notion of a universal hermeneutics where understanding always involves interpretation, and where interpretation is always present (see [Chapter 5](#)). Interpretation is not, however, arbitrary but takes place through interpretive frames, which are themselves located

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16 See Rorty (1979) for an explanation as to what these reasons are.

within the background of all our beliefs and practices. Even apparently simple actions, such as learning that the capital of the United Kingdom is London, or that the square root of 36 is 6, can only be understood in terms of an immersion in, and inseparability from, a background, and they are therefore never fully specifiable. They are enframed.

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## 4

# Pragmatism, anti-representationalism and learning

Henrik Rydenfelt

## Introduction

It seems fair to say that theories of learning are primarily concerned with how we learn. These theories are typically divided into five or six different camps or paradigms based on their account of how learning takes place (see [Scott, 2021](#)). For example, behaviourist accounts typically maintain that learning involves – or consists of – the development of new behavioural responses in the light of stimuli, while cognitive theories of learning place more emphasis on the relevance of memory and the processing of information in the human mind. For this reason, each of these accounts of learning result in somewhat differing recommendations for teaching and education.

The divides between these theories are, at least to a great extent, underscored by their differing perspectives on what counts as learning. In particular, they may diverge on whether learning involves the acquisition of new knowledge (or, at least, true beliefs), and what such acquisition involves. This is where theories of education invite intricate epistemological and ontological issues. Some behaviourists argue that, instead of new knowledge – at least understood in terms of representation of the world – learning is the development of new patterns of behaviour that are, in some way, desirable. However, cognitive theories, as well as many constructivist and phenomenological accounts, often construe learning as the acquisition of new knowledge. Moreover, such knowledge

is typically understood as (accurate) representation of the world. However, the whole notion of truth or knowledge as representation has been vehemently contested in contemporary philosophy and educational research (Scott, 2021: 25–9, 50–3). Representation has been viewed as a master term that masks intractable philosophical assumptions, or reflects positions of social, institutional, political and economic power. It easily seems that, at least roughly, we are faced with two alternatives. Unless we can make sense of the notion of representation, we are forced to drop the notion of knowledge from our account of learning altogether. Or, conversely, we may reinterpret ‘knowledge’ in alternative terms that are devoid of representational baggage, for example, as a social construct that emerges from our discourses, as whatever is beneficial from the perspective from some form or way of life, or as indicating a position within networks and relations of power in a Foucauldian vein.

Much more could be said about the relevance of the notion of truth or knowledge as representation to various theories of learning. The task of the following, however, is to explore how these issues could be met with resources provided by the tradition of philosophical pragmatism. This is not entirely unexpected. Pragmatism has been deployed in attempts to provide answers to some of the more vexing issues within the philosophy of education. Such issues include the very possibility of learning, or the generation of new information and knowledge based on limited earlier knowledge, which has been addressed by drawing from the notion of experience developed by Charles S. Peirce and John Dewey, and the hypothesis-generating form of inference, abduction, first distinguished by Peirce (Prawat, 1999). Another such issue concerns the role of the educator in light of the autonomy of the pupil or student: how can students be educated without imposing the educator’s opinions on them, in particular with regards to ethical or moral affairs where differences of opinion are pervasive in liberal societies? The notion of pluralism developed within the pragmatist tradition has been deployed to argue that conflicts of opinion and uncertainty are also beneficial in educational contexts, making necessary the consideration of the conflicting opinions of others, providing the opportunity to problematise, justify and revise our opinions (Holma, 2012; Rydenfelt, 2020).

Pragmatism, it is argued in the following, also provides a unique way of understanding learning without invoking a problematic notion of truth or knowledge as representation, or by interpreting this central notion in terms that are not as vulnerable to such criticisms. The argument of this chapter will draw from resources developed among the contemporary pragmatists who call themselves anti-representationalists

– Richard Rorty and Huw Price, in particular – about the subtle form of scientific realism advanced by Peirce, and the account of learning modelled on the pragmatist view of inquiry proposed by Dewey. In the following, a section is dedicated to each of these themes, introducing these accounts and, gradually, their import for educational philosophy.<sup>1</sup> While a comparison between the pragmatist perspective developed here and different theoretical accounts of learning – which share some debts to pragmatism in general and Dewey in particular – is beyond the scope of this chapter, the concluding section offers some proposals for future developments in this line of research.

## Pragmatist anti-representationalism

A hallmark view of a number of contemporary pragmatists is their critique of representationalism, the contention that our thought and talk aim to copy, represent, mirror or describe reality. (This contention is hardly shared by all of those who call themselves pragmatists; as we will see in some detail below, the issue is a contested one in the pragmatist camp.) In Richard Rorty's (1979) account, it was two American thinkers, W. V. O. Quine and Wilfrid Sellars, whose critical insights concerning the empiricist project – Quine's criticism of the analytic–synthetic distinction and 'reductionism' about meaning, combined with Sellars's (1956) criticism of the myth of the Given – paved the way for a new era of anti-representationalist pragmatism. Rorty's take from these criticisms was that the traditional epistemological project is futile: there is no particular philosophical account to be given of knowledge, justification or truth. He proposed instead an epistemological behaviourism which views knowledge 'as a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature' (Rorty, 1979: 171; cf. Rydenfelt, 2021).

Another way of understanding the anti-representationalist stance has been more recently offered by Huw Price (2003; 2011; 2013), who has elucidated his position by beginning with a familiar moral expressivism, the view that moral language does not describe or represent the world but, rather, expresses our (non-cognitive) commitments or mental states. Expressivism is typically local: its purview is a particular discourse, while other parts of language are dealt with by descriptivist or

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1 The first two sections draw from my earlier work on realism and anti-representationalism (in particular, Rydenfelt, 2021).

representationalist means. Once let loose, Price argues, such expressivism cannot be contained. Contesting the *bifurcation thesis* – the splitting of language into its ‘descriptive’ and merely ‘expressive’ parts – Price argues that we are heading towards a global expressivism. Philosophers have long been occupied with the project of finding suitable ‘facts’ to act as truthmakers for various problematic claims – such as moral, mathematical or modal statements – in the scientific, predominantly physicalist view of the world. In Price’s diagnosis, these ‘placement problems’ arise because we are prone to shift the focus of discussion from language to its alleged referents (or objects). This *object naturalist* approach simply assumes that the patch of language investigated ‘describes’ or represents realities. Instead, Price (2011) argues, we are to stick to the linguistic side of the issue, engaging in a *subject naturalist*, anthropological study of language, and abstaining from the ontological commitments of the language under scrutiny. Price (2003: 168) maintains that the key representationalist assumptions of object naturalism would need to be validated from the point of view of such ‘naturalistic reflection of linguistic behaviour’ – and that they are not.

Anti-representationalists have found a natural ally in semantic deflationism or minimalism, which eschews the notion of truth or reference as a ‘robust’ semantic relation between words and the world, and concentrates on the function of the truth predicate as a linguistic device. They propose a similarly deflationary attitude towards ontology. Borrowing a page from Carnap, Price (2007) argues that there is a pluralism of linguistic frameworks which each entail their own (‘first-order’) ontological commitments – but that there is no point of view external to these frameworks from which to pose the metaphysical (‘second-order’) question of whether those commitments fit the way things *really* are. While Quine’s contention that there is only one type of ontological commitment, marked by a single existential quantifier, does imply (*pace* Carnap) that the plurality of linguistic frameworks does not bolster a plurality of types of ontological commitment, it leaves the anti-metaphysical implications intact, in Price’s interpretation. Accordingly, Price argues for a Quinean monism concerning ontological commitment ranging over a Carnapian pluralism of underlying linguistic frameworks.

To be clear, the anti-representationalists are not opponents of the scientific project. They embrace the ontological commitments of science when suggesting a ‘subject naturalist’ inquiry into our linguistic practices. However, their arguments are directed against scientific realism as traditionally conceived. Indeed, the Quinean, monistic stance towards existential quantification gives Price crucial argumentative tools in his

criticism of the possibility of arguing that the ontological commitments of science, as opposed to those made in other existentially quantifying games, should be given privilege. If all ontological commitments stand on a par, there is no external point of view from which to argue for an ontological privileging of science. In turn, from the first-order point of view of those of us engaged with scientific vocabulary, we are already *making* those commitments. The appearance of the privileging of scientific ontology turns out to be merely perspectival: those playing other existentially quantifying games simply undertake different sets of commitments. In this vein, Price argues that scientific inquiry itself leads to a form of self-learned modesty, ‘a scientific discovery that science is just one thing among many that we do with the linguistic tools of ontological commitment’ (Price, 2007: 401).<sup>2</sup>

In the absence of a representationalist vocabulary and the notion of some switch of language really managing to ‘mirror’ reality, the question becomes whether to reinterpret notions such as truth and knowledge without invoking representationalist views, or to do without them altogether. Rorty (1998: 21) remained somewhat ambivalent about this issue, admitting as he did that he was wavering ‘between trying to reduce truth to justification and propounding some form of minimalism about truth’. The former course was much more prominent in his writings that attempted to turn philosophy into cultural politics by the replacement of objectivity and truth with solidarity and justification. For Rorty’s (2010: 229) unabashedly ethnocentrist ‘Western liberal intellectual’, there is ‘nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society – ours – uses in one or another area of inquiry’, admitting as he does that ‘we must, in practice, privilege our own group, even though there can be no non-circular justification for doing so’ (Rorty, 2010: 335). In Rorty’s slogan, intersubjective agreement should be grounded in ‘solidarity’ rather than in (fact-based) ‘objectivity’. While we may hope to bring others under the same fold, our success is a sheer historical fact. (See also Chapter 1.)

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2 Price’s stance towards science is somewhat complicated. He advocates a reinterpretation of the key notion of representation in terms of his new bifurcation between I- and E-representation. Any assertion or belief is an I-representation due to its position in an inferential structure within our modes of reasoning and justifying our claims to others. By contrast, E-representations track, indicate or covary with something in the (natural) environment. While all language games are I-representational in nature, scientific language is occupied (also) with E-representation: the external world is what we ‘have in view in the scientific project’ (Price, 2013: 55). For a critical discussion, see Rydenfelt (2011; 2021).

## Pragmatist realism

Anti-representationalism resists the application of representationalist vocabulary that could be used to elucidate the concepts of truth or knowledge that are entailed in many theoretical accounts of learning. The contemporary anti-representationalists have suggested that the concepts of truth and knowledge are to be interpreted in a minimalist fashion or as justification among peers. But these are not the only alternatives. Based on the realist position developed by the founder of the pragmatist tradition, Charles S. Peirce, we can provide an alternative account of truth, knowledge and realism that is not dependent on anti-representationalist assumptions – or, if you wish, can salvage the notion of ‘representation’ from anti-representationalist criticism. Peirce, often considered the arch-realist among the early pragmatists, was dismissed by Rorty (1982: 161) as only having given pragmatism its name. However, this dismissal was mainly due to the contention of the anti-representationalists that all realist positions are mired with representationalist assumptions – a contention that does not withstand closer scrutiny.

Starting with his earliest philosophical pieces, Peirce repudiated the Cartesian and early empiricist picture of ‘ideas’ as representing objects to the mind. Instead, for the remainder of his career, Peirce developed an account of meaning and meaningfulness in terms of his semiotic triad of signs, interpretants and objects (Short, 2007: Chapter 7; see Rydenfelt, 2015a). A sign is anything that could elicit an interpretant, a response or reaction that interprets the sign as a sign of its object. Interpretants are not merely ideas or thoughts: they can also be actions or feelings. Peirce’s early pragmatism, as propounded in his papers from the 1870s, was gradually integrated into this broad semiotic vision as an account of the meaning and meaningfulness of thoughts that interpret a sign (or *logical* interpretants, to use Peirce’s terminology). But while thoughts are interpretable by further thoughts (or words, as in a translation), there is no obvious way of telling whether two thoughts indeed mean the same. Peirce suggested that we anchor meaning in conduct. The *ultimate* logical interpretants are habits of action, and the ‘meaning’ of signs which admit to logical interpretants can be clarified by considering the habits of action their acceptance would entail. Any meaningful sentence, if accepted by a speaker, would result in action under some conceivable circumstances. If the conceivable conduct resulting from the acceptance of two sentences in no way differs, their meaning is the same. This account of meaning and meaningfulness does not depend on representationalist assumptions.

However, Peirce also provided a sophisticated account of realism. (Peirce was a realist in many senses of the word; it is a *scientific* realism that will concern us here.) His scientific realism relied on a key observation concerning our practices – linguistic and otherwise – of settling and justifying opinion. In some of these practices, Peirce contended, opinions are settled with the aim of ascertaining how things are, independently of our opinions. These practices entail the assumption that there is an independent reality. However, this realist view is not presented as an indubitable certainty. Rather, it is an assumption that underlies the scientific method; for this reason, I have referred to Peircean scientific realism as *hypothetical realism* (Rydenfelt, 2021). This form of realism does not build on representationalist assumptions: it acts so that our ideas, beliefs or assertions aim to represent reality just by being ideas, beliefs or assertions. Indeed, in Peirce’s view, there are practices of settling opinion which do not entail the notion of an independent reality. For example, those who follow what Peirce called the method of authority take the dictates of an authority, religious or otherwise, as decisive in settling their disputes. The followers of the *a priori* method, in turn, engage in a free debate and discussion in order to arrive at opinions agreeable to reason. Ascertaining how things are independently of our opinions is an aim particular to the scientific method: it is not the goal of all practices of settling and justifying opinion.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, suspicions might be raised concerning the notion of finding out how things ‘independently’ are. Does this not entail some version of the correspondence account of truth? And is this account not vulnerable to typical criticisms of correspondence accounts, for example, that either ‘correspondence’ refers to trivialities concerning our notion of truth – such that to believe that *p* is to believe that *p* is true – which is much more easily accounted for by deflationary or minimalist means; or that ‘correspondence’ refers to some substantial relation between ideas or words and reality that it has turned out to be exactly difficult to provide a philosophical account of? These difficulties of the correspondence

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3 Based on Peirce’s account of the different methods of fixing belief, a number of pragmatists have argued, roughly, that we are committed to the scientific method just by the fact of having beliefs or the fact that belief aims at truth (for example, Misak, 2000; Talisse, 2007). However, as I have argued elsewhere, the pragmatist should not resort to such conceptual manoeuvres (Rydenfelt, 2011; 2019a). Indeed, Peirce nowhere suggests that the opinions fixed by methods other than the scientific one are less than genuine beliefs. There is no non-circular argument available for the method of science: the choice of the method – the choice of what counts as the relevant kind of evidence or argument – is itself a substantial normative issue, which allows for no such simple resolution.

account can, however, be sidestepped by the concreteness of the Peircean view of science. In the scientific practice of settling and justifying opinion, the reasons given for and against a belief (often implicitly) make reference to reality: a claim is considered to be a reason for or against a belief because – at least ultimately – it is taken to show how things are or are not, independently of how anyone may believe them to be. Real things, Peirce maintained, affect us causally through perception, causing us to form judgements: ‘all the sensations which [real things] excite emerge into consciousness in the form of beliefs’ (Peirce, 1992: 137).<sup>4</sup> Such judgements may inferentially justify other judgements by the ‘laws of perception’, themselves the (fallible) products of scientific inquiry. Even if it may be argued that this account belongs to the camp of ‘correspondence’ views, it does not rest on a picture of a fit between ideas and realities that the anti-representationalists criticise.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, following the scientific method makes a practical difference. As reality is independent of anyone’s opinions of it, there are no guarantees that we have described it correctly. This *fallibilist* contention that characterises the scientific practice is absent from the non-scientific practices of settling and justifying opinion – the opinion of some (myself, an authority or everyone) is treated as beyond doubt. Indeed, the fallibilism of the Peircean scientific practice of settling and justifying opinion coincides with – and can be explicated in terms of – the account of *representational* features of some of our assertions that has been advanced by Robert Brandom – another pragmatist whom the anti-representationalists have been happy to enlist for their cause, despite some suspicions that Brandom may be a step removed from the anti-representationalist view (see Price, 2010).

Brandom’s inferentialism provides an account of the meanings of assertions in terms of the other moves that they would commit us to or preclude, and what kind of moves they could be justified by, ‘in a game of giving and asking for reasons’. Nevertheless, Brandom also aspires to

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4 I have chosen to draw from two of Peirce’s best known and most accessible texts in order to explore his views, in order to avoid his precise but sometimes intricate terminology by which he develops these accounts in many ways throughout his later works.

5 The literature on conceptions of truth often suggests that Peirce understood truth in terms of an ideal limit, or as the beliefs that would be reached at the ‘end of inquiry’. However, Peirce, to my knowledge, never identified truth with ‘the end of inquiry’ or with the opinion that stands at its ‘ideal limit’. Peirce (1992: 139) did maintain that we may envision the ‘final opinion’, or ‘the result of investigation carried sufficiently far’, even though ‘Our perversity and that of others may indefinitely postpone the settlement of opinion’. These notions, however, cannot give us guidance in conducting inquiry. That science may ultimately lead to such conclusions does not tell us how to go about inquiring – it only tells us to keep inquiring.

account for the representational use of language in inferentialist terms – such use that introduces ‘a kind of correctness in which authority is invested in the things we are (in that central normative sense) talking about rather than in our attitudes toward them’ (Brandom, 2000: 44). This representational use is reflected in the fact, Brandom argues, that the inferential relations of ‘ordinary empirical claims’ differ from the inferential relations of any claims concerning who asserts or is justified in asserting that claim. In particular, claims concerning who is justified in asserting an ordinary empirical claim neither commit us to nor justify the claim itself: making the claim ‘X thinks that *p*’ does not entail a commitment to *p* or to the claim that *p* is justified. This representational feature of ‘ordinary empirical claims’ coincides with the fallibilism entailed by Peirce’s scientific method and its standard of correctness for our claims that is independent of anyone’s opinions on it. The inferential relations of a claim differ from the inferential relations of any claims concerning who asserts or is justified in asserting that claim if and only if we are fallibilists concerning that claim.<sup>6</sup> In this way, the Peircean scientific method and its brand of scientific realism may help us to salvage the notion of representation from the clutches of *representationalism*.

## Pragmatist learning

This view of the role of anti-representationalism and representation in both classical and contemporary pragmatism provides another opportunity to set the record straight concerning the development of the pragmatist tradition. Many scholars of pragmatism reacted with outrage when Rorty, in the 1980s, enlisted John Dewey as a precursor to his anti-representationalism, and started to use the term ‘pragmatism’ to refer to his own views. Rorty’s name was added to a long line of the mantle’s kidnapers – a line which, by the strictest accounts, already begins with William James. Those who had studied the classics argued that the pragmatists have proposed novel accounts of truth, objectivity and (scientific) realism – such as the one just presented based on Peirce’s views – rather than rejecting those notions altogether. However, the received wisdom on both sides of this debate was that the realist position entails representationalism. In the case of Dewey, the question became

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6 From the Peircean point of view, this is the very foundation of the notion of an ‘ordinary empirical claim’: a claim is an ordinary empirical one when we, in our practice of inquiry, follow the scientific method with respect to it.

whether he was a realist; if he was, it was thought, he must have been a representationalist. As we have just seen, this assumption misinterprets the role of anti-representationalism in the pragmatist tradition beginning with Peirce. When Rorty entered the picture, those who had upheld the pragmatist banner for decades should have reacted with a shrug, pointing to the ways that the earlier pragmatists already provided an account of science and inquiry that does not build upon representationalist presuppositions.

Dewey's work on education has traditionally been viewed as providing a pragmatist conception of learning, even though the exact details of this account continue to spark debate (see [Miettinen, 2000](#)). It is fair to say that Dewey's notion of learning is nearly inseparable from his view of inquiry. Learning, like inquiry, is understood as the acquisition of new knowledge, rather than merely adopting the beliefs, ideas and theories developed and provided by others. Indeed, Dewey's recommendations for education – including his suggestions for the development of the Laboratory School in Chicago – are thoroughly informed by the pragmatist account of inquiry (see [Dewey, 1899](#)). Inquiry begins with doubt, or what Dewey called a problematic situation: some of our beliefs are called into question, and inquiry is required to appease this doubt by attaining a new conception or belief. Science is this process made deliberate and explicitly social: scientists actively attempt to revise and test theories and hypotheses, including ones already (but provisionally) accepted by the community, and come up with new hypotheses to be tried. Such revision extends to the methods and standards of inquiry itself: far from *a priori* certainties, our views of justifying our view and criteria for better and worse theories and procedures are themselves the fallible and revisable results of the scientific practice. Accordingly, Dewey ([1916](#); [1938](#)) envisioned educational settings that would produce problematic situations, inducing doubt and the desire to find out, to conceptualise problems, to arrive at new conceptions, hypotheses and habits, and to engage in active, social processes of inquiry.

What is the role of representation in this notion of learning? On the one hand, in learning, we gain new knowledge about reality (which Dewey variously referred to as 'nature', 'environment' and even 'experience'). On the other hand, there is no suggestion that processes of inquiry and learning aim to uncover a 'fit' between ideas and realities. Setting out with the assumption that knowledge entails such representation, it is no wonder that Dewey's epistemological and ontological commitments have appeared to be difficult to trace from his

writings (see [Hildebrand, 2003](#)). However, just as Peirce's notion of inquiry avoids representationalism without slipping into Rortyan ethnocentrism, Dewey's view of learning avoids the choice between the two uneasy alternatives – those of interpreting knowledge and truth in the representationalist fashion, or as a mere social construct within our discourses. In line with Peirce's notion that beliefs and theories are not just ideas 'in the head', but habits of action, Dewey maintained that learning results in change in our habits of conduct. However, emphasising the practicability of its results, Dewey's account introduces another dimension of learning that is somewhat absent in Peirce's notion of inquiry. Dewey emphasises that learning is a transformation not only of those who learn, but also of the reality that stands 'outside' of them: both are changed or constituted by processes of learning. But this view should not be interpreted as an epistemological or ontological constructivism that understands truth or knowledge purely as a social construct; instead, reality – the environment or nature – is part of this process, and is reshaped by it.

One central consequence of this account of learning is that it extends to normative issues. Critical of a hard dichotomy between descriptive and normative questions, pragmatists – beginning with Peirce – argued that normative issues can be the subjects and topics of scientific inquiry (see [Rydenfelt, 2011; 2015a; 2015b; 2019a; 2019b](#)). Peirce proposed a line of inquiry that he called normative science, composed of aesthetics, ethics and logic. Dewey, in turn, suggested that matters of social policy should be subjected to experimental study, which he called social inquiry ([Rydenfelt, 2019a; 2022a](#)). A key part of the reason why such accounts were available to the pragmatists – and absent from much contemporary philosophical ethics, meta-ethics and philosophy of science – is their criticism of representationalism. Representationalism continues to suggest the visual metaphor of a fit between claims and visible, typically atomic, facts or objects. As Price (2010) has suggested, such an approach appears unable to account for the truth of moral, mathematical and modal claims that refer to facts that are not accessible in the way suggested by the visual metaphor. Abandoning representationalism, however, means that we can drop the quest for suitable candidates for 'moral facts' that are discernible in this fashion, and argue that the truth of moral, mathematical and modal claims can be the objects of inquiry and learning.

## Conclusion

In different ways, many pragmatists have proposed that our processes of learning and inquiry need not depend on a representationalist foundation, or the notion of a 'fit' between ideas and realities with which those processes are to be compared. The fallibilist insight that motivates pragmatism amounts to an escape from the clutches of representationalist assumptions, while the pragmatist view of inquiry also provides a notion of how learning and inquiry may improve our beliefs, which are, in turn, understood as habits of action.

These facets of pragmatism in education would enable further comparisons of pragmatism with alternative accounts of learning and education. First, pragmatism does not agree with behaviourist views which consider all of learning as processes of conditioning. Instead, pragmatism suggests that learning can take place by way of deliberate inquiry into the world and ourselves. Nevertheless, the pragmatist perspective connects the results of learning with (deliberate) conduct: the outcomes of learning are not merely ideas but habits of action. Second, pragmatism provides an account of learning that can be adopted by any specific cognitivist and phenomenological accounts of the particular processes of learning and education. Depending on key terminological choices, we may argue that the pragmatist perspective involves a notion of knowledge that does not depend on 'representation', or, alternatively, a notion of representation that is devoid of representationalist assumptions. The choice is terminological: either way, this perspective enables us to see how learning may amount to the acquisition of knowledge. Third, and finally, pragmatists can readily admit that our actual processes of acquiring new beliefs – or habits of action – take place in various networks of power and influence. Moreover, not all of 'learning', in the sense of habit-change, takes the ideal shape of inquiry along the lines suggested by Peirce and Dewey. However, inquiry as a form of ideal habit-change provides a vision of how learning may lead to the improvement of our views, a growth of knowledge that is irreducible to the mere reconfiguration of social, institutional, political and economic power.

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## 5

# A *Bildungstheorie* of learning

David Scott

A *Bildungstheorie*<sup>1</sup> is future oriented, semantically conceived, fundamentally values- and virtues-based, ethically and compassionately driven (at curriculum, pedagogic and learning levels) and life-long, and it fulfils Martha Nussbaum's (2000) requirement for a philosophy of equal esteem for all human beings – the equality principle (see [Chapter 3](#)). The key relations in this *Bildungstheorie* are: maturation (reaching a state of full or complete development); progression (as a simple supersession, a sequencing supersession or a hierarchical supersession – see [Chapter 3](#)); narration (we structure our sense of reality through a narrative or set of narratives); possibility (discursive and material objects and object-configurations that are sourced from the original object); projection (for Heidegger [1962], existence, being what it is, always confronts us with the issue of which possibilities we should project into the future, and thus into our future self or selves); praxis (comprising a thought as in some way becoming an action); edification (the ethical, social, political or epistemic improvement of a person); justification (the development of a set of good reasons for doing something in the world); and teleology (from τέλος,<sup>2</sup> *telos*, end, aim, goal or finality). A *Bildung* is both a concept and a discursive configuration comprising material and discursive objects, object-relations and discursive and material configurations, as well as being a praxical object and having a material existence in the world. As a discursive object,

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1 Two German words are used in this chapter, *Bildungstheorie* and *Bildung*, and these are not used to obscure the meanings that I am seeking to explicate, but to show or indicate the origins of these words and word-sets, given that there is a lack of obvious words or word-sets in the English language that can capture the meanings that inhere in these two words.

2 From the original Greek word.

the concept of *Bildung* has several properties, such as being polysemic, semantically contested, networked, interactive, powerful and dynamic.

A conceptual activity such as a *Bildung* may have more than one set of meanings attached to it. This knowledge claim comprises a method that allows a claim – it cannot at the same time provide a justification for the contents of that claim – about the properties of a particular word or word-set. If the claim is that an object in the world – in this case, a word or word-set – has properties, then this implies that the word-object is characterised by how it is structured or what attributes it has. However, it cannot have an infinite number of properties or attributes – there are limits – and what follows from this is that in the ceaseless repositioning and restructuring of an object and its properties, those properties, however fleetingly held, constitute the object’s potential behaviours and uses in the world. And thus, as Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953: §90, his italics) reminded us, there is a particular way of understanding these behaviours: ‘We feel as if we had to *see right into* phenomena: yet our investigation is directed not towards *phenomena*, but rather as one might say, towards the “possibilities” of phenomena. What this means is that we call to mind the *kinds of statement* that we make about phenomena.’ The aim, as it was for Wittgenstein, first and foremost, is a semantic one. If the task is semantic, then we are necessarily concerned with determining the truth or otherwise of the *Bildungstheorie*, or theory of learning, that we are focusing on.

In its curricular form, we might want to construe a *Bildung* in the following way. There are twelve areas of life – epistemics (knowing), modalities (communicating), temporalities (genealogising), spatialities (positioning), physicalist sciences (cognising), hermeneutics (understanding), technologies (enhancing), meditations (philosophising), ethics (being), valorisations (valuing), corporalities (embodying) and creativities (being creative) – and these are the building blocks of any curriculum that we might want to construct. The easy part of making or constructing a *Bildungstheorie* curriculum is to describe or give a credible account of knowledge production and curriculum formation with regards to the concept and practice of learning. The difficult part is making a judgement about what those forms of knowledge might be and what they cannot be, that is, those dispositions, cognitions, processes and embodiments that we think are appropriate for inclusion in a curriculum, and those that should not be included. The guiding principle of a *Bildungstheorie* curriculum is that it embodies those relational objects that constitute a *Bildung*: maturation, progression, narration, edification, possibility, projection, justification, teleology and praxis. This is not a directory of pedagogic knowledge, because the

learning object has logical and other types of inferential connections and relations with the way it can be learnt, and thus its pedagogy is derived from the constitution of the learning object, its learning *modus operandi*, and the characteristics of the learning environment (see [Chapter 1](#)).

## A genealogy

A *Bildung* is a discursive configurational object, and it refers to a set of values that each person should develop in themselves. Originally understood as a process of formation, it has taken on other meanings, such as an ethical and cultural self-realisation. It is tied closely to social and political arrangements, and consequently stipulates certain types of belief and behaviour for each person. It is and has always been a learning process. To make a *Bildung* possible, each person has to constitute themselves holistically, and this comprises a balance between sensibility and reason. Originally understood as an artistic activity directed towards the cultivation of a harmonious life, it was also thought of as the best way to achieve those *teloi* or desiderata, both personally and socially.

*Bildung* was a central concept in the normative thought of many late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German thinkers associated with romanticism and idealism.<sup>3</sup> However, it never developed into a specific school of thought, but became part of the conversation about generative and apt learning and learning arrangements. *Bildung* can mean ethical formation, development, education or culture; it has roots both in ancient Greek notions of culture or *paideia*, and in Christian understandings of human creation and re-formation. In its early formation and conception, *Bildung* was understood primarily as a process of development, and as operating in different ways at the sub-individual or psychological level; the individual or autobiographical level; the ordinary level of living; the functional level where the concern is with relational roles such as capitalist and worker, or shop owner and customer; the structural level, as in the functioning of whole societies or their parts (that is, the economy or the political sphere); the mega level of whole traditions and civilisations; and, finally, the planetary or cosmological level where the person's immediate concerns are with the planet (or cosmos) as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Johann Gottfried Herder, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, Friedrich Schleiermacher and Ludwig Uhland.

4 See Bhaskar (2002).

Later, it came to be understood as a cultural acquisition, concerning taste, sensibility and good living, with its inevitable class associations, and as a form of cultural capital. Another strand of thinking in relation to a *Bildungstheorie* was aesthetic. Immanuel Kant's (1988) notion of aesthetic judgement comprises a configuration of understanding, imagination and pleasure. If we are ever to achieve a *Bildung* in this sense, then we have to become genuinely moral beings: balanced, rational, sensible and affective. Romantic *Bildung* was a political ideal as much as it was an ethical or dispositional one. In the German-speaking world today, the term *Bildung* is simply synonymous with education, although it is still broadly associated with the ideals of a liberal arts education.<sup>5</sup>

## Naturalism

There was a family of views in the late eighteenth century that understood the natural as an inner source of motivation and action. It is possible to place these under the collective term of expressive romanticism, although we should be careful about placing all its many iterations under a single banner or label. In contrast to the classical emphasis on form, tradition and harmony, some romanticists argued for the expression of feeling and imagination in the construction of knowledge. There are two consequences of this. The first is affective in a fundamental sense, so that we can talk about the nurturing of an inner voice. The second is entering into a particular relation to nature, one of conservation, respect and care for it. In this sense, nature means more than just the environment, and also extends its meaning into what is considered natural. Thus, some sexual practices were considered to be abhorrent because they did not conform to what is natural or given. We can then talk about a naturalistic ethic in which our behaviours, intentions and thoughts are aligned with a natural norm. This is also a form of legitimation, in that human beings now had a clear way of distinguishing between those activities which are natural and those which are abnormal, and, consequently, those activities which they should own, and those activities which they should disown.

A naturalist, above all else, rejects utterly any metaphysical or even universal sense, although universals may be understood as natural objects, as being justified by their natural status. On this account, there

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<sup>5</sup> As championed by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1997).

are no Platonic forms,<sup>6</sup> Cartesian mental substances,<sup>7</sup> Kantian noumena,<sup>8</sup> divine objects that do not, in a broad sense, belong to nature. There is only the natural order of things. Although many scientists embrace naturalism, this does not mean that naturalists necessarily endorse notions of determinism, physicalism and reductionism. Indeed, we should be careful here to separate out those belief-sets which embrace these notions and a theory of mind that is in some sense volitional. And what follows from this is that there is an irreducible normativity, and hence ethical prescriptiveness, involved in the use of concepts and conceptual terms, such as *Bildung* and learning.

## Nativism

An influential strand of a *Bildungstheorie* – nothing more nor less than a theory of *Bildung* – was nativist in orientation. There are many examples of nativist theories of learning. In *Reflections on MetaReality: A philosophy for the present*, Roy Bhaskar (2002) provided a model of learning, which he called ‘the unfolding of the enfolded’. This model of the unfolding of the enfolded understands learning not so much as learning something outside oneself, but as the unfolding of an implicit potential that each human being has. What happens in life is that human beings realise or fail to realise their potentials. However, if not enough attention is paid to the external elements, then it is a one-sided model. The model of the unfolding of the enfolded has five elements: the cycle of creativity, the cycle of courting, the phase of formation, the phase of making, and, finally, the cycle of reflection. Knowledge always pre-exists the learner, and knowledge and learning are central to any theory of being.

Another example of an innate theory of learning is Noam Chomsky’s (1968) argument for language acquisition. Underpinning his theory are three presuppositions. The first of these is that the way we as human beings acquire language is by realising (and, in the process, developing) a biologically determined programme for learning a language. This process mirrors the physical growth of the human being in normal human development. What this also means is that human beings start to speak at

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6 Plato was a philosopher born in Athens during the Classical Period in ancient Greece.

7 René Descartes was a French philosopher, scientist and mathematician, widely considered a seminal figure in the emergence of modern philosophy and science.

8 Immanuel Kant was a German Enlightenment philosopher, whose best known work is *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant, 2007).

the same age, and their progress follows a clear linear path, although there is likely to be some variation in how this is realised. The second of these presuppositions is that this language programme comprises a set of rules, which we might want to call the grammar of the programme, and human beings have access to this set of rules and a special ability to decode this grammar, which is nativist or innate. What this means is that, in most circumstances, the child is able to learn the complexities of a language system in a short period of time. The third underlying presupposition is that because children have different experiences during childhood, and therefore there are environmental differences between children, there is bound to be some variation in the speed and depth of language acquisition. This acknowledges the role of environmental factors in language acquisition, even if the knowledge that is being acquired is already there in the person's mind.

A third expression of innateness in learning is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's educational philosophy. His notion of freedom or being free comprises an idea of innateness or natural capacity, where this is understood in essentialist terms, and as relating in a fundamental sense to the individual concerned with – and as subject to, in its full realisation – the contingencies of history and experience. His mature work on education is *Émile, or On Education* (in the original French: *Émile, ou de l'éducation*) (Rousseau, 1979), and this has led, whether rightfully or not, to a notion of progressive education. *Émile's* underlying principles seem to support a notion of child-centred education, which accords with a view of what progressive education is, and what traditional education is not. A child's natural or innate capacities need to be allowed to come to fruition, and this can be achieved through a process of self-discovery, and the avoidance of that child being dominated by others, especially teachers. So, both process and innate capacities are protected from the harmful effects of formal educational structures and life more generally.

For Rousseau, there was a moral universe separate from human beings, a natural order of growing and learning, which, for a variety of reasons, can become distorted – leave a child to herself and this natural potential or being can be fulfilled. Consequently, there is a natural ethic of being, so that a child had only to listen to her inner being and voice, filter out those siren voices that would ultimately lead to distortions and disfigurements of the natural, and live the good life. Inner reflexivity, then, involves both the cultivation of these natural instincts and the resisting (with the help of others) of any distorting tendencies. This romantic expressivism, found in Rousseau, but also in other European Enlightenment figures, is an expression of innateness, and, in different

ways, can be seen in Chomsky's (1968) language acquisition device and Bhaskar's (2002) unfolding of the enfolded. The implications for learning are profound – learning is understood as the expression and fulfilment of something that is already there, by virtue of being human. These three forms of learning are foundationally nativist, although they are all forms that a *Bildung* might take.

## ***Bildung* as learning**

A *Bildungstheorie*, then, has as its central component a notion of learning, and this is learning understood as polysemic. Learning can be construed as a site of knowledge-development, in that there are three sites of knowledge: the world and its contents; the mediating arena between the contents of the world and objects in the mind (this is, what we might want to call learning sites, which are also contentful); and the contents of the mind, which allow us to make judgements, perceive the world and reflect on what we have perceived. Learning can be understood in a technical sense as the absorption of information, as a sponge absorbs water. Learning can be thought of in praxical terms, as an action or activity in the world. Learning, however, can also be understood as an essential reference point in a *Bildung*, which is perhaps best construed in relational terms as a maturation, a progression, a narration, a series of possibilities, a projection, a praxis, an edification, a set of justifications and a *telos*.

Clearly one of the dimensions of a *Bildung* is that the epistemological always has a relation to arrangements of objects, object-relations and object-configurations in the past (this then requires a genealogy of conceptual understanding), currently, and, perhaps most importantly, in the future (this refers to possible iterations of the human being, the self, progression and those political arrangements that provide the contexts of learning). This chapter has sketched out a possible route that our investigation into a notion of a *Bildung* might take. It is however, still a work in progress.

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## 6

# Exploring learning in critical realism

Robert Isaksen

Critical realism is a philosophy of science, and not exclusively a theory of learning. However, because philosophic and scientific practice can be considered types of learning, a philosophy of science is likely either to have an implicit theory of learning or to have implications for learning theory, or both. In addition, as a philosophy of science, critical realism can provide general recommendations about how to carry out research on learning. This chapter is therefore an investigation into learning from various critical realist perspectives.

## Introduction to critical realism

The term ‘critical realism’ refers to various philosophies. In this chapter, it is the critical realism first developed by the British-Indian philosopher Roy Bhaskar (1944–2014) which is discussed. Other ‘critical realisms’ are found in the philosophy of perception (for example, Maurice Mandelbaum’s phenomenological approach)<sup>1</sup> and theology (for example, John Polkinghorne’s theological critical realism).<sup>2</sup> Donald Campbell, an influential voice on the methodology of systematic reviews and evidence-based research, considered his philosophy of science to be a ‘post-positivist critical realism’ (see [Pawson, 2006](#): 19). Unsurprisingly, these varieties have several differences, and they have to a large extent operated without reference to each other. The overlapping elements are a certain optimism about the possibility of acquiring knowledge of a mind-

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1 See Mandelbaum (1984).

2 See Polkinghorne (2011).

independent reality and the possibility for societal improvement. Bhaskar developed his version of critical realism into what he called dialectical critical realism (Bhaskar, 1993) and, later, metaReality (Bhaskar and Hartwig, 2016). In this chapter, I will focus on the first version of critical realism, for the sake of brevity and because later versions are in any case developed from this. I first want to explore Bhaskar's arguments for a critical realism.

## Revindication of ontology and realism

Bhaskar initially developed his philosophy of science in the 1960s and 1970s at the University of Oxford, first starting on a doctorate in economics, before moving to philosophy (Bhaskar and Hartwig, 2010). He started his doctorate on the question of whether economic theories that had been developed in the West could or should be applied to newly decolonised economies. The trouble he experienced was that economic theory at the time (and still today within mainstream economic theory, it could be argued) presumed certain axioms about people and society, such as 'the rational man', which it was not permitted to question. Bhaskar was told that asking questions about what the world was like was not within the purview of economics. When he moved to the philosophy of science department, he was similarly met with claims that one cannot talk about what the world is like. Ontology was not permitted, only epistemology. Bhaskar came to argue that the lack of ontology in the work of, for example, the logical positivists and Popper, went back to Kant and Hume (Bhaskar, 2008). Later, he drew the line back to Descartes. Bhaskar did not refer to Heidegger in his early work, but his interest in a revindication of ontology was not dissimilar.

Bhaskar's initial argument against an epistemology-only philosophy of science was constructed using a version of Kant's transcendental method. This was used to demonstrate that philosophers of science who believed, implicitly or explicitly, that doing ontology was unintelligible, while at the same time accepting that experimentation was central to giving science its superior epistemic validity, were carrying out a performative contradiction, what in critical realist terms is called a theory–practice inconsistency. Bhaskar's transcendental argument here is 'what the world must be like for science to be possible' (Bhaskar, 2008: 36). Drawing on the philosophy of action of Danto (1981) and Von Wright (1993), Bhaskar argued that the epistemic qualities of experimentation make most sense when it is understood as a process by which the

researcher interacts with a mind-independent reality which exists prior to, and independently of, the researcher. A classic example here is that of a feather in a glass tube. When the air is removed from the tube, the feather falls with the same velocity as an iron ball. Researchers successfully carrying out experiments in the natural sciences do not *create* empirical events. Rather, they block certain causal mechanisms so as to observe the effects of other causal mechanisms functioning uninterruptedly. Even without the researcher's intervention, gravity was always influencing the feather exactly as it affects the iron ball. This was Bhaskar's positive argument for a realist theory of science. In addition, he argued that *any* epistemology will have an implied ontology:

[Hume] has not really succeeded in banishing ontology from his account of science. Rather he has replaced a Lockean ontology of real essences, powers and atomic constitutions with his own ontology of impressions ... And it is this ontology which subsequent philosophers have uncritically taken over. For whether they have agreed with Hume's epistemology or not, they have accepted his critique of ontology, which contains its own implicit ontology, as valid. (Bhaskar, 2008: 40)

## A relativist epistemology with the possibility of rational judgement

Bhaskar (2008: 260) later clarified that this argument is situated, that is, it is directed towards those who accept that scientific experimentation has a unique epistemic value and is of central importance to science and scientific method: 'someone who denies that our knowledge is experimentally established and practically applied, and that science develops in time need be bound by none of the results of this book'. Where Kant's transcendental argument took a presumed human universal as its minor premise, Bhaskar's took a historically local and situated one. Where Kant's was a foundationalist approach to knowledge, Bhaskar's was an immanent one. (See below for how this relates to a cultural-historical activity theory of learning.) Later, Bhaskar developed immanent critiques of other philosophies and belief systems to further demonstrate his argument for ontology, and specifically of a mind-independent reality and causal mechanisms (for example, Bhaskar, 2009; Collier, 2007; Laclau and Bhaskar, 1998). As I have suggested elsewhere (Isaksen, 2016), this

means that Bhaskar argued that critical realism was better relative to its competitors while still being situated, not unlike Lakatos's historical argument for his concept of research programmes (Murphy, 1993). Immanent critiques may allow for universal claims, but these are to be understood as tentative and open to revision.

Critical realism has a realist conception of ontology, and a relativist conception of epistemology *because* of realism, and, in addition, the possibility of rational theory comparison *because* of some connection with reality. The epistemic criterion for theory choice is that which provides 'greater explanatory power' than its competitors (Bhaskar, 2009: 73), with one of the criteria being that one explanation is more comprehensive than another (Bhaskar, 2009: 82), especially when it can be so on the competitors' own terms. There are, however, other meanings to 'explanatory power' which Bhaskar explicated; for example, that it may be understood as when one theory can explain more phenomena and synthesise more theories. Scott (2021: 66) puts the problem well when he asks: 'why one criterion should be given higher or lower value than another, and this applies even if all of the designated criteria are given equal values'. What should a researcher do if and when theory A has greater explanatory power than theory B on one understanding of the criterion, while theory B has greater explanatory power than theory A when understood another way? Scott argues further that the very inclusion of a criterion is itself a value judgement, and that each of these value judgements themselves require criteria for inclusion and exclusion, and so on ad infinitum. This is a serious challenge to the possibility of rational theory choice from the perspective of critical realism.<sup>3</sup> It is also worth noting that a critical realist ontology and epistemology have implications for the 'expressive-referential' theory of truth that Bhaskar (2009) conceived.<sup>4</sup>

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3 A possible way of dealing with this issue may be found in the fractal approach of Murphy (1993), as I have previously suggested (Isaksen, 2018b), and which I plan to delineate in greater detail in a forthcoming paper.

4 'Expression (as representation or description) is not identity and only metaphorically correspondence. Speaking of "expression" reminds us that there are different (and better and worse) ways of expressing something – i.e. it reminds us of the connections between ontological realism, epistemic relativity and judgemental rationality' (Bhaskar, 2009: 100).

## Powers-based etiology, multi-causality and emergence

Based on an ontological examination of scientific experimentation, Bhaskar (2008) developed a powers-based understanding of causality, where it is to be understood primarily as the property of things rather than as a Humean constant conjunctions of events. He argued for a three-layered understanding of observable events and causal mechanisms. Bhaskar and Hartwig's (2016) terminology was the *real*, the *actual*, and the *empirical* or *phenomenal*. However, many find this complicated, as the *actual* and *empirical* are also *real*, and the most important distinction is between *mechanisms* and *events*. Consequently, I prefer to refer to these as the level of mechanisms and the level of events. There is, in turn, a subsection of all events which are observed. It is at the level of mechanisms that causality is found, according to Bhaskar's version of critical realism. An important part of research, therefore, is to use a form of inference termed 'retroduction', which in Bhaskar's terms is a form of transcendental argument. It is about asking 'what kind of causal mechanism(s) would need to exist to produce the events we observe?'

Being is understood as an open system with a multitude of interacting and often counteracting causal mechanisms (represented in Figure 6.1 by the two arrows); for example, a gust of wind counteracting Earth's gravitational pull on a leaf. In the natural sciences, it is considered possible to create 'closed systems' via experiments where only one causal mechanism affects the observed events, thereby producing constant conjunctions between events, whereas in the human sciences, this is considered problematic. As just one reason for this, what research subjects

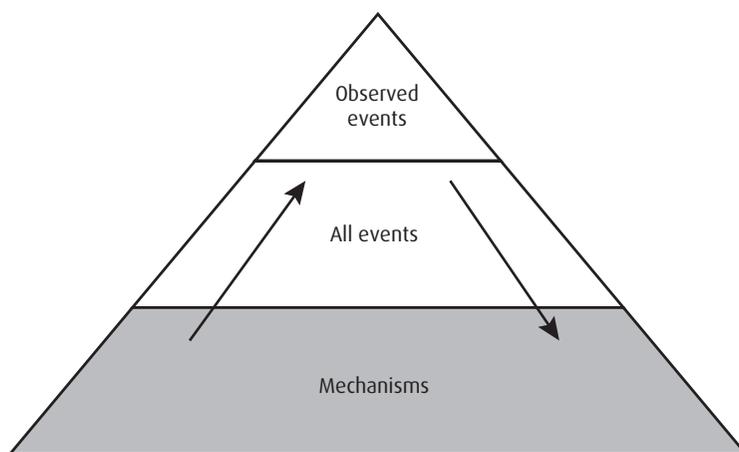
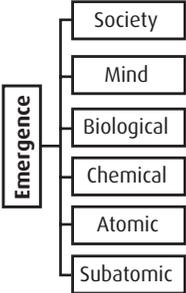


Figure 6.1 Open systems (Source: Author)

do within an experimental setting cannot be assumed to occur in the same way in a non-experimental social context. However, not all of the natural sciences find their greatest methodological value in experimentation, for example, meteorology (Lawson, 1998). Because of the accepted open-systemic nature of reality, and, in particular, of social reality, critical realism is often aligned with a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach (Bhaskar and Danermark, 2006; Bhaskar and Hartwig, 2016; Danermark, 2019; and Chapter 2 in Scott, 2021).

Another reason for the importance of interdisciplinarity comes from the concept of emergence, where an entity is understood as being qualitatively different from its constituent parts (see Figure 6.2). An example of this is that a water molecule is made of one oxygen atom and two hydrogen atoms when they are connected in a particular configuration (Elder-Vass, 2005). When oxygen atoms are not connected in this way, they do not have the features of water, and they are highly flammable rather than flame retardant. For critical realism, a mind is similarly understood as the emergent feature of a biological body and brain (which, in turn, is an emergent feature of atoms, which, in turn, are emergent features of subatomic particles). A mind is made up of these constituent parts, but it is qualitatively different from them. This view provides the means to a non-reductionist and non-dual conception of mind and consciousness (Morgan, 2007).

The argument is that those who wish to reduce mind and conscious experience (including aspects of learning) to biology, such as neuroscientists, cannot explain why a further reduction to atoms should not occur, and then to subatomic particles, and so on ad infinitum.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 6.2** Emergence (Source: Author)

<sup>5</sup> The role of interdisciplinarity is discussed below, in relation to both critical realist theories of learning and approaches to empirical research on learning.

## The natural and social sciences

The epistemological idea that there is a necessary social and philosophical background which people draw from and develop is related to what Bhaskar (1998) called the transformational model of social activity, or TMSA. The TMSA argues for determined (but not overdetermined) agency because of structures, which agency, in turn, may reproduce or transform in society. This model was Bhaskar's attempt to overcome the structure–agency dualism in sociology. Bhaskar presented four archetypes of the structure–agency discussion in sociology, and he related these to prominent sociological theorists: Weber,<sup>6</sup> conceiving of multiple individuals constituting society; Durkheim,<sup>7</sup> considering a reified society which determines individuals; Berger and Luckmann,<sup>8</sup> viewing individuals and society as dialectically related, where society is an idealisation which at the same time determines individuals; and Marx,<sup>9</sup> seeing society as enabling and constraining individuals who, in turn, may reproduce or transform society (Bhaskar, 1998: 31–7; 2009: 122–7). Bhaskar appropriated Marx's approach here, and in general was, in many ways, inspired by Marx's approach to social research and philosophy (Bhaskar and Hartwig, 2010).

Bhaskar (1998) has argued that the social sciences have an analogue to experimentation in the form of crises, such as neuroses and financial upheavals, which bring together causal mechanisms that were in many cases present but not as easily observed. It has also been argued that experimentation in the social sciences may have some value when the experiments are relatively similar to real-world contexts, such as with student assessments (Isaksen, 2018b). The social sciences may also use the superclass of contrast explanation (Pratten, 2007), for example, in noting tendential differences between incomes of women and men. One important difference for critical realists between the natural and the social sciences is the claim that in the social sciences a person's reasons can be causes for beliefs and actions (Bhaskar, 1998). Bhaskar argued that this allows both interpretation and explanation in the social sciences. The argument is that empiricists have a deficient conception of causality, which is found lacking in both the natural sciences and the social sciences.

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6 Max Weber (1864–1920) – an example of his work is 'Objectivity in social science and social policy' (Weber, 1949).

7 Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) – an example of his work is *The Rules of Sociological Method* (Durkheim, 2014).

8 See Berger and Luckmann (1966).

9 Karl Marx (1818–1883) – an example of his work is *Das Kapital* (Marx, 1867).

The argument continues that hermeneutics has also mistakenly accepted the empiricist conception of causality for the natural sciences, while claiming that the social sciences cannot be understood in the same causal way because of the unique nature of interpretive understanding. With a powers-based conception of causality, Bhaskar argued that both the natural and social sciences are dealing with the same fundamental form of causality, but that in the social sciences – because of emergence – agents' reasons are an additional and important form of causation.<sup>10</sup>

## Explanatory critique

Bhaskar has explained that the 'critical' in critical realism has various meanings, one of which is its defence of the possibility of a type of 'factually grounded critique'. This is called explanatory critique, and it is seen as supporting the possibility of critical social science (Lacey, 2007). The possibility of this comes from an engagement with Hume's claim that it is not possible to derive an 'ought' from an 'is'. Bhaskar's (2009) argument is that *inherent* in the 'is' as part of Hume's guillotine<sup>11</sup> is the value of knowing what is, that is, there is already a value commitment to truth internal to wanting to know what it 'is'. From this, it can be argued that all science is evaluative and critical, even if researchers themselves do not recognise this. If science did not value knowing what is, there would be no reason for carrying out research. As an immanent argument, it may not hold sway against those who claim that truth is not important. Bhaskar (2009: 183) retorted that any intentional activity (for example, writing that text does not exist) assumes a commitment to truth.

Hume's claim is therefore placed on its head in critical realism, with the immanent argument that an ought is already inherent in it, and that, therefore, all things being equal, we should critique falsehood and elevate truth. What is argued further is that causal mechanisms such as social structures, ideologies and detrimental material conditions that contribute to belief in less than the most explanatory knowledge should also, all things being equal, be removed or transformed, so that truth can better be served. An example of this could be a critique of how pharmaceutical corporations negatively influence the truthfulness of medical research.

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10 The methodological implications of reasons being causes are discussed later in this chapter, and in [Chapter 3](#) of this book.

11 Hume's law, or Hume's guillotine, argues that if a reasoner only has access to non-ethical and non-evaluative factual premises, he or she cannot logically infer the truth of valorised statements.

What will be noticed is the *ceteris paribus* clause, and Bhaskar (2009: 169–94) explained that a critique at the level of philosophy of Hume’s guillotine does not equal automatic recommendations at the level of social science methodology and praxis, and cautioned against unreflective applications of explanatory critiques.

## Meta-methodology and learning

A meta-methodology is to philosophy what a research methodology is to research. In short, a meta-methodology is the means by which philosophical knowledge is produced. A meta-methodology need not only be understood as the form of argumentation and justification for philosophical conclusions; it can just as well be understood as a means for learning in philosophy. The point of this section is not to suggest a perfect fit between a critical realist meta-methodology and a theory of learning. Such a fit would be surprising, to say the least. The purpose of this section is rather to explore the idea that a theory of learning could have affinities with a critical realist meta-methodology. I will suggest below that the cultural-historical activity theories of Lev Vygotsky, Alexei Leont’ev and Yrjö Engeström, different as these are, have such affinities with a critical realist meta-methodology.

Drawing on a Marxist understanding of the person and society, Vygotsky (1978) argued that the individualist and behaviourist approaches found in psychology were too simplistic, and should rather be understood as necessarily occurring within a social context, and especially through mediation. In a rebuttal to the behaviourists, Vygotsky suggested that the social context affects what may be understood as a stimulus, and what can be understood as an appropriate response. According to Vygotsky, individuals necessarily learn in a social context, and can develop faster when actively supported by others in this process. The role of educators is therefore to place learners in situations that are within what he termed their zone of proximal development, and to provide support there. Although Vygotsky’s work was outlawed by Stalin, Leont’ev (1978) brought the Marxist understanding of Vygotsky to the fore, in addition to providing even greater emphasis for the social context and its materiality. Engeström (2018) has built on this with the understanding that there is not just one activity system with which learners engage, but several, and that these activity systems are competing and clashing. One of Engeström’s central arguments about learning is that it occurs through contradictions that are both internal to and between activity systems. This point about contradiction brings us back to a critical realist meta-methodology.

## Development of knowledge

The philosophical method of Bhaskar's critical realism takes an avowedly immanent approach. There is no explicit mention of a zone of proximal development in which to learn. However, an immanent critique in the same way takes the 'other' and their current knowledge and beliefs as its focus on developing knowledge (Bhaskar and Hartwig, 2016; Isaksen, 2018a). In the case of the learning theorist, the question would be: how can I guide this person from where they currently are to greater knowledge? In the case of the philosopher, it would be: how can I develop this field from where it currently is to greater knowledge? When interpreted this way, the praxeology is strikingly similar. Where 'supporting in the zone of proximal development' is understood as helping others, an immanent critique could be interpreted as more antagonistic. However, when the critical realist notion of epistemic relativity is applied self-referentially, and a humbler epistemic stance is taken, an immanent critique will in many cases adopt a similar approach. In both cases, learning is understood as being based on prior knowledge, which has and will develop in a historical and social context. Again, even though cultural-historical activity theorists have focused on learning, and critical realists have focused on justification, the approaches can be seen as two sides of the same epistemic coin. Both positions also have a tendency (but not a necessity) to assume greater knowledge with the one who guides, an assumption which can and has been questioned. The similar degrees of importance of cultural-historical activity theory and critical realism in the role of social structures for both enabling and constraining possible knowledge and action are apparent, and likely derive from similar Marxian genealogies.

Several researchers drawing on critical realism have noted affinities between critical realism and cultural-historical activity theory, and have, for example, critiqued more individualist theories of learning, such as behaviourist and cognitivist perspectives (for example, Mukute and Lotz-Sisitka, 2012; Simeonova, 2017), whereas Ellery (2011) has applied critical realism to ontologically connect cultural-historical activity theory and cognitivism. Kahn et al. (2012) have argued that Vygotsky was too focused on structures to the detriment of agency, and that a critical realist conception of structure and agency in learning is required. Nunez (2013), Mukute and Lotz-Sisitka (2012) and Simeonova (2017) argue that critical realism can provide the necessary ontological support for activity theory, whereas Brown (2009) has suggested that ontology is a dimension

that this learning theory and critical realism already have in common. Nunez (2013) interestingly provided immanent critiques (she sought to demonstrate internal contradictions, in Engeströmian terms) to argue for the necessity of a critical realist activity theory to build on developments from Vygotsky to Leont'ev to Engeström, arguing that critical realism can provide an activity theory without the current dualisms, such as individualism and collectivism, explanation and understanding, and reasons and causes.

Among critical realist thinkers and researchers, there are clearly diverging opinions on the affinity between critical realism and cultural-historical activity theory. The points of similarity that I have observed between critical realist meta-methodology and cultural-historical activity theory are: i) knowledge development is necessarily and fundamentally situated historically as well as socially, but agents are not overdetermined by history and society, and agents may in turn change society (although the exact weightings may differ); ii) knowledge development occurs through resolving contradictions (although how to resolve contradictions may be understood slightly differently); and iii) there is some ontological referent in knowledge development (although this may be more or less explicit, and analysed to a greater or lesser degree).

## Philosophy of science and learning

As David Scott (2000: 2) has argued in *Realism and Educational Research*, 'Educational research is itself educational. The researcher is as much a learner as those who form the subject matter of the research.' As with the previous claim that meta-methodology can be seen as the approach for producing philosophical knowledge, and thus learning, so it is suggested here that scientific research can also be seen as a subset of learning, because critical realist scientific research is understood as the active involvement of the researcher(s) in the world. The learning theory that is perhaps most often related to a learner being actively involved is that of John Dewey and his version of pragmatism.

For Dewey (2007), learning that was removed from practice was not only a misuse of educational resources, but also a logical impossibility. For him, the dualism of subject and object was necessarily an illusion, and not related in any way to our actual being in the world, either phenomenologically or practically. Dewey paid particular attention to the aesthetic and emotive aspect of problems. Problems do not merely appear; they are felt as much as they are thought, and that is what motivates

learning. As part of a learner's experience, or practice (Elkjær, 2009), they reflect on their experience. This reflection is not necessarily something that occurs *after* an experience, but is just as much a part of that very experience. Dewey's theory of the person and learning has been interpreted as a recommendation for a student-centred pedagogy, where the learner is given free rein in the learning process. However, Dewey (1938) himself argued against such 'progressive pedagogies'. While wanting to move past educator-centric teaching, he still saw the value of those with greater experience and knowledge teaching and guiding would-be learners.

One might assume that a Deweyan theory of learning would be appropriate in drawing out the implicit theory of learning in Bhaskar's analysis of scientific inquiry. Although critical realists in many cases endorse pragmatist approaches on grounds of praxis and relevance, there are ontological, epistemological and etiologiical differences that create difficulties. Critical realists argue, on grounds mentioned previously, for a mind-independent reality, an ontological realism, while pragmatists stay in principle agnostic on this topic, as it is not deemed necessary for action. Bhaskar argued for an immanent, 'other-focused', form of justification, while pragmatists take an individualist approach to justification (Isaksen, 2018a). Both agree that knowledge is fallible, but the concept of truth is different. Bhaskar (2009) argued that truth is understood as being expressive-referential, meaning that linguistic claims refer to something other than themselves and may be true to a greater or lesser extent. A pragmatist notion of truth, however, especially for Dewey, is a question of what works and provides practical utility, and leaves out explicit metaphysical postulates (McDermid, 2022). For critical realists, causality is powers-based, while for pragmatists, it is empiricist. For all these reasons, in particular the latter, critical realism cannot easily incorporate a pragmatist theory of learning. It can still engage with pragmatism, however. For example, Dewey's analysis of the importance of emotion and aesthetics to what is experienced as a problem, and which may drive a learner's personal engagement, is relevant to research and education alike, and finds similarities in the social realism of Margaret Archer (2003; 2007) and Bhaskar's later developments in dialectical critical realism.

Although cultural-historical activity theory has usually been understood as focusing on the zone of proximal development, and on the central role of discourse and mediation, the material activity of the learner is also theorised as being of central importance. Leont'ev (1978), in particular, drew attention to this aspect of learning, and to a Marxist conception of human activity as central to research. Again, we find a genealogical connection in Marx between cultural-historical activity

theory and critical realist philosophy, and one which can ground the importance, and the necessity, of the material activity of the learner. Although Jean Piaget<sup>12</sup> and embodied cognitivists (Shapiro and Spaulding, 2021) also argue for the importance of active engagement in the world to learn, there is again less affinity because of their positivist leanings, such that there are also here ontological, epistemological and etiological hurdles to connect these understandings of research and learning with those of critical realism.

## Critical realist-inspired theories of learning

Critical realism has been applied to study learning in curricula and learning environments (for example, Schudel, 2014; Wheelahan, 2015; Withell and Haigh, 2018), organisational learning (for example, Kringelum and Brix, 2020; Simeonova, 2017), self-regulated learning (for example, Jakešová and Kalenda, 2015), leadership learning (for example, Willis, 2019), learning to teach (for example, Cochran-Smith et al., 2014), learner agency (for example, Manyukhina and Wyse, 2019), social learning (for example, Lotz-Sisitka, 2012), practice learning (for example, Coleman, 2020), e-learning (for example, Li, 2013), learning disabilities (for example, Warner, 1993), assessment for learning (for example, Roberts et al., 2021), constructing learning (for example, Boughey and McKenna, 2017), transformative learning (for example, Jakobsen, 2018; Kimura, 2020), and student engagement (for example, Kahn, 2014; Kahu, 2013). There have also been some critical realist-inspired theories of learning – in addition to Nunez (2013).

In a series of interviews on critical realism and education with David Scott, Bhaskar explained its relationship to learning theory (Scott and Bhaskar, 2015: 32):

Although I didn't refer very much specifically to education in the phases of basic and [dialectical] critical realism, nevertheless a lot of critical realism is about or depends on changing consciousness. And there is a resonance with themes and issues in education and in the philosophy of education. But in the philosophy of metaReality, I did sketch a model of learning, which is called the unfolding of the enfolded.

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12 Jean Piaget (1896–1980) – an example of his work is *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (Piaget, 1954).

Bhaskar went on to explain that this model is about the learning of skills, and possibly dispositions, and may be related to learning cognitive knowledge insofar as this is dependent upon skills and dispositions. It is a model where each learner already has the skill or disposition prior to it being unfolded. It is a view that learning skills and possibly dispositions does not fundamentally come about by internalising knowledge from without, but is rather understood as involving qualities that people already have that ‘merely’ need to be actualised: ‘A good example of this would be learning a language. We all have the potential to learn any language when we are born – the Chomskian<sup>13</sup> thesis’ (Scott and Bhaskar, 2015: 32). Scott commented that this has been criticised, which Bhaskar acknowledged, explaining that such a theory of learning also needs to pay attention to external elements, such as educators and the learning context.

As Bhaskar suggested above, he did not much discuss learning before working on metaReality and, as this chapter is focused on the first development of critical realism, I will not provide a more fine-grained exposition of this theory of learning. There are, however, a couple of general points related to learning discussed in the interview, for example, that Bhaskar saw a connection between Vygotsky’s arguments about mediation and his own philosophy of science (Scott and Bhaskar, 2015: 31), and that he criticised Vygotsky for his empirical realism (Scott and Bhaskar, 2015: 40). This criticism is in line with, and likely informed by, Nunez’s work, with which Bhaskar was acquainted. He argued for distance from complexity and post-humanist theories of learning, on the grounds that they both lack a clear distinction between different components at the ontological level (Scott and Bhaskar, 2015: 39–40). Emergence and stratification are central to critical realism.

## The relation of structure and agency to learning

Peter Kahn et al. (2012) propose a critical realist theory of learning, and apply this to understanding why academics to varying degrees are able to reflect on their practice as teachers in higher education. The theoretical problem to which they are responding is the claim by Ashwin (2008) that in theories of learning in higher education, there is a lack of conceptualisation of the interplay between agency and structure. Kahn et

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13 This refers to Noam Chomsky (1928– ). An example of his work is *Syntactic Structures* (Chomsky, 1957).

al. (2012: 859) claim that there is usually a focus on *either* agency or structure, and that this is because research in higher education tends to draw on *either* psychology or sociology:

The theory of approaches to learning (Marton and Säljö, 1976), for instance, is particularly well established. It addresses the role that a learner's intention plays in shaping the resultant learning. By contrast, social constructivist theories of learning, as with Bruner (1996) and Vygotsky (1962), posit that learning is dependent upon social structures.

Kahn et al. (2012) propose a 'third way', between the extremes of too great a focus on either agency or structure.

These authors draw on the work of Margaret Archer, a critical realist, who has expanded Bhaskar's TMSA through a sociological lens. In short, Archer (2003; 2007) adds the concept of 'the internal conversation' to what she considers a normal capacity for reflexive deliberation in people. She argues that this plays the necessary mediating role between agency and structure, without which these could not be related as they are. For Archer, the individual chooses actions by reflecting on the structures in which they find themselves, as they interpret them, and, in conjunction with the individual's own configurations of concerns, they choose a course of actions. The configurations of concerns are deeply individual, although they may have similarities to those of other people.

Kahn et al. (2012: 868) argue that the theory of learning they propose provides a more comprehensive understanding of learning:

Our account of learning in the given context is more comprehensive than that provided either by social constructivist theories or by psychological theories such as approaches to learning. Valsiner and van der Veer (2005: 82), for instance, argue that Vygotsky held the postulate 'The social nature of human cognition emerges in the process of internalization of external social experiences by individuals in the process of socialization' (ibid.: 82). We have similarly been able to see how the development of capacity to engage in reflection on academic practice emerges in part from social interaction, also recognising the way in which this feeds into the development of practice. But at the same time we have also explored ways in which capacity to engage in reflection emerges also in relation to the concerns of the individuals involved, and to their own characteristic patterns of reflexive deliberation.

Kahn and colleagues later applied this theory of learning to an understanding of student engagement (Kahn, 2014; Kahn et al., 2017).

Kevin Williams (2012) has, in a similar way, applied Bhaskar’s TMSA, with Archer’s reflexive addition, to provide a theory of learning that is seen as an improvement upon earlier theories. Whereas Kahn et al. (2012) proposed their critical realist-informed understanding of learning as a happy third way between two extremes, Williams instead builds on Alan Jarvis’s (2018) theory of learning. A comparison between Jarvis’s and Williams’s theories of learning is therefore useful (see Table 6.1).

The two principal differences are that Williams emphasises how changed agents may in turn affect society, and broadens the category of experiences beyond Jarvis’s social focus. Specifically, he argues on immanent grounds that Jarvis’s learning theory does not include his own claims about learning: ‘Jarvis’s answers, however, do not appear congruent with the strong sense of agency he calls for [see Table 6.1], for persons are left as gifts of society through society’s conversation(s)’ (Williams, 2012: 304), and ‘If learning is life-wide [as Jarvis claims] it is therefore social-plus: learning also includes our relations with the natural and practical realms, something that Jarvis’s socially-dependent self does not acknowledge’ (Williams, 2012: 304). Li (2013: 287) has similarly

**Table 6.1** A comparison between Jarvis and Williams (Source: Author)

Jarvis	Williams
<p>Learning is the combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person – body (genetic, physical and biological) and mind (knowledge, skills, attitudes, emotions, meaning, beliefs and senses) – experiences social situations, the content of which is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the individual person’s biography, resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person.</p>	<p>Learning is the combination of processes throughout a lifetime whereby the whole person <i>experiences situations involving one or any combination of three orders of reality (natural, practical and social)</i>, and the content of such experiences is then transformed cognitively, emotively or practically (or through any combination) and integrated into the person’s biography, resulting in a continually changing (or more experienced) person and <i>impacting on the elaboration of society</i>.</p>

drawn on Archer to argue that learning is a central part of being human, and that learning therefore affects the trajectory of individuals' identities, and that this can explain why the process of learning is 'intensely emotionally charged'.

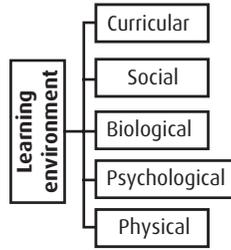
The move from an application of Bhaskar's work on structure and agency to a more interdisciplinary conception of learning is exemplified through the lens of learning for sustainable development. The TMSA has been applied by Chikamori et al. (2019) to provide a model for education for sustainable development. The argument is that it is important to understand the temporal nature of sustainability issues, in particular, that what we do today affects the next generation(s), and that a temporal understanding of agency and structure is therefore important. However, it could be argued that the relation between materiality and the social, and their interactions, are missing. As Agbedahin and Lotz-Sisitka (2019) emphasise in their study on education for sustainable development, Bhaskar further developed the TMSA from a focus on structure and agency exclusively to also include smaller and larger scales, such as the biological and the supranational. It is to this type of 'laminated' (Bhaskar and Danermark, 2006) theory of learning that I now turn.

## The relation of emergence and stratification to learning

Gordon Brown (2009) has argued for a critical realist understanding of the learning environment based on a stratified understanding of being. He claims that 'in critical realism it is the ontology that enables and constrains the acquisition of knowledge, that is, learning' (Brown, 2009: 14), and that:

If the possibilities for knowledge are enabled and constrained by the ontology, the possibilities for students acquiring knowledge in a particular environment are enabled and constrained by the total ontology of that environment. Thus, the learning environment is more than merely the location of learning as it is commonly construed. It is the total set of circumstances that enable and constrain learning. (Brown, 2009: 20)

For Brown, this whole ontology includes the students themselves as part of the learning environment, and he argues that the learning environment is 'laminar or layered, having at least physical, biological, psychological, social and curricular dimensions' (Brown, 2009: 31) (see Figure 6.3).



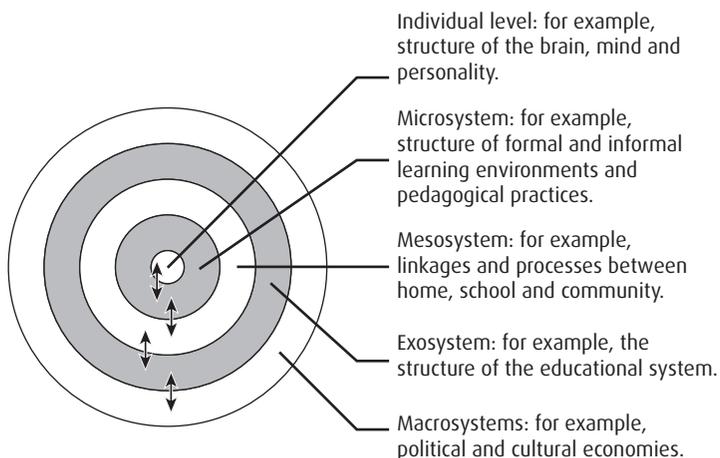
**Figure 6.3** Learning environments (Source: Author)

Although Brown’s focus is on a theory of the learning environment and not on learning per se, he claims that, ‘various properties emerge from different levels, where the critical emergent property of the learning environment is learning’ (Brown, 2009: 31). Leon Tikly (2015) and Frode Restad (2019) have, in their different ways, sought to develop a more precise understanding of learning, while drawing on Brown’s ontological and laminated understanding of the learning environment.

Tikly’s (2015) primary interest is in how to research the topic of learning. Since the object of study in this case is learning, he sees it as relevant to what counts as an appropriate methodology to propose a theory of learning (see Figure 6.4). In typical critical realist fashion, each level is understood as emergent from the lower level, and as including non-deterministic two-way interactions, as the arrows represent. It is the whole which Tikly (2015) suggests represents learning and its possibility. He explains how he reworked an empiricist-based model so that it became a critical realist one:

Whereas Broffenbrenner’s work can be seen to focus on statistical correlations between factors at different levels (i.e. the relationship between parental occupation in the ‘exosystem’ and the ‘microsystem’ of child development), the emphasis in the model presented here [see Figure 6.4] is more on the interaction of causal structures and mechanisms at each level that in Bhaskar’s terms are more ‘intransitive’ in nature. (Tikly, 2015: 244)

Restad (2019) examines learning within a Norwegian context, and seeks to synthesise the two traditions which have come to hold most sway. These are the Germanic tradition of *Bildung*, and the Anglo-American-inspired *competency* approach. *Bildung* has a long and varied history (see Chapter 5). In English, it is translated as *formation* and, as such, it is understood as interested in more than how to help students learn content, and as



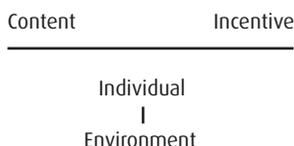
**Figure 6.4** Stratification (Source: Author)

including, more fundamentally, the unfolding and socialisation of students. *Competence* has, in contrast, a much shorter history, and is focused on issues such as learning, student retention, and relevance for employment and international competition: ‘Each tradition serves as a critique of the other, with the competency-based argument highlighting the lack of policy relevance in the *Bildung* tradition, and the *Bildung* tradition criticizing the competence for its reduction of the complex phenomena of students learning to meet measurable outcomes’ (Restad, 2019: 409).

Restad notes that these critiques are also accepted by thinkers internal to each tradition. Some scholars seek to develop potential syntheses of these approaches to overcome the bi-directional criticisms, but Restad (2019: 413) argues that these attempts do not pay sufficient attention to ontology:

I take issue with the proposition of Deng and Willbergh that the contradictions between competence and *Bildung* can be resolved by merely developing new theories of knowledge, without also dealing with issues at the ontological level. Rather, I contend, these traditions need an ontological platform in critical realism before any coherent theory can be devised to bridge these concepts.

Restad then suggests that, even though it is not explicitly critical realist, ‘Illeris’ model of learning [see Figure 6.5] coincides with Brown’s model of the learning environment in a number of ways. It recognises the interaction of factors at the psychological (cognition/emotion), curricular (learning



**Figure 6.5** Illeris’s theory of learning (Source: Author)

content) and sociocultural (environment) levels’ (Restad, 2019: 415). Illeris considers a close interaction between the individual and their social and material environments, and emphasises the importance of both emotion and the acquisition of knowledge for learning, in a similar fashion to several of the other critical realist theories of learning.

Restad therefore unites Brown’s (2009) ontological understanding of the learning environment and Knud Illeris’s (2018) general theory of learning for a more ontologically comprehensive theory of learning. It is argued that such an ontologically comprehensive theory of learning can hold in tension the strengths of both *Bildung* and competence, and can therefore be of value to policymakers and educators alike:

... an understanding of learning grounded in a critical realist ontology can cater to both empiricists, who want to measure competence as an outcome of learning, and those who want to support the autonomous meaning making of students through *Bildung* by recognizing that educational measurements do not capture all aspects of learning in an open system of education. (Restad, 2019: 417)

## Methodological recommendations for studying learning

In a desire to make the abstract philosophy of science as relevant as possible to research practice, some researchers<sup>14</sup> inspired by critical realist

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<sup>14</sup> Tikly (2015: 237) explains the importance of the philosophy of science for the study of learning: ‘Governments and donors are in the process of investing millions of dollars in research programmes aimed at finding out “what works” in raising learning outcomes for disadvantaged learners in low- and middle-income countries. Yet the philosophical and methodological assumptions underlying much of the current discourse including what learning is (the ontology of learning) and how we come to know what learning is (the epistemology of learning) are rarely made explicit. This is despite the fact that these assumptions have profound implications for education policy and practice including pedagogy, the curriculum, assessment, teacher training and investments in learning materials.’

principles have sought to provide general critical realist research methodologies. The problem with this is that any such methodology will necessarily be piecemeal. There is not, and cannot be, a critical realist methodology as such, not even for a singular topic. A methodology is contextual, whereas a philosophy of science, especially one such as critical realism, is much more expansive. I will therefore not seek to provide ‘the’ critical realist methodology for studying learning, but rather demonstrate the variety of approaches which have used critical realist perspectives.

Unsurprisingly, it is not uncommon for critical realists to argue for the importance of explicitly including an ontological dimension. Indeed, the attention to a realist ontology seems to be one of the main reasons researchers turn to or apply critical realism – they want to say something about the world, and they find greater support for this in critical realism than in positions such as positivism or social constructivism. Critical realists, or those taking some inspiration from critical realism, want to argue that learning is in some way about reality, and more than sensations or constructions *only*. We have seen how this ontological drive has been applied to the learning environment (Brown, 2009), the learner (Williams, 2012) and learning itself (Tikly, 2015). To this can be added the content to be learned, with examples such as environmental learning: ‘with emphasis on ontological realism, it maintains that nature and the environment are real, rather than socially constructed, which supports the argument for sustainability, education for sustainability and the restriction of human activity, so as to reduce harm to people and our planet from climate change’ (Khazem, 2018: 132).

Corson (1991a: 197) has argued that: ‘Like Popper’s account, the critical realist account is epistemologically tentative ... But unlike Popper’s account, Bhaskar’s is ontologically daring: he allows for the actual existence of generative mechanisms which explain social events in the past and in the present.’ It varies as to how epistemologically tentative critical realist research on learning has been. The focus of most studies has been ontological and causal, although there are some who argue for the importance of reflexivity because of the situatedness of the researcher (for example, Clegg and Stevenson, 2013; Kahn, 2015), others who have argued only or primarily on immanent grounds (for example, Scott, 2005; Warner, 1993; Williams, 2012), and others who have focused on the importance of comparison generally (for example, Tikly, 2015; Withell and Haigh, 2018).

Withell and Haigh (2018) describe some of the difficulties with seeking to uncover causal mechanisms in a learning context when taking seriously the problem of a mind-independent reality. Their research sought to look at potential causal mechanisms at several strata, through

three cycles of action research, and to attempt comparative explanations of potential causal explanations. This led to an abundance of potentially competing and/or interacting causal mechanisms. Were the events they observed best explained by potential mechanism A, or were the phenomena best explained by potential mechanism B, or C? Or were the observed phenomena best explained by some interaction of A, B and/or C? If so, what kind of interaction would provide the best explanation? How might a lack of knowledge of certain disciplines, and insufficient time, affect these judgements? Together with their critical epistemological reflections, Withell and Haigh (2018) do end up providing some tentative conclusions, plans for future research, and a hopeful outlook.

Perhaps the most common methodological implication from critical realism applied in research on learning is the addition of the mode of inference known as retrodution, and because it is so common in critical realist research, and to a critical realist philosophy of science, it is presented as a *necessary* condition for critical realist research. I argue that this is not the case. It is perfectly legitimate to hold a critical realist ontology, epistemology and etiology without seeking to uncover causal mechanisms in every research endeavour. There will be times when explorations of statistical tendencies, or the documentation and publicity of under-represented voices, is more than sufficient to count as research, also from a critical realist perspective. What critical realism allows for and invites is a deeper exploration of observable phenomena, if and when this is deemed relevant.

By drawing on Bhaskar's understanding of the logic of scientific discovery, Corson (1991a; 1991b) has explained in detail how retrodution can function as one element of educational research, and Huckle (2004) provides an example of how a student may use this in their learning. Kringelum and Brix (2020) suggest a research methodology for organisational learning based on critical realism, with retrodution having a prominent place. Reimann et al. (2014) do the same for e-research, with a focus on quantitative methods. Willis (2019) and Tikly (2015) both suggest that retrodution is centrally important to research on learning and, in addition, provide examples from their own research about how they applied it. Willis (2019) demonstrates this within a setting of leadership learning and qualitative interviews, while Tikly (2015) uses multi-level modelling of cross-national data and cycles of participatory action research. For both researchers, the interest is to better understand the causal mechanisms driving the empirical observations. Tikly (2015) further notes the importance of comparison when proposing causal mechanisms, and the tentative nature of such conclusions. Fryer (2021) provides an interesting use of retrodution to

demonstrate that what are usually understood as graduate outcomes in policy documents, with their econometric and empiricist stance, would in a critical realist account rather be conceptualised as graduate functionings (that is, what graduates do). It is the mechanisms (that is, the *causes* of what graduates do after graduation) that are the graduate outcomes from higher education. He argues further that the critical realist focus on graduate outcomes at the level of the mechanism should therefore be the primary interest of researchers and policymakers alike.

An increasingly common research approach to learning is the randomised control trial and systematic review. Both, it is argued, are based on a flawed empiricist notion of causality. Clegg (2005: 422–3) provides an example of the issue:

Gough *et al.* have produced a meticulous account of their methodology whereby they used a systematic review to seek an answer to the question ‘What evidence is there that processes involving reflection, planning and action improve students’ learning?’ ... a meticulous documented procedure was followed so that all the choices were ‘objective’, in the sense that other researchers applying the same criteria could be expected to reach the same results. The questions are, however, what does this tell us about PDP [personal development planning], and what use is this knowledge to researchers and practitioners? Gough *et al.* (2003) were clear at the launch that it was not possible to know ‘how or why’ PDP was producing those effects reported ... Because the issue of the underlying mechanisms was not addressed in setting up the review, the final list of studies cannot be seen to be related to one another in any systematic way. We do not know whether the reported outcomes were produced by the same or different mechanisms, or even if the term reflection is being used with any consistency. Indeed, given the cultural variation Gough *et al.* (2003) note, it appears extremely unlikely that this is the case.

Critical realist researchers, or those of a critical realist persuasion, have sought to develop a more critical realist version of systematic reviews that does apply retrodution to causal mechanisms. In particular, the ‘realist evaluation’ of Ray Pawson (2006) has been important in this regard, with his context–mechanism–outcome configuration, although this has also been criticised, both for its lack of a critical dimension (Clegg, 2005) and for not acknowledging the breadth of possible mechanisms in open systems (Hinds and Dickson, 2021).

An example of interdisciplinarity in research on learning can be found in Agbedahin and Lotz-Sisitka (2019), who applied Danermark and Bhaskar's (2006) laminated model to analyse the possibility for mainstreaming the learning of, and for, sustainable development. Stylianou and Scott (2018) used the same model, together with Brown's (2009) interdisciplinary understanding of the learning environment, to study the disempowerment of teachers of ethnic minorities. Kahu (2013) developed a holistic framework for student engagement – seeing this not only as a means to learning, but also as an end in itself – by synthesising insights from several disciplines and perspectives (see Scott, 2021: chapter 2).

The question of quantitative research methods in the social sciences and educational research has been an area of some contention because of its empiricist genealogy (for example, Clegg, 2005; Scott, 2007; Tikly, 2015). First, variables are at the level of the event, and do not represent a systematic attempt to understand underlying causal powers. Observations of correlated variables (or constant conjunctions, in Hume's terms) do not therefore equate to an understanding of causality for critical realists. Second, quantitative methods assume closed systems which rarely, if ever, occur in social reality. Third, in enumerating social phenomena, quantitative studies can strip them of their unique qualitative and contextual differences. Despite these criticisms, there does seem to be a growing number of critical realists who accept the use of quantitative research methods in the social sciences (Downward, 2007). Some argue that this is valid when data from quantitative methods are understood as only providing general ideas of tendencies at the level of the event, which can be studied further with the use of more qualitative methods and via retroductive inferences.

## Interpretation and action in social reality

Shipway (2010: 165) has argued that because reasons can be causes, 'the first step in educational research should be to seek the reasons and accounts of the agents who are involved in the situation under examination'. Whether this should always be the first step is an open question, but the importance of inclusion of people's accounts and explanations is generally agreed upon, because of human intentionality in learning and experience generally. This is one of the reasons that interviews are commonplace in social research inspired by critical realism. Scott (2021: 79), however, cautions against an unreflective acceptance of reports of reasons: 'We need to distinguish here between actual reasons

for an action and rationalisations of those reasons after the event or activity.’ Similarly, even if individuals do provide accurate descriptions of their reasons, it need not be the case that they correctly understood their context when devising their reasons for courses of action, nor that they are able to accurately predict and interpret the consequences of their actions and beliefs (see [Chapter 3](#)).

These are issues that bring us to the relationship of structure and agency in learning research. Applications of the TMSA in learning research can be found in Manyukhina and Wyse (2019), Boughey and McKenna (2017), Chikamori et al. (2019) and Robert et al. (2021), among others. Burgoyne (2009) has, for example, applied the TMSA to add a social and material dimension to Kolb’s (1984) learning circle. Kimura (2020) has similarly applied the TMSA to expand upon Mezirow’s (2009) somewhat individualist concept of transformative learning. Kimura also drew on Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy in studying how Cambodian citizens could learn to better stand up to the land-grabbing of local government. An insufficient understanding of the relation of structure and agency may also be implicit in research methods on learning, such as in quantitative modelling (Scott, 2005) and in educational psychology (Kahn, 2015), and it is therefore argued that care must be taken when using these research methods.<sup>15</sup>

It will be remembered that the critical realist concept of explanatory critique builds on ‘what it is’ to make value claims about ‘what should be’. Banfield (2016) supports a Marxist approach to the sociology of education, in large part through the application of an explanatory critique. Mingers (2015: 316) has argued for the importance of using explanatory critiques in business research and business schools, because:

business and management organizations are clearly implicated in many of [the physical, social and political problems in the world]: global warming is largely caused by industrial production and fossil fuels; the financial crisis by executive greed and lack of control and foresight; and curable disease by a reluctance to sell medicines cheaply.

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<sup>15</sup> In addition to the above research methodology recommendations, Poulshock (2011), Ariza et al. (2021), Schudel (2014) and Rafe et al. (2021) have suggested how critical realist principles may be applied directly in the curriculum and in the classroom. The interested reader can find in Bhaskar (2009: 104–68) arguments for many of the methodological recommendations and discussions above.

Potter (2010) provides an important example of an explanatory critique with regards to learning in formal education. He suggests that the meritocratic ideology of the ruling classes in educational systems has a causal efficacy which is detrimental to the working class, and, even though it would be beneficial for the working class to know and understand this ideology, it is not made available to them.

While educational systems are one of the most important sources for learning ‘what is’, and have this as their stated purpose, these systems also systematically obscure some of the most important ‘what is’ for certain groups, namely their domination by the ruling classes, a domination which also occurs within the educational system itself. Potter (2010) argues that the causal explanation for this comes from hierarchies in society (and he includes gender and ethnicity as examples, in addition to class), and that such theory–practice inconsistencies will continue in educational systems as long as social hierarchies exist, and he therefore invites changes to them. It is in regard to such *absences* of what is learned in formal education which brings in the relevance of a critique of curriculum as found in Wheelahan (2015), and the relevance of a self-reflexive attention to implicit values and actions as educators (Burt et al., 2018).

## Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have primarily been interested in representing as best as I could, and as space would allow, the breadth of perspectives that can and do exist about learning and the study of learning from critical realist perspectives. There is not one critical realist approach to studying learning, nor is there one critical realist theory of learning. Indeed, the picture I presented initially of a single critical realism is also misleading, as there are discussions and disagreements among self-proclaimed critical realists about most of the concepts discussed (as well as others not discussed). There are, however, also areas of overlap – tendencies, if you like – and it is my hope that this chapter has been able to demonstrate that some of these tendencies exist, as well as some of the value that critical realist approaches to learning can contribute.

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# 7

## Learning systems and values

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### Introduction

In formal school systems, as well as in higher education, regimes of performativity (Ball, 2012; Lyotard, 1984) continue to undermine the agency of both teachers and students (Shore and Wright, 1999). In this chapter, a critical realist framework is combined with an Aristotelian virtues frame to analyse the relationship between learning systems and values. How can teachers and students develop personal embodied properties, and hence personal emergent powers (Archer, 2003), to increase their agency within current educational contexts? Claims that authentic morality is internally driven, and that an integral aspect of human agency is reflected in how we choose to conduct ourselves (Sayer, 2011), are central. Although influential, neither the diktat of external authorities (Ramsden, 1991) nor normative notions of 'good' based on empiricist metrics (Hayes, 2017) can replace an Aristotelian virtue-based framework, striving for an internally set goal in addressing this question of agency within educational structures. The argument is developed by considering humans as stratified beings, exerting their agency to make changes to the world, and hence to themselves. The way people develop personal embodied properties (Archer, 2003; Macdonald and Brooker,

1999), which can interact with contextual structures to give rise to new emergent aspects of agency,<sup>1</sup> is considered to be an essential part of the learning process.

An Aristotelian approach to aims or goals and virtues is elaborated to reveal the contradiction between the internal development of personal properties through the practice of virtues and the demands of external, market-driven, reward/punishment monitoring regimes. Human agency – what it is, as well as the restraints and enablements it encounters – is deeply involved with the development of morality and how one might choose to conduct one’s self. These ideas are then related to Dewey’s view of the purpose of educational systems, and a view of curriculum as an emergent process culminating in learners drawing connections between educational systems and the development of ethical values. The chapter concludes with accounts of different value systems and possibilities for change.

## Learning as a necessary product of human agency

Like all objects in a stratified universe, a human being is also a stratified entity. Humans are born into an environment of structures which may be changed by interacting with them. Structures can be considered to be patterned entities (Lefebvre, 2002) in the physical world, patterns of roles and relationships within the social world, and patterns of symbols, texts and discourses in the cultural, or symbolic, realm. These three mutually interacting realms, namely the physical, the social and the cultural, are full of structures both constraining and enabling our agency as living things. Furthermore, agency is defined here as the capacity of a living being to make changes to its environment (Sharar, 2016). Being an agent, or acting in an agentic manner, involves acts of changing or defending those structures within which one finds self. Physical structures consist of classrooms, coins, teaching resources, food, mountains, roads and so on. Humans, in the process of living, mould physical structures to make them more conducive to their needs. Social structures consist of roles and the relationships between them, and they occur, for example, in families, jobs,

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1 Archer (2000: 306, my italics) has written the following about the structure–agency relationship: ‘[T]hree of our major problems in social theory are in fact interrelated. These are the “problem of structure and agency”, the “problem of subjectivism and objectivism”, and the “problem of agency”. All hinge, in various ways, upon the causal powers of people, their nature, emergence and efficacy ... *it will only be the re-emergence of humanity*, meaning that due acknowledgement is given to the properties and powers of real people forged in the real world, *which overcomes the present poverty of social theory*.’

debts, agreements or laws. The people occupying such roles at any one time can change the way they act them out, bearing in mind that we cannot always do what we want. They can change aspects of the role itself and the relationships between roles (Bhaskar, 1998). Cultural or symbolic structures may be defined as patterns of symbols, together with rules for their use (Bertalanffy, 1981). Examples of these include languages, gestures, musical notations, codings, mathematical notations, traditions that encapsulate knowledge, and narratives. The development of new vocabularies in different contexts is part of the way people reform language as they use it. All aspects of human cultural systems are changed by human activity through time. Although the three types of structure mentioned above are always deeply, interactively, intertwined, separating them out analytically to examine them is useful (Archer, 2003), with the caveat that they are inseparable in real-life contexts (Sharar, 2016).

Human agency exists simultaneously at different levels: atomic, cellular, physiological, individual, social, societal, global and so on. At atomic levels, the agentic processes of life are exhibited in the self-replicating activities of DNA, which steadily reorganises atoms and molecules in our environment, simultaneously building our own cells and other physiological structures – a process lasting as long as we are alive. At this level, we are constantly interacting with the air, water and nutrients around us, and making changes to them and to ourselves. At physiological levels, needs are unconsciously met, but it is sometimes possible for humans to override this process and live in a way that is discordant with their needs. An Aristotelian approach to what it means to be good at this level would involve respect for our nature as human beings and avoidance of activities harmful to us. Yet, illogically, humans often act in ways detrimental to their own needs, particularly under external pressures. At the level of our individual selves, our conscious and unconscious awareness of both our surroundings and our own activities constitute a complex system in which we constantly change our environment; and the process of doing so reflects back on ourselves. This ability to change ourselves while changing the structures around us is fundamental to learning processes. As an example, let us take the situation of a novice carpenter. The experience of using tools and shaping wood develops fine motor skills and hand–eye coordination. These are examples of physical personal embodied properties, capacities that allow further woodworking powers to be drawn upon and used. The carpenter is exercising agency in the physical realm, which enhances the physiological structures needed to do it better. The very process of changing the physical environment changes the carpenter’s physical self.

At the social level, we are continually re-formed by our social experiences, by roles we find ourselves playing and the changing relationships we form. In time, from an early age, we learn to discriminate and discern things that are important in our social lives. In social interactions, we use cultural objects such as language, starting from the recognition of gesture, facial expressions, important sounds, smells and tastes to the final build-up of what Searle (1992: 194) calls the 'background' against which we operate. Through developing social competence and capacity, we make changes to the social and cultural structures in which we find ourselves. Children's manoeuvrings to manipulate social interactions demonstrate this process clearly. Through social experiences and interactions, people develop social, personal, embodied properties, capacities that empower them to enhance their social agency. Such learned social capacities, which allow the reading and evaluation of situations and acting accordingly, are embodied, because repeated social experiences make them a property of the individual, a toolkit to call upon when needed.

In the symbolic realm, our linguistic capacity, the development of larger vocabularies in new languages and learning signification systems, such as mathematics, music or coding, all add to our personal embodied properties in terms of culture. Language, and technologies such as writing, can exteriorise thoughts and concepts, and share them with others (see Steigler et al., 1998). We can use our capacities in this area to control others. We are all influenced by a myriad of extrinsic value judgements, concepts and phrases, which can be internalised. The ability to construct and interpret narratives that make changes, or persuade others to make changes, to the physical, social or symbolic environment, has become important to our survival.

It follows, then, that human beings have the potential to make changes to those physical, social and symbolic or cultural structures in which they find themselves. In doing this, they actually change themselves, enhancing their own personal embodied properties (see Archer, 2003). Learning could usefully be described as the changes in any human's personal embodied properties which occur as they make changes to the structures affecting them. Important questions arise for any learning system. What personal embodied properties do learners gain, and how are they developed? How do external structures affect learners? In other words, how do these operate in different circumstances to give rise to emergent powers, enhancing the learner's agency? What possibilities arise for pedagogic projects? How do learners and their teachers choose which structures to change (morphogenesis) and which

structures to leave intact (morphostasis) (see Archer, 1998a; 1998b)?<sup>2</sup> As people exert their developing agency, and make decisions about morphogenesis, they are confronted with questions about how best to conduct themselves, what their values are, and why. Consequently, we now need to turn our attention to ethics.

## Approaches to ethical issues

There are various ways to think about ethics. First, there are deontological approaches, or rule-based ethics, as envisaged by Kant (1964),<sup>3</sup> Nagel (1987)<sup>4</sup> and Rawls (1999),<sup>5</sup> where actions are evaluated in terms of the degree to which they fulfil a duty or contain a quality of ‘goodness’. This is an ‘ethics based on the notion of a duty, or what is right, or rights’ (Blackburn, 2005: 94). Here, perspectives on morality originate in external authorities who decide what is good or bad; for example, rules set by religious authorities. Another version of this type of moral compass takes the view that society is obviously run by good and responsible people, and so whatever is considered by those in power to be good should set the standard for all. Yet another example of rule-based positions invites us to adopt ideas of morality from the actions of admired celebrities or trendsetters.

Second, there are consequentialist approaches to ethics (Bentham, 1948).<sup>6</sup> Here, the ethical nature of an action depends upon its consequences. Blackburn (2005: 94) describes this as ‘the view that the value of an action derives entirely from the value of its consequences’. In this approach, mass statistical surveys may play a part in determining the best results for the greatest number of people. Acceptance of this approach can exert the subtle pressure to conform to the norms of society, and to behave in the way that other people are behaving. Another assumption is that the metrics used in empiricist evaluations are equally relevant to

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2 For a more detailed discussion of these processes, see Sharar (2016).

3 Kant’s deontological philosophy stemmed from his belief that human beings possess the ability to reason and understand universal moral laws that are applicable in all situations.

4 Nagel argued that the direction of deontological reasons is against the fact that you do something specific, and not against the fact that it is happening.

5 Rawls is a deontologist ethical theorist. His book, *A Theory of Justice*, establishes that a system of wealth redistribution ought to be created such that it abides by a specific set of moral rules (Rawls, 1999).

6 Bentham’s views are most closely aligned with act utilitarianism. This basic form of consequentialism holds an action as ethical if and only if it produces more beneficial/pleasure-causing outcomes than negative/pain-causing ones.

different people. Sometimes, consequentialist approaches to ethics overlap with and influence deontological approaches, only, this time, the external authority can be envisaged as being those who control the metrics by which learning systems are steered. Here, the best outcomes for the greatest number is given as a reason for adopting one or other teaching protocol. An example of this is the results of global testing regimes such as PISA<sup>7</sup> being used to justify particular modernisations of education systems to serve economic, and not pedagogic, aims.

Neither deontological nor consequentialist approaches examine the effects of actions on the actors themselves. Decisions about what should be done are dependent upon factors external to the actors and their activity. Either a higher authority of some kind makes the decision as to what is good, or the consequences of each action are evaluated in terms of what is the greater good for the greatest number of people. It is a third approach to ethics, namely a teleological perspective aiming for a particular goal, which evaluates the quality and ethical nature of someone's actions in relation to how they themselves are changed as a result. In other words, it is an approach to ethics based upon an internal principle of change within our human existence. Actors, envisaged as rational beings, on trajectories aligned with their needs for nourishment, growth, movement and rest, as well as intellectual needs, such as the need to think and learn, determine their ultimate aims (Johnson, 2008). Hegel and Marx understood morality as something that changes with time and context, and which develops towards some goal. For example, some Hegelian views portray morality in terms of a society's move towards greater and new types of freedoms for oppressed people as society develops different means of production, which open up new possibilities to free people from various constraining structures (see Hegel, 1896). Marx (1976) developed this notion further, with the idea that, as the means of production become more advanced, they open up possibilities to meet the basic needs of more sections of society. This, in turn, changes the structures that constrain people's lives and opens up more choices. After all, it is only when one has the ability to choose that one can make 'good' or 'bad' choices. For Charles Taylor (1985), the ability to choose is fundamental to being human, and man (*sic*) is a self-evaluating being.

As we have seen, humans have internal potentials aligned with their needs and, in the course of their activities in the physical and social world, they can actualise such potentials. This process develops their ability to

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7 Programme for International Student Assessment.

act judiciously in various and changing circumstances. In terms of pedagogy, it is not whether to teach in this or that manner, but how to become a teacher who can know how to act, and to act well, in different situations, that counts. It is virtuous activity which leads to developing virtues and a state of happiness, or eudaemonia, within any practice. In other words, you have to live your ethical values if you want to develop them. Similarly, engagement in virtuous activities connected with learning helps students to develop the capacity to learn further – if you want to be able to do something well, you have to start to do it. This apparent contradiction is fundamentally linked with the changes that take place in the actor or agent themselves as they act to change their physical, social or cultural environments, and thus to further their own aims. If learners' actions are divorced from, or even detrimental to, their own particular physical, social, cultural or intellectual needs, then learning will still take place, but it may be a very different learning from that envisaged by their teachers.

To illustrate, consider a hypothetical school science lesson about photosynthesis. Let us imagine that there were severe consequences for speaking out of turn or moving. The children copy the lesson from the board, and recite and repeatedly write down the photosynthesis equation, and learn to reproduce it by rote and to answer simple examination questions about it. The physical restraint of students' bodies, the reproduction of the symbols, and the recognition of when to place these on the examination paper are undoubtedly abilities. They will help to pass a narrow type of examination, but they do little to equip the child to appreciate photosynthesis in the garden, the village or the forest where it is going on, or to adapt the circumstances for plant growth in the fields when the climate changes. Perhaps all the child will learn is the importance of sitting still for long hours. Muscles will adapt to sedentary restraint, and the process of writing will develop useful strength in fingers and hands. Most of all, the child may accept that learning is fundamentally about facts chosen for them, and that the process is somewhat painful. Any protest will be instantly met with disciplinary punishment. The child learns to conform to hierarchical social structures, in other words, to know its place. Activities which contradict the specific nature of children, and are out of kilter with their trajectory as humans and as learners, are not going to develop the level of critical understanding that is needed for a human society to thrive in changing circumstances: 'Humans, like the members of all other species have a specific nature, and that nature is such that they have certain aims and goals. They move by nature towards a specific telos. The good is defined in terms of their specific characteristics' (MacIntyre,

2007: 148). This specific nature of any learner stems from their being human, and thus having human needs; from their being learners, which role brings with it a series of other needs to fulfil; from their ability to access information as required; and from their ability to consult and work with more knowledgeable others in a social environment conducive and not destructive to developing the necessary capacities. Furthermore, it stems from the age of the learners, their prior experiences and understanding, and the particular phenomena or general subjects being learned. All these are relevant. For a teacher to develop the capacity to skilfully analyse the ontology of learners, to understand their history and environment, and to identify learners' specific characteristics in context is a starting point. The disposition to become better at identifying these, and to create a suitable curriculum, is a virtue that teachers need to develop.

What teachers actually end up doing habitually, on a daily basis, can profoundly affect them, and their students, and shape their pedagogical practices. Similarly, it is what learners end up doing habitually that shapes the virtues they develop. In previous work (Sharar, 2016), and above, I have suggested that people acting in the physical world necessarily change their own bodies and give themselves emergent physical properties. A workout in the gym develops properties in muscles, giving them the emergent power of more strength if needed. Social interactions help develop our social understanding of situations and hence our ability to make changes to social structures around us. Similarly, cultural and linguistic interactions such as learning a new language or new cultural capital allow us to operate within this area too. This is how humans not only develop new embodied properties, but also learn how to draw upon their increased powers, using them judiciously in different contexts and to different extents as appropriate. Habitual activities play a part in this process, and they can both develop and suppress these powers, with corresponding increases or decreases in a person's capacity for agential action. As an example of this third approach to ethical questions, the next section of the chapter will elaborate upon Aristotle's virtue ethics, and will consider virtues in more detail.

## What you do is what you become: striving towards a goal

For Aristotle, natural entities, including living things, contain an internal principle of change which moves them towards what is intrinsically good for them (Johnson, 2008). The human soul has what Aristotle called

potentialities, or faculties to meet its needs for nourishment, growth, movement and rest, as well as for perception and intellect. These he called its 'nutritive, perceptive, desiderative, locomotive and intellective' faculties (Aristotle, 1986, *De Anima* Book II: 414a41). In much the same way as critical realism conceptualises the world as having a stratified ontology, Aristotle postulates a stratification within the human soul. Exercise of human faculties, at biological, social and intellectual levels, involves actualising inherent potentials at each level. These potentials, or faculties, are possessed as part of the ontology of humans as rational animals.

In critical realist terms, Bhaskar calls such an emergence of agency in living things 'synchronic emergent causal powers materialism'. According to him, we can: 'credit intentional embodied agency with distinct (emergent) causal powers from the biological matter out of which agents were formed, on which they are capable of reacting (and must, precisely as materially embodied causally efficacious agents, do so, if they are to act at all)' (Bhaskar, 1998: 601). Such a striving, or teleological movement of actualising emergent causal powers, is agential action, and it is evident at physiological, social and cultural levels of human existence. Aristotle claims that exercising these faculties over time develops the virtues which are associated with the different parts of what he called the soul: 'Virtue too, is divided into classes in accordance with this differentiation of the soul. Some virtues are called intellectual and others moral; wisdom and understanding and prudence are intellectual, liberality and temperance are moral virtues' (Aristotle, 1955, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I: 1103a4). According to MacIntyre (2007: 52), Aristotle's teleology means that ethical activity involves actualising our human possibilities: 'Within that teleological scheme there is a fundamental contrast between man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realised-his-essential-nature. Ethics is the science which is to enable men to understand how they make the transition from the former state to the latter.' Critical realists differentiate between the 'actual' powers of humans at any one time and the 'real' properties of humans, which include the potential powers which could be developed under the right circumstances (Bhaskar, 2010). It is through actualising such potential powers over time that people learn to use them judiciously, hence developing the associated virtues. Humans have personal properties or capacities (Archer, 2003), which have the potential to give rise to emergent powers in favourable circumstances. Such potentials allow us to actualise emergent powers and, in the course of doing this, people change their actual capacity to act further.

Aristotle illustrated the point that humans have potentialities as well as actualised powers in the following way:

Again, of all those faculties with which nature endows us we first acquire the potentialities, and only later effect their actualization. (This is evident in the case of the senses. It was not from repeated acts of seeing or hearing that we acquired the senses but the other way round: we had these senses before we used them; we did not acquire them as the result of using them). (Aristotle, 1955, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book II: 1103a28–31)

But unlike the senses, virtues develop through use. Aristotle considered the virtues of *justice* and *temperance* to be two examples of those powers which we develop and learn to use by exercising them:

But the virtues we do acquire by first exercising them, just as happens in the arts. Anything that we have to learn to do we learn by the actual doing of it: people become builders by building and instrumentalists by playing instruments. Similarly we become just by performing just acts, temperate by performing temperate ones, brave by performing brave ones. (Aristotle, 1955, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book II: 1103a31–1103b-3)

It is the habitual practising of these powers to carry out virtuous acts, such as being just or courageous, which builds virtues. The virtue of courage, when possessed, means not only to be brave, but also to know how to be brave at the right time and place, and to the correct degree in different circumstances. Such understanding is developed over time, perhaps over an entire lifetime.

For Aristotle, the overall aim for man (*sic*) is happiness regardless of the whims of fortune, and this can only be obtained through developing virtues, because living a virtuous life is in itself happiness: 'It is virtuous activities that determine our happiness, and the opposite kind that produce the opposite effect' (Aristotle, 1955, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I: 1100b10). But what are virtues? According to Aristotle, they are not emotions and they are not capacities, and yet they are related to both of these. Aristotle distinguished between feelings, faculties and dispositions, and concluded that virtues are the latter. An example of this is that all humans have the capacity or faculty to feel anger. The way we are disposed to feel anger could be either a virtue or a vice depending on whether it tends towards the right amount of anger in the appropriate circumstances, or whether it tends towards excessive or insufficient anger for the precise context. A virtuous person would be able to judge just how much and when, where and to what degree they should feel and exhibit

anger. To gain the right disposition, one would have to experience the exercise of the virtues over time in different circumstances. Doing this, and doing it correctly, would develop the correct disposition or virtue.

Aristotle (1955, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book II: 1106a12) suggested that: ‘So if virtues are neither feelings nor faculties it remains that they are dispositions.’ The circumstances in which one might be angry are highly contextual. When is it appropriate to get very angry, and when is it necessary to keep calm? It is developing the disposition to ‘get it right’ in any particular case which is virtuous. So Aristotelian virtues are the dispositions to exercise the correct capacities in the correct contexts and to the correct extent. The more a person practises these virtues, the more the virtues develop. Applying a virtues-based approach to what is ‘excellence’ in teaching opens up a view of the complexity and richness involved in pedagogic interactions. It allows us to take account of the different contexts in which a teacher has to apply the many qualities needed at different times and to different degrees, all of which vary with the particular physical, social and cultural situations in which they work.

## Virtues and their nature

Not only are virtues dispositions, but they also have to be fixed and permanent dispositions undertaken as a matter of choice by a person who knows what they are about. Aristotle explained this further:

But virtuous acts are not done in a just or temperate way merely because they have a certain quality, but only if the agent also acts in a certain state, that is, (1) if he knows what he is doing, (2) if he chooses it, and chooses it for its own sake, and (3) if he does it from a fixed and permanent disposition. (Aristotle, 1955, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book IV: 1105a 26–1105b)

Virtues are chosen for their own sake, and they cannot be acts imposed upon people by compulsion. One aspect of humans’ natural flourishing, as rational animals, is the ability to use reason to set goals for themselves. They are capable of envisaging goals, defining steps to follow, and committing themselves to action. Actions can be undertaken both voluntarily and involuntarily. The extent of human agency is a complex issue, with various gradations of compliance where people may choose to act even when compelled. Aristotle discussed the question of how to decide if agents are acting voluntarily or not in more detail and depth

than there is room for in this chapter (see Aristotle, 1955, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book III Section I: 1109b–1111b), but there are limits to how someone can act virtuously under compulsion.

Aristotelian virtues are dispositions which involve a *telos* to realise humans' intrinsic potential – they are developed over time, in particular specific contexts, and they are pursued as a matter of choice. To be able to live the good or eudaemonic life, the path taken, and hence the practices engaged in, are in keeping with a person's nature as a rational animal. It does not follow that engaging in a practice, such as teaching, will automatically develop virtues. It can also develop vices. Choices are always made about the practices in which we engage. People might do what they are told, or they might only partially comply. Nevertheless, the practices in which we end up engaging can be decisive in whether we develop virtues or vices. Aristotle cites people learning music and artisans involved in crafts to make this point:

Again, the causes or means that bring about any form of excellence are the same as those that destroy it, and similarly with art; for it is as a result of playing the harp that people become good and bad harpists. The same principle applies to builders and all other craftsmen. Men will become good builders as a result of building well, and bad ones as a result of building badly. Otherwise there would be no need of anyone to teach them: they would all be born either good or bad. Now this holds good also of the virtues. It is the way that we behave in our dealings with other people that makes us just or unjust, and the way that we behave in the face of danger, accustoming ourselves to be timid or confident, that makes us brave or cowardly. (Aristotle, 1955, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book II, 1103b: 8–17)

According to Aristotle, simply being involved in a practice will not necessarily bring about improvement. Building badly would create a bad builder. It is not enough to teach one's discipline in particular contexts, it is important to do judicious things within teaching, many times, to develop the virtues that will enable us to make the correct choices in each circumstance. Doing the wrong thing repeatedly can actually damage a teacher's ability to act wisely in new contexts. In this chapter, it is claimed that the effect of neoliberal, metric-based governance of teaching is encouraging those very practices that develop bad teaching. The effect of such prescriptions on the experiences, and hence on the daily practices, of the students also militates against students choosing activities knowingly, of their own volition, and developing ethical dispositions. The next section examines the process in more detail.

## The virtues and pedagogy

What does it mean to develop virtues during the process of living our lives, and following our preoccupations and projects? The first stage is to envisage the steps within any practice undertaken, and to trust that the next stage on the trajectory towards this goal will become clearer. This is not as straightforward as it might seem. To be virtuous, in Aristotelian terms, is in keeping with, and a part of, the ability to flourish. This contrasts with Kant's perspective. Kant (1964: 65) saw virtue as the struggle against inclinations and needs, and in accordance with duty: 'we will put before ourselves the concept of duty, which contains that of a good will, though under certain subjective limitations and hindrances, which, however, far from concealing it and making it unrecognizable, rather elevate it by contrast and let it shine forth all the more brightly'. Such deontological approaches also appear in calls for self-sacrifice for some greater good. Similarly, utilitarian perspectives that measure 'good' as the greatest benefit for the greatest number call for giving up our own flourishing for the sake of others. After all, is not the social contract about the giving up of our sovereignty for the sake of the benefits (Locke, 2003; Rousseau, 1998) that come from living in a society? These ideas are familiar. We are accustomed to accepting that our personal projects, built upon deeply held values, might have to be given up for a greater good. So, when similar demands appear in the idea that in judging teaching, lecturers and teachers should defer to the university's or school's preoccupation with high scores using empiricist metrics (Frankham, 2017), often under the justification that without such high scores, the school, department, module or programme will not be viable, or that colleagues may lose their jobs, they are plausible and powerful. It is on this very point that teachers in higher education can be persuaded to lose control of pedagogical decisions, and find themselves uncritically following prescriptions under managerial pressures; pressures which direct practices in ways detrimental to richer pedagogical endeavours, and often detrimental to students' intellectual development (Burrows, 2012). MacIntyre (2007) claims that one of the 'central moral fictions of our age' is the 'peculiarly managerial fiction embodied in the claim to possess systematic effectiveness in controlling certain aspects of social reality'. And he goes on to point out that effectiveness is not 'a morally neutral value'; rather, it is 'inseparable from a mode of human existence in which the contrivance of means is in central part the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behaviour' (MacIntyre, 2007: 74–5). Within, or in spite of, such manipulative frameworks, the agent, whether teacher or student, has to negotiate a path

towards pedagogic aims or learning. The correct formulation of such a path will result in developing various virtues in line with her, or his, internal trajectory as a human, as a professional and as a learner. Sometimes such choices lead to the transformation of the framework.

Aristotle claimed, in the *Eudaemonian Ethics*, that: 'It is the correctness of the end of the purposive choice of which virtue is the cause' (cited in MacIntyre, 2007: 149). For teachers, an essential ability is learning how to set such ends correctly. Yet, this very basic task is taken away from faculty members when decisions about evaluating 'teaching excellence' are taken over by managers with an eye to market considerations, and are monitored against vague frameworks of 'teaching excellence'. The goal is decided and a trajectory set with aims which, in their preoccupation with markets, money and metrics, are often far from the actual pedagogical needs of the students within specific disciplines and contexts. Lecturers and teachers engage in repeated activity on a regular basis, but are they developing virtues or vices?

Shore and Wright (1999: 560) have documented this process, pointing out that new categories of 'experts' appear, who:

First design new types of 'expert knowledge' that provided the classifications for the new normative grid. Second, they advised on the design of institutional procedures. Third, they staffed and presided over the new regulatory mechanisms and systems, and judged adherence to or deviance from them. Fourth, they had a redemptive role insofar as they made their expert knowledge available to individuals who wished to engage in the process of self-improvement in order to modify their conduct according to the desired norms.

Requiring people to perform activities which set them on a slightly different trajectory to their original pedagogical goals can manipulate them to shift those goals. Enforcement of the latest version of prescriptive 'teaching excellence' metrics makes faculty members accommodate aims other than meeting the learning needs of their students, the development of disciplinary aims and, indeed, their own physical, social and cultural needs. Whether one agrees or not with the new prescriptions is irrelevant, one has to comply anyway, and the very act of compliance begins to develop different qualities such as 'minding one's back' or working to entertain students. Developing such qualities requires the cultivation of very different skills or potentials, ones that encapsulate what Shore and Wright (1999) have called the marketised and marketising self. Under these conditions, working to the metric can lead to habitual action justified by the belief that there is no alternative (TINA). Such TINA formations are

dangerous in their ability to suppress normal pedagogical interactions. Similarly, requiring that students spend long hours sitting still silently while waiting for instructions, or demanding passive, uncritical acceptance of prescriptive protocols for arbitrary performances, prevents students from engaging in the act of finding out and working to change structures to improve their own physical, social and cultural environments.

## What is a learning system?

To pass on the current state of knowledge that any society has acquired to the next generation is crucial if that society is to survive:

Society exists through a process of transmission quite as much as biological life. This transmission occurs by means of communication of habits of doing, thinking, and feeling from the older to the younger. Without this communication of ideals, hopes, expectations, standards, opinions, from those members of society who are passing out of the group life to those who are coming into it, social life could not survive. (Dewey, 1916: 3)

How this is done is as varied as there are cultural systems, languages and ways of life. The future generation has, within a relatively short time, first to attain all the skills, understandings and capacities of their parents and grandparents, and second to apply these to the changed situation in which they find themselves. According to Dewey, the fact that a society changes is inevitable, and the survival of that society depends on the plasticity and adaptability of the people that constitute it. It is their ability to adapt the existing physical, social and cultural structures in order to survive in a changing world, in other words, it is their agency, which is crucial. Values change all the time as developments in technology make new perspectives accessible. The habits and practices of the people who make up any society change with changes in the ways in which they obtain the necessities of life, and with changes in the ways in which social structures are organised: 'there is the necessity that these immature members ... be initiated into the interests, purposes, information, skill and practices of the mature members: otherwise the group will cease its characteristic life' (Dewey, 1916: 7). Any system by which knowledge moves from one generation to another is a learning system. Elements of these systems in society may be informal, hidden from view, or even parts of the real learning system, and yet may still be actualised.

The 'characteristic life' of a group changes, inevitably refreshing what is ethically acceptable. In many countries, the reality of brutal slavery or apartheid, or the intrigues and oppression used to obtain raw materials and goods that facilitate everyday life for the inhabitants, were once hidden. Now the real cost in human misery and suffering inherent in the production of even trivial commodities are laid bare for anyone who cares to use the internet. This causes some hitherto widely accepted values to be contested, and it exposes them to deep critical analysis, particularly by young people. In the UK, there have been widespread protests by schoolchildren about racism and climate change. In the main, this process is happening outside formal educational systems, although at times, such as during the Iraq war, it spilled into the classroom, with children walking out of lessons.

Similar discontents surround the treatment of women in a gendered society. Changes to physical structures, such as the availability of effective contraception allowing women to earn their own living, have meant that marrying a suitable earner is now no longer the only life option for young women. Gendered social relations, and the gendering processes that facilitated these, are being contested and opposed openly. It is now acceptable for a child to question why their mathematics teacher needs to know their gender. Both the Me Too and the Black Lives Matter movements, as well as the developments around climate change and Extinction Rebellion, have had reverberating effects upon the way in which certain values are thought about, particularly, but not exclusively, by young people – a process troubling to some who have hitherto not questioned them. Far from being a cancellation of lauded cultures, or the rewriting of history, this is the result of reworked social roles and relationships at global and national levels. The perspectives of the hitherto marginalised are being revealed and reconsidered. However, although some social and cultural structures may have changed, many physical structures remain.

The promotion of misogynist and racist ideas is widespread, even if such ideologies are more easily refuted and restricted, and often need to be held in secret. There is still a very material and lucrative industry parasitic on pornographic social media (Dines, 2010) and, although society's values may appear, on the surface, to be changing, there is not necessarily a corresponding cessation of these physical structures, giving rise to, for example, the gender pay gap (UNESCO, 2015). There are still racist and misogynist murders, and discriminatory practices and structural processes. Many of those who profited from the slave trade remain highly influential in the UK to this day (Hall, 2020). The values that accompanied past imperialist adventures are no longer universally

accepted. Neither is it clear that the contestation over control of the media, and hence over which knowledge is available to all, will be settled in favour of freedom of information, rather than in favour of those who benefit most by controlling the news media. All this gives rise to interesting and shifting landscapes in the ethical lives of many societies.

Formal schools in the conventional Western sense are only a part of the system by which children become acculturated into their societies and acquire the knowledge that their elders have developed. There are myriad additional processes of apprenticeships and learning going on beyond, and in spite of, any organised school system. In a vivid illustration of the grim reality of the hidden aspects of learning systems, Dines (2010) argues that the main source of sex education in society is now the internet. Even if we were to restrict our lens to examine only the formal school system in any society, we find that there are many unintentional processes at work. Often, these interactions work in tandem with intended processes, and enhance the planned outcomes; much more often, they work against them, giving rise to an extensive hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968). Dewey (1938) elaborated on the need to distinguish between the formal and the informal curriculum.

Many unexplored spaces for reflexive agency still exist, if people were to break away from the dogma that there is no alternative to the situations in which they find themselves. (For some examples of teacher-led morphogenesis, see Sharar, 2016.) Many cultures and civilisations, in the past, have developed, upheld and fought for very different social values to be passed down to future generations, values that stem from the everyday lifestyles, traditions and practices of the community. Graeber and Wengrow (2021) have given voice to sophisticated philosophical and social critiques by those who experienced the European imperialist adventures at first hand. They point to the first peoples of Canada, Australia, America and the Middle East who met the European colonialists, and who expressed sophisticated critiques of the views and values of the latter. Overall, the values of the European imperialists, whose own societies were steeped in hierarchical relationships of power and domination, were often considered to be distorted and problematic. The Europeans could not be respected, because they showed a lack of critical perspective, and their behaviour was seen to be distorted by the need to obey their superiors and religious leaders. Ironically, it is these very virtues – the ability to take critical perspectives, and to resist the pressures from hierarchical social relationships – that are currently being eroded in global learning systems today by regimes of performativity and marketisation.

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## Part Two

# Meso-concepts

In this part of the book, the chapter authors focus on a series of strong normative evaluations (see Taylor, 1998). In [Chapter 8](#), David Scott examines some strong normative evaluations concerning categories and orders in the world: training, education, assessment, woman and probability. In [Chapter 9](#), Jon Nixon discusses the concept of friendship, and, in particular, the enduring friendship that persisted throughout their lifetimes of Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher.

Praxis is not just action, for this would render the concept as meaningless insofar as everything we do in the world would be a praxis. It comprises a thought becoming in some way an action. As with all thoughts or thinking, a praxis is embedded in histories, archaeologies and genealogies of that thought or concept, and what that thought or set of thoughts allows or disallows. Praxis as a concept has four elements: practice on practice, practice on thought, practice on ourselves, and practice unfolding from thought. The five praxes that we examine in this part of the book are: being critical (Alex Moore with David Scott in [Chapter 10](#)), an ecological approach to learning, higher education and the university (Ronald Barnett in [Chapter 11](#)), a feminist pedagogy (Sandra Leaton Gray in [Chapter 12](#)), pedagogy as a concept and as a practice (David Scott in [Chapter 13](#)) and thingful learning in an object-oriented pedagogy (Søren Bengtsen in [Chapter 14](#)).

The recognition of a conceptual domain of time-oriented change in social phenomena means that generative mechanisms exist that underlie the occurrence of learning events (see David Scott and Bushra Sharar in [Chapter 15](#)). These generative mechanisms may be resistive, oppositional, adversarial and the like, and they comprise a state of affairs which is in opposition to another state of affairs. There are a variety of such mechanisms or apparatuses: counter-conductings, emancipations, decolonisations, immanent critiques, textual readings, decategorisations, absentings, praxis(ings), trans-framings, reflections and textualisations. These are examples of practical reasoning where the intention is to change a state of affairs in the world, although most mechanisms or apparatuses are morphostatic. We start this part of the book with a chapter on four

important concepts and conceptual framings, that is, concepts and conceptual framings that are important to the concept and practice of learning: training/education, assessment, woman and probability.

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## 8

# Learning categories and orders: training, education, assessment, woman and probability

David Scott

A critical realist theory is an argument for the existence of an independent external world, which is independent of our minds, and which we can only know, and know what it is – its contents – (if we can know it at all), through some form of conceptual framing or worldview (a *Weltanschauung*) (see [Chapter 1](#)). And what follows from this is that our conceptual frameworks, perspectives on the world, and descriptive languages interpenetrate what is being called reality to such an extent that it is impossible to know what an unschematised world could be (see [Putnam, 1990](#)). We can never know the thing-in-itself (*Ding an Sich*),<sup>1</sup> including those striations and divisions that structure the world and that are not just in individual minds or language structures. The real dilemma is how do we characterise a world that we can only know through prior categories and divisions and, consequently, how do we subsequently describe the world-to-mind and mind-to-world set of relations. Here is a triadic rendition of it. There are three sites of knowledge: the world and its contents, the mediating arena between the contents of the world and objects in the mind where learning takes place, and the contents of the mind that allow us to make judgements, perceive the world and reflect on what we have perceived (see [Chapter 1](#)). In differentiating between these three sites, I am suggesting that the relationship between knowledge and the world is mediated or conceptualised, and that, as a consequence, we

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1 See Kant (1958).

can only see the world, and we can only operate in the world, through a particular lens or discursively, for example, through a particular configuration of all the relevant objects, object-relations, and institutional and configurational objects (including other people) that constitute learning as a concept and as a practice. The training/educative binary is an example of these configurational objects.

## Training/educative binaries

In order to make sense of the training and education binary, and to resolve the difficulties of operating through this binary, one way of proceeding is to suggest that one of these concepts is superior to the other. So, we can say for this or that reason, or this or that set of reasons, that an educative model gives a better account of learning than a training model. We have to be careful here about how we conceptualise these terms for two reasons. The first is that the account we give may not capture the subtleties of each concept at work in the world, and the second is that to treat them as oppositional constructs may distort the reasonable argument that some aspects of learning are better captured by the term *training* and other aspects by the term *education*.<sup>2</sup>

How are these two concepts used in the lifeworld? An answer to this question requires an examination of the possibilities of each concept, and this is complicated by the fact that we are dealing here with two concepts that can potentially enter into a number of different types of relationships. A first relationship-type is that one of these concepts is correct and the other is incorrect; a second relationship-type is that one of these concepts is a more adequate account of learning than the other; and a third relationship-type is that one of these concepts is a better descriptor of some aspects of education, and the other is a better descriptor of all the other aspects of education that are not covered by our first concept. If we want to sustain the first of these types, then we have to show<sup>3</sup> in relation to those criteria we might want to use for determining truthful knowledge (epistemic adequacy, coherence, rationality and referentiality)<sup>4</sup> that our understandings of these terms meet the demands of these criteria. We

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2 There are some politicians, policymakers and academics who want to treat all learning activities as training activities, and abandon altogether those characteristics and attributes that have been associated with education. This would seem to be a matter of operative power.

3 This form of words denotes a logical relationship.

4 For a fuller discussion of these criteria for true knowledge, see Scott (2021).

also have to provide an argument that can show that it is possible to say that one is better than the other. With regards to the second type, we have to show, in addition to meeting the criteria for truthful knowledge, that the issue is not that of making true or false judgements about the two concepts, but of one being a better and more useful descriptor than the other. With regards to the third type, there is a qualitative difference between the two concepts insofar as our concern is now with the concept of learning itself, and that some activities that can come under this concept can be better delivered through a training model, and others can be better delivered through an education model. What this requires is an inclusive model of learning, and a way of showing that training and education models can subsume all those activities that we want to attach to the notion of learning. We are dealing here with object-relations and particular relationships between concepts, as they play out in a life or a collection of lives, individually or collectively (see [Chapter 1](#)).

A first conceptualisation of the relationship between training and education is that the object of learning and the arrangement of its characteristics at a particular moment in time are the prime determining factors in whether a training or educative model should be used. This argument only makes sense if we accept that training and education constitute two different forms of learning – they have distinctive approaches to learning and how learners experience activities associated with learning.

A second conceptualisation of the relationship between training and education suggests that the determining factor in distinguishing between a training pedagogy and an educative pedagogy is the function or purpose of the learning activity. This requires the identification of a set of differences between the two concepts, and then the initiation of a process whereby different functions or purposes are matched to these different models of training and education. So, for example, a teacher is trained to become a teacher because what they are required to learn is a particular set of behaviours and mechanistic actions. In this scenario, there are no reflective, self-reflective, meta-cognitive, meditative and imaginative elements that we might want to describe as educative.

A third conceptualisation of this relationship refers to the philosophy of learning that enframes it, such as behaviourism, phenomenology, cognitivism, constructivism or materialism. Each of these learning philosophies has different characteristics. For example, behaviourists focus on how human beings behave and not on what is in their minds, and thus they argue that if these terms are used as descriptors, then they should be replaced by behavioural terms or, at least, those mind-dependent constructs should be translated into behavioural descriptors.

This has implications for whether we should adopt a training or an educative model, although a decision such as this also depends on which characteristics are given to a notion of training and which characteristics are given to a notion of education.

A fourth conceptualisation of this relationship refers to the values we hold. Such values are embedded in a worldview, with the characteristics of a worldview being: a person's dynamic capacities and affordances, and the environments within which they are situated; relations between a person and their environments; accounts of understanding, learning and change; and inferences from these premises and conceptualisations about representations, media for representations, learning environments and practical actions. A training model has a particular view of these characteristics and capacities, as does an educative model, and they are significantly different.

A final set of possible relations between the two concepts focuses on their manifestations as power stratagems. Training and educative models have different types of object-relations attached to them, such as one-to-one or one-to-many, strong or weak, vertical or horizontal, corrosive or developmental, endogenous or exogenous, convergent or divergent, framing or reframing, and categorising or recategorising. There are different trajectories of power (in history) and, consequently, different power arrangements can be associated with the use of each concept. Educative models give greater amounts of agential freedom to the learner, and these are sometimes denied to learners in training models. Consequently, training models are generally more popular among state bureaucrats and policymakers, and the reasons for this are clear – a training model acts to reinforce the strength of the hierarchical arrangement of goods and people, and it provides a greater degree of control over its workforce.<sup>5</sup> In addition, each of these concepts has a different history. Fundamentally, the various valuations given to each of these concepts change over time. Many of the activities that were previously thought of as educative are now thought of as embracing a training ethos.

Another concept that has an important role to play in any learning theory is a notion of assessment.

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5 And, indeed, over other workforces. An example of this would be the institution in which I work, where teachers are trained for their roles in schools.

## Assessment

The most important change to the UK education system over the last forty years (and to many other education systems around the world) was achieved through devaluations and revaluations of the currency of education for schools, teachers and students. Examination and test results (such as the Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA], and the phonics screening test in Year 1 of the English education system) have been prioritised. And this happened because successive UK governments drove through an assessment-led reform process, with consequences for curriculum, governance, notions of quality, learning and accountability. Assessment, as a concept, is plurisemantic, powerful, semantically contested, networked, interactive and dynamic.

Assessments may be more or less integrated with the teaching programmes that students follow. Some kinds of assessment (for example, IQ tests) are not designed to measure students' learning (or the results of a teaching programme), in which case they are often associated with measures of qualities supposedly inherent in the learner, such as intelligence.<sup>6</sup> Assessment which is placed at the integrated end of the continuum is likely to be more informal than formal, more formative than summative, process- rather than product-oriented, and to be frequent or continuous rather than taking place at one time point, usually at the end of the programme of study.

Summative assessments reflect the performance of a student at the end of a given period of instruction. These examinations are designed to assess students' competences, acquired over an extended period of time, in a range of subjects. They are held under standardised conditions (relating to room arrangements, the use of specific formats, invigilation processes and the like) and under time constraints. Consequently, they are complicit in a particular type of knowledge (about the individual and about the system) being produced, and not a more truthful or reliable form of knowledge. Formative modes of assessment are most closely associated with the process of teaching itself, but it is the results of these summative tests that are most visible and public. Formative dimensions of assessment focus on providing information for the teacher about the way learners complete particular tasks. The information provided is intended to feed directly into the teaching process, so the focus is on how

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6 In most educational discourses, the notion of intelligence is reified.

students tackle these tasks, and how they go about solving problems that they are given. The assessment environment does not need to be standardised during formative processes of assessment.

Summative assessment is concerned with determining whether students have mastered particular elements of the curriculum. They aim to be reliable and valid; and homogeneity of context is considered to be important, so that comparability becomes possible, although, as suggested above, this is a misleading account of what is going on. A summative assessment marks some point in the otherwise potentially organic teaching and learning process at which it is decided to stop teaching and give one's full attention to assessment, invoking a particular type of assessment. The stage at which it is most important to carry out this kind of assessment is often determined by factors other than those arising from learning goals, such as predetermined times in the school year, or a requirement to report to other parties.

All the possible uses of assessment reflect decisions that have been made, and will be made in the future, about who and what is assessed, for what reason and in what way, and they all reflect a particular social context – this is the key to understanding what assessment is and what it can do. The underlying principle, then, when we are dealing with assessment practices (and inevitable with the concept of assessment) is that educational assessment should be understood as a social construct that allows the concept to be understood and used in a variety of ways. In addition, although it is possible to trace policy issues in assessment back to the earliest days of public examinations, when, for example, the Emperor Napoleon in France recognised the powerful contribution that nationally controlled assessment procedures could play in cementing national unity, in recent years, the importance of assessment as a policy tool has grown enormously as governments and education systems have increasingly come to realise its powerful potential as a mechanism of social control.

Assessment serves a wide range of purposes, ranging from the most commonplace of exchanges in a cafe, for example, to school reports and high-stakes examinations, from individual job interviews to national monitoring. What unites all of these is the sense in which assessment, first and foremost, is a proxy for determining the quality of something or someone. It therefore operates as a mechanism for placing that person or object in a particular hierarchy of values: this person is better than this other person with regards to a particular range of skills, and this school is better than this other school because its students have graduated with better examination results. Closely associated with this is the issue of legitimacy. The results of any particular assessment device have to be

trusted by the public, if the consequences are to be acceptable. Sadly, assessment issues are generally treated as technical matters, as focusing on improving the methodologies used to assess people, rather than on the purposes or consequences of using such approaches.

What this means, in effect, is that on occasions clear contradictions and tensions between common assessment practices emerge. An example of this in the UK is the incompatibility between an increasingly test-driven educational and curricular culture and an explicit commitment to lifelong learning processes. Another example might be the tension between summative and formative purposes in an assessment process. This learning agenda, exemplified by the notion of formative assessment, is at odds with the use of punitive high-stakes testing, which has as its principal purpose raising standards, although the notion of a standard is in itself a contested issue.

An important aspect of assessment is its increasing internationalisation, exemplified by large-scale cross-national assessment studies, such as PISA. What it is possible to argue is that there is now a world trade in educational policies, especially in relation to assessment issues. This policy borrowing, the take-up of apparently good ideas developed in one country by another, has further strengthened the grip of traditional assessment assumptions. Despite the significant evidence concerning flaws in international comparisons of student achievement, the power of the simple messages that can be and are derived from them about relative national success in the world has served significantly to reinforce the prevailing domination of established forms of educational assessment.

The assessment revolution has been one of scale, range and significance; a revolution that has elevated quantitative data, the raw material of most public assessments, as the principal mechanism for delivering transparency, accountability and predictability. The collection of data has become in itself a major instrument of social control, whether this is at the level of the individual, the institution or, indeed, the whole system, such as in England (and in the devolved systems of the UK). Assessment, then, can be described as a concept – as having a number of qualities or components – and as a category – as being different from other conceptual framings.

## Concepts and categories

Elucidating the categories of our conceptual system or language can be understood in a holistic sense, so we are talking here about all the concepts in our three systems of meaning (the antecedents of concepts,

their relations to other relevant concepts, and the way the concepts are used in the lifeworld), or about the language we are using to express our thoughts (its semantic, grammatical and functional elements), and the relations between them and other objects in the world. These categories then refer to how the world, learning systems and minds are constituted.<sup>7</sup> My concern is with how these categories, which are real, function in the world. As soon as we attempt as onlookers to explain the contents of the world, we are necessarily concerned with objects (that in some way are different from other objects), object-relations (that are different from other object-relations), object-configurations (that are different from other object-configurations) and people (who have different characteristics and qualities from other people and other objects). We may disapprove of the consequences of having some of these categorisations in the world, but we can hardly deny their existence, although we may want to change them (materially, as well as discursively), and thus their powers and consequences.

Categories or categorisations have a history, and they can be genealogised. Aristotle (1963), writing in the mid-fourth century BCE in Athens, identified the ten highest categories of things: substance (for example, a woman or a horse), quantity (for example, a kilometre in length), quality (for example, red or soft), relation (for example, fraction or proportion), place (for example, geography or space), date (for example, in the past or future), posture (for example, lying down or sitting), state (for example, awake or dreaming), action (for example, swimming or walking) or passion (for example, experiencing pain or pleasure). Immanuel Kant developed a notion of cognitions of phenomena, thus locating these categories firmly in the mind, as minded objects. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant (1958) constructed his categories from an understanding of judgements that we make. He started from a framework of Aristotelian logic,<sup>8</sup> and he endorsed Aristotle's four basic or foundational categories: quantity, quality, relation and modality, with each of these basic categories being expressed, or finding its meaning, in a number of subcategories. In relation to quantity, for example, a judgement might be universal, particular or singular, and, with regards to relations, it might be categorical, hypothetical or disjunctive. Using this methodology, Kant then deduced (logically

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7 The issue of whether these categorisations are natural or pre-set or given is an issue of some importance, and it requires a fuller treatment than I can give here.

8 This refers to the traditional system of logic expounded by Aristotle and developed in the Middle Ages, concerned principally with deductive reasoning as expressed in syllogisms.

inferred) his twelve pure concepts of understanding, divided into four classes of three: unity (quantity), plurality (quantity), totality (quantity), reality (quality), negation (quality), limitation (quality), inherence and subsistence (relation), causality and dependence (relation), reciprocity (relation), possibility (modality), existence (modality) and necessity (modality). These are conceptual structures, and not just divisions in things in themselves.

There are two obvious lacunae here: the first is about supersession, and the second is about time. Categories can have a supersessional form. There are three types: simple supersessions, sequencing supersessions and hierarchical supersessions. In the first case, a category gives way to another category, where this is demonstrably superior to the original category in some or every way – it has superior qualities. These states of affairs may be material (although most categories are exclusively discursive), and they can refer to different types of categories in the world (discursive, material, relational, configurational and personal). With sequencing supersessions, a category is part of a sequence of other categories, so that each part of this sequence is superior to the one directly below it in the sequence because it has superior qualities. There is no requirement for it to be of a particular length as a sequence. With hierarchical supersessions, a category is part of a sequence of events that culminates in an end-state that is complete, insofar as it cannot lead to a higher state of being. This form therefore suggests that all the other events are inferior or incomplete for a variety of reasons. (For a fuller account of supersessional qualities, see [Chapter 3](#).)

Categories and concepts are also time-oriented or temporally related. Learning as a concept and as a practice has a temporal dimension. If we understand it as a process – a first event produces or leads to a second event, which in turn leads to a third event – then we are identifying three time points, each of these time points being arranged sequentially. Henri Bergson (1999) suggested that the present is not in time, but should be understood as *presencing*; what he meant by this was that any talk of the present, and indeed any *presencing* activity, is an intrusive act in the ceaseless flow of time.<sup>9</sup> In addition, self-reflection or taking part in an internal conversation or in an examination of the self (especially in a religious sense) all refer to past occurrences – they are never acts of reflection about present occurrences. The whole present is never available

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9 Heidegger (1962) borrowed from Bergson the notion of *presencing*, although his claim was that he used it in an entirely original way.

for self-examination (see [Scott, 2021](#)). The key, then, to understanding what categories and concepts are lies with the types of relations that exist between objects, object-relations, object-configurations and persons in their formation and reformation, and as they play out or have played out in antecedent, contemporaneous and applied semantic settings.

More modern category systems have been developed on the back of Aristotelian and Kantian schemas. For example, Ingvar Johansson ([1989](#)) developed a realist theory of categories. He identified ten principal types: space-time, state of affairs, quality (substance or property), external relation, grounded relation, inertia, spontaneity, tendency, intentionality (real, presentational, representational) and fictionality. Johansson arrived at his categories through a method of successive abstraction, that is, from a particular shade of a colour, to a primary colour, to a notion of colour itself and, finally, to a category of quality. His method was essentially supersessional. Reinhardt Grossman ([1983](#)) identified eight primary categories: individuals, properties, relations, classes, structures, quantifiers, facts and negations, seemingly operating at only one level of understanding.

All these categories and category systems seem to be conceptual, and they are intended to be exhaustive. Susan Carey ([2009](#)), working from a psychological perspective, argues from a variety of studies of infant human beings and primates that there are a number of core concepts that are innate, that fit certain classes of entity in the world, and that are shared by prelinguistic human infants, adults and primates. These include the sortal dimension of an object (and thus of difference), and would also include quality, quantity, intentionality and causation. However, there is no necessity in the idea that a sortal object is innate or prelinguistic, as we can see with the category of woman.

## Woman as a category

An important binary that has had real effects in the space of learning is the male/female binary, an oppositional coupling of two word-objects, implying a relationship between these two descriptive terms, both of which can be problematised. In addition, the strength, type and probative force of this relationship is central to any conception we might have of what a woman is, that is, how we conceptualise and can conceptualise a woman. We therefore need to examine, in the first instance, the characteristics of a woman, as a concept and as a conceptual frame. Although women have been actively involved throughout the centuries in

making societies, they have been marginalised when it comes to the production of knowledge about societies and social activity. This has implications for how categorical differences are constructed to conceptualise masculinity and femininity, how these key categories function to define the nature of people (women, men and intersex persons), and how they work to attach different valuations to women's, intersex persons' and men's dispositions and capacities. The discursive configurations that I discuss below are not histories, archaeologies or genealogies.<sup>10</sup> They are models of what a woman might be, and they consist of discursive objects, sets of discursive objects, configurations of discursive objects, and discursive and material arrangements of women, predominantly connected by logical relations.

The first model that we need to consider is constituted through a liberal discourse.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis here is on removing barriers to women's participation in public life, and arguing for a more equal share for women in the rights, privileges and opportunities enjoyed by men. This rendition of a woman is founded on the emancipatory impulse of liberalism. Its key elements are a belief in an essential human nature, a commitment to progress and a trust in an abstracted form of rationality (see [Chapter 3](#)). It follows classical liberal notions of freedom, exemplified in the writings of John Stuart Mill (2001).

An alternative perspective is an attempt by women to integrate their approaches into mainstream critical theories such as Marxism,<sup>12</sup> structuralism and post-structuralism. The argument is made that gender inequality derives from capitalist economic and social relations, and that men's domination over women is a by-product of capital's domination of labour. The focus of women's exploitation is ideological (see [Chapter 1](#)), and this can result in episodes of false consciousness among women, including a notion of what a woman is. This form of patriarchy is structural, and resistance to it has taken an intersectional form. The purpose of intersectionality is to develop a single framework for analysing power that encompasses sexism, colonisation, racism, class oppression, heterosexism and other axes of oppression, as they play out in history and society.

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10 See Foucault (1982). Michel Foucault (1982: 77) refused to be categorised as a man: 'my objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects'.

11 Liberal feminists include Mary Astell (1666–1731), Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1799), Harriet Taylor (1807–1858), John Stuart Mill (1806–1873), Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902), and Virginia Woolf (1882–1941).

12 Neo-Marxist feminists include Angela Davis, Raya Dunayevskaya and Claudia Jones.

Other notions of the woman have been developed and, as one of them, traditional feminine values are valorised over traditional male values. Women, working from this viewpoint, accept that their nature is different from men's, and that women excel in relational and nurturing practices. They go on to argue that the characteristics associated with femaleness, such as caring, relatedness and attentiveness, should be privileged over male characteristics, such as rationality, objectivity and disinterestedness. Radical feminists<sup>13</sup> contrastively, shift the focus from equal opportunities to the phallogocentric nature of all systems of representation,<sup>14</sup> and argue that, whenever the two sexes are represented in a single model, the feminine is always collapsed into a universal model represented in masculine terms. Feminists of this type have argued that the general concepts, assumptions and categories of thought have been organised around hierarchies, which, by association, privilege masculinity and devalue femininity.

There are other directions that feminism<sup>15</sup> has taken, with consequences for understanding and being a woman. The first of these is political,<sup>16</sup> so that a woman is understood, first, as having equal status to men in important and powerful positions in society, in the boardroom, in the legislature, in the judiciary, in the armed forces, as top earners and in the media. The argument that this will change politics, business, the enforcement of the law, media opinion and the like to a more consensual, democratic and softer form of governing relations in society has been abandoned, with the impulse now towards a general balance of men and women. The second strand is for women to embrace and participate in libertarian practices.<sup>17</sup> The intent is an equalising of pleasure and liberty between the different sexes.

Another direction that feminism has explored is category subversion. This has taken two forms. The first is through recognising and

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13 See Daly (1992), Flax (1990) and Griffin (2000).

14 Leading figures in what has been called second wave feminism are Shulamith Firestone, Kathie Sarachild, Ti-Grace Atkinson, Carol Hanisch, Roxane Dunbar, Naomi Weisstein and Judith Brown.

15 The concept of feminism is, of course, a discursive configuration, and therefore has properties such as being semantically contested, networked, interactive, powerful and dynamic. Everything I say in this section about the concept of a woman comes from a biological male perspective.

16 All action and thought can be construed as political or value-embedded. Here, we are referring to institutional reform in the first place, and discursive reform in the second.

17 Michel Foucault (1976) in his later work positioned the notion of desire as part of the arrangements particular societies make.

institutionalising different forms of sexuality.<sup>18</sup> What is distinctive about this is the fluid nature of sexuality, with people moving between different sexual identities over time. The second and more powerful response, which feminists are increasingly taking, is to challenge in a fundamental sense the male/female binary category, and the positioning of women within it. This involves a direct challenge to the idea of natural differences between men and women and, in a more fundamental sense, to the whole idea of difference.<sup>19</sup> Crude versions of these different relations are hegemonic in modern societies.

All these varieties of women show how gender relations operate in favour of male domination, and feminism's fundamental purpose is to help effect a redistribution of power towards women. However, the category *woman* is not understood in the same way by everyone, nor is the category of *female* as opposed to *male*. This means that we need to be sensitive to this diversity of women's experience and to the power relations that are present among women, and, this hardly needs saying, to those that are present between and among men, women and intersex persons.

Another important concept in social theory and learning discourses is the notion and practice of probability.

## Probability

One meaning of the concept of probability is that some event in the future is likely to happen regardless of whether a prediction that it is likely to happen or will happen has been made.<sup>20</sup> It therefore embraces a physicalist framing of the world and a sequentialist view of causation. It does not hold to a non-materialist view of the mind, nor to a semantic view of the

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18 These different forms of sexuality are embodied, of course, but they also have a direct relationship with feminism and the various forms that feminism can take. Allosexual, androsexual, asexual, aromatic, autosexual, autoromantic, bicurious, bisexual, biromantic, closeted, coming out, cupiosexual, demisexual, demiromantic, fluid, gay, graysexual, grayromantic, gynosexual, heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian, LGBTQIA, libidist asexual, monosexual, non-libidist asexual, omniseual, pansexual, panromantic, polysexual, pomosexual, queer, questioning, romantic attraction, romantic orientation, sapiosexual, sex-repulsed, skoliosexual, spectrasexual, straight are names for different types of sexuality. A different list would include paraphilic desires, such as towards non-human objects, the suffering or humiliation of oneself or one's partner, children and non-consenting persons. Indeed, one source has listed as many as 549 different paraphilic behaviours (see [Aggrawal, 2008](#)).

19 Difference as a concept, then, is both multi-perspectival and contested.

20 Probability can also be understood in a Wittgensteinian sense (see [Wittgenstein, 1969](#)) as a state of being that we have to live with, a state characterised by a lack of certainty.

relationship between mind and the world and a mediational view of learning. The concept only has credibility in relation to physicalist events in the world, such as in quantum mechanics, where the physical properties of an object are explained at the level of atomic and subatomic particles. In this view of the physical world, energy, momentum, angular momentum and other properties of objects are reduced to quantifiable phenomena, so that a probable judgement and a judgement about the probability of an event occurring at a second time point from the perspective of a present or first time point can be made. In this rendition of the concept of probability, these two types of judgement need to be clearly delineated.

In the first case, a probable judgement refers to the accuracy of the prediction, given that a prediction is about a future event, with the accuracy of the prediction treated here as vague or ill-defined. (It is ill-defined only insofar as one can imagine a greater degree of measurement accuracy.) In the second case, the event that a judgement is being made about (between two time points) is in itself probabilistic or not likely to occur. The theory cannot predict what will happen, not because it is impossible to measure what will happen (the measuring technologies are not and can never be appropriate for this task), but because what is being measured or described has uncertain properties. A notion of quantum entanglement, where the properties of an object are so intertwined that a description of the whole in relation to its parts becomes impossible, is an example of the dilemma faced by these types of theorists. Is this inability to precisely or probably explain a particular entanglement the result of a measurement incapacity, or is it caused by the nature and constitution of the entanglement itself, and how it works?

A second rendition of probability is one that is firmly entrenched in the first of our nexuses of meaning, the antecedent framework (see [Chapters 1](#) and [5](#)). This antecedent network is contentful only insofar as conceptual objects have already passed on their meanings to other meanings and meaning structures, although this does not rule out sets of inferential relations persisting into present and future actions. These inferential relations are multifaceted, and only have semantic contents in their specific applications, such as pluralisings, praxis(ings), negatings, learnings, forcings and so on. Even in the most basic of thought-actions, such as identifying objects as distinct phenomena, we are engaging in inferential processes.

In the mid-fifteenth century, the word *probabilite* was loosely associated in semantic terms with a 'likelihood of being realised, appearance of truth, quality of being probable', derived from the old fourteenth-century French word *probabilité*, and from the Latin word

*probabilitatem*, which some have described as referring to the object's credibility or probability (see *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2001–23: entry on probability). In this antecedent rendition (in a semantic sense) of the word-object, there are three clearly delineated notions being proposed (and perhaps a series of relations between these three sets of meanings): a sense that a prediction about what was likely to happen in the future had a degree of uncertainty about it; a sense that a probable or uncertain judgement is related in some way or another to a truth-construct, or to a set of criteria which are truthful (credibility is being understood here as relating to the truth or otherwise of the discursive object or object-configuration); and a sense that the concept refers to a quality or property of an object or object-relation.

In the early eighteenth century, the term was used to describe, or to seek to describe, the 'frequency with which a proposition ... is found true in the course of experience' (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2001–23: entry on probability). This linkage to frequency is also a linkage with a mathematical precision,<sup>21</sup> as it was understood in empiricist and atomistic terms, with its suggestion that experiential knowledge, contrary to Kant, can be known without any form of mediation. The concept was further integrated into forms of practical knowledge and praxical consequences, such as weather forecasting (as in the forecasts made by the United States Signal Service from 1869) and seismological warnings (as in, Alaska will probably experience a major earthquake in the next ten years). In both these cases, probability is being used to measure (and at the same time give credence to) evidential support relations. The concept of probability also once had the meaning of probity, where it referred to the amount of authority a witness in a legal case could have and was given. This refers to other factors than the relevance of the participant in the prosecuted case, such as the social status of the witness or the position that the witness held in the political order.

Probability as a concept and as a practice, then, has taken on the meaning of frequentist probability, where the probability of a predicted event denotes the relative frequency of occurrence of that event in a series of happenings or outcomes of an experiment (natural or otherwise). This can refer to the tendency of the experiment to lead to a specific and definite outcome. In this case, numbers are assigned to this sense of probability, as an utterance by a person. It is thus a degree of belief.

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21 Precision is itself a concept, and therefore is polysemic, semantically contested, networked, interactive, powerful and dynamic.

Bayesian probability is an example of this (see *De Finetti, 2017*), with the calculation comprising expert knowledge (indicating a notion of prior probability distribution) and experimental data (understood as a likelihood function). Incorporating both prior distributions and likelihood functions results in a probability distribution that is future-oriented and has taken account of everything that is currently known that is relevant to the situation in hand. Bayes's theorem then refers to the probability of an event occurring in relation to the workings of all the other relevant events and occurrences, and is expressed mathematically.

The concept of probability has taken on a linguistic form, which has semantic consequences, as a modal object. In the English language, the principal modal verbs are: can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, would and must.<sup>22</sup> Verbs which share some but not all of the characteristics of these modal verbs are sometimes known as quasi-modals, semi-modals or pseudo-modals. These verbs do not inflect, do not add endings in the third person singular and are not used as infinitives, participles, imperatives or subjunctives. What they do is modify semantically the meaning we can give to other verbs. This modification can take the form of offering a degree of certainty or uncertainty to an utterance which refers to a future event; so, in epistemological terms, we can say that it can rain tomorrow (all the conditions are present or will be present tomorrow – there is a strong possibility that the predicted event will happen), that it could rain tomorrow (all the conditions are present or will be present tomorrow – there is a weak possibility that the predicted event will happen), that it may rain tomorrow (this implies a strong certainty about a predicted event), that it might rain tomorrow (this implies a lesser degree of certainty), that it shall rain tomorrow (this shows a strong intention or assertion about an event that will happen in the future), that it should rain tomorrow (this is a suggestion or piece of advice, and is only used when talking about probable events), that it will rain tomorrow (this suggests that the event that is being predicted has a real possibility of happening), that it would rain tomorrow (this suggests the future event is imagined and not real), and that it must rain tomorrow (this is used to show or indicate that the utterer thinks it is very important or necessary). All these different meanings given to these modal verbs are degrees of probability, importance, certainty and graded belief.

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<sup>22</sup> This utterance and some of the utterances below are enframed in a notion of correct English usage, and all its implications.

There are three conceptions of the notion of probability, and they are in opposition to each other: classical and logical probability, frequency and propensity probability, and subjective/objective epistemic probability. The first of these uses a rule for assigning probabilities: the principle of indifference. If there are many possible outcomes of an event, and there are no good reasons as to why one should occur rather than another, then each outcome is equally likely to happen. This version of probability consists of dividing the number of relevant outcomes by the number of possible outcomes. If there are four aces in a standard pack of cards (and each card is equally likely to be drawn, a very important condition), then our chances of drawing an ace are four fifty-seconds, or one thirteenth. A version, or perhaps refinement, of this method of determining probability is to treat each unit as a structure rather than a state, so that if we toss two coins, there are four possible outcomes: two heads, a head and a tail, a tail and a head, and two tails. However, we can redescribe or retranslate these possible outcomes as structures, so that there are now three possibilities: both heads, both tails, and half-and-half (this involves a prior conceptualisation). This conception of probability has only a weak and reductionist empirical connection.

In the second version of probability, we are concerned with frequencies. We observe a series of events and then work out how many of those events feature a particular element that we are interested in, for example, the number of blue cars on a road, where the event is defined as a passing car from our observational point. We can then work out the probability frequency of blue car events in our total number of events. We might want to say that 25 per cent of the events we observed involved blue cars, and thus there is a 25 per cent chance that in the next event there will be a blue car. This, of course, makes an assumption that the pattern we observed in our first sequence of events will continue into future events. We can follow this line of reasoning so that it includes imaginary, that is time-independent, events, if we think that we know all the factors that contribute to a probable event occurring. This is known as propensity probability, and we can make predictions about it in relation to future events. However, it depends fundamentally on a belief that there is a persistent pattern to events, past, present and future.

A third version of probability focuses on our beliefs and how much confidence we have in them. This involves a notion of how confident we are that events we predict may happen in the future. It is therefore an estimation – we might want to call this an epistemic estimation – of our confidence in future predictions that we want to make. If I only have a 20 per cent certainty that an event that I predict will happen in the future (and 80 per cent certainty that it will not occur), then I can say that it

probably will not happen. There are, of course, debates and disputes about these three notions of probability and how they fit with everyday or common conceptions of probability – how, in other words, we actually use the notion of probability.<sup>23</sup> Probability is, then, a social category.<sup>24</sup>

## Social categories

There are two fundamental difficulties with developing category systems and categorisations. The first is that we are assuming, in our quest to understand how the world, learning and the mind are structured, that there are differentiated objects in the world. The second difficulty is methodological, and amounts to a scepticism that we can ever know what these categories are. The assumption at the beginning of this chapter that there are ontological (and, in particular, linguistic) distinctions between educative practices and training practices is difficult to justify, as are their conceptualisations. The key, then, to understanding difference semantically, and to determining this endogenously and exogenously in particular discursive dyads (for example, educative/training), lies with the designation and positioning of the two terms in the first place.

Categories, orderings and boundaries between objects, object-relations and object-configurations are central elements in any social theory, and especially in a philosophy of dispositional or conceptual realism. One argument in favour of differences between natural and social kinds is that social kinds depend on our attitudes towards them, whereas natural kinds do not. Attitude-dependent kinds are called by Searle (1995) institutional kinds, although this does not and cannot differentiate between discursive, material, relational, configurational and person-oriented kinds, with institutional kinds usually thought of as configurational (discursive or material).<sup>25</sup> Another argument is that

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23 In opinion polling, two different but connected notions of probability are used: the first of these is a sampling probability, where the uncertain relation is from the sample to the population, and the second of these refers to the degree of uncertainty that one can make about the recorded result. So, the result is expressed as within certain parameters.

24 Everything I say here is about the concept of probability and not about its pedagogy. Although the latter is an important element, there is not the space here to develop the notion further.

25 In his book, *The Construction of Social Reality*, John Searle (1995) suggests that many institutional categories are coextensive with what I have been describing here as social categories. For Searle, natural entities are associated with social entities and properties through status functions. A status function specifies the relationship between a social entity (a status) and a natural entity. Furthermore, statuses are only real because they have been collectively endorsed by a community.

natural kinds are non-conceptually based, whereas social kinds are concept-dependent. A third argument is that natural kinds are enframed in physicalist meta-theories, whereas social kinds are enframed by intentionality, reasons and reason-giving strategies (see [Chapter 3](#)).

The most important issue is the existence, status and nature of social entities, using this last term to indicate objects which are different from other objects. We can perhaps concentrate on three category-types: social facts (for example, the fact or fact(ing)<sup>26</sup> of money), social kinds (for example, the existence of races and genders) and social groups (for example, the teaching staff at a school). Social facts such as the issuing of money bonds by the UK Bank of England or the US Federal Reserve System enable those who have acquired them to purchase certain types of goods, and these facts are understood as being in the world and about the world, rather than being representational entities in the mind (although they do have symbolic and discursive meanings attached to them). There is a view that social facts are only credible by virtue of a sense of collective intentionality or minded actions involving a number of people. An important question is whether social kinds are natural kinds. However, what the four examples in this chapter show, or so I am claiming, is that categories, such as the male/female dyad, are not natural or definitive divisions, but constructed categorisations (formed and reformed by human beings in society) that enable certain types of political and social arrangements. An extreme version of this argument is that there are no meaningful natural divisions or differences between social objects – similarities and differences between objects can only be attributed to the functioning of the relevant concepts, and not to any natural processes. Any activity in and about the world is dependent on a human being or human beings acting in the world, and this applies as much to concept-development as it does to other worldly practices.

Another key question about social kinds concerns their existence or reality; in particular, the existence or reality of particular social kinds, such as genders (for example, women, men and intersex persons), methodologies (for example, anti-racism) and races (for example, configurations such as white or Caucasian, black or African, yellow or Asian, and red or North American – referred to in Anemone [2011], although he does not endorse racial categories in this sense). Some theorists have argued that races are biological kinds, and that biological

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<sup>26</sup> The word 'facting', a derivation from a 'fact', is being used here to indicate an activity where a person gives credence to a truth-carrying proposition by referring to it as natural, and therefore beyond dispute or discussion.

races exist. Others argue that races are biological kinds, but that biological races do not exist. Social constructivists, with reference to race, argue that races exist but are discursive and social in nature. Race taxonomists encountered certain problems, and this led to a belief that race as a category was socially constructed, and not just through the naming process itself or through biology. However, some biologists persisted in their belief in racial categories, arguing that reproductive isolation during human evolution, or through social practices such as miscegenation, had led to the existence of different groups of human beings sharing physical phenotypes, and even to clusters of genetic material. In addition, some argued for the formation of socially constructed and differentiated racial categories.

The third major difficulty, then, is about the extent or plurality of these concepts or categories, even if an acknowledgement is made that they exist and are real. The solution to this problem is to designate them as sets of their members, or even to designate them as identical to Platonic idealisations in other worlds, times or places. A further solution is to suggest that social groupings are *sui generis* entities, and that they are structured wholes. These structured wholes or configurations are organised through the object relations that connect their parts.

An argument in favour of social (and natural) categories and divisions being real is that they can be shown to be real kinds because they have a relatively stable set of projectable<sup>27</sup> properties. What this means is that social categories such as gender,<sup>28</sup> learning, dis-ability<sup>29</sup> or intelligence<sup>30</sup> persist over time. Asserting the persistence of these properties does not rule out becomings, struggles, institutionalising, coalescing and dissolutions of these properties and the forms they take. A particular hegemonic relation between the conceptual configurations of training and education may be superseded by a different configuration of these elements, or, indeed, the concepts of education and training, and the

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27 What this means is that the properties of these objects project into the future.

28 See Sandra Leaton Gray and David Scott (2023).

29 See Roy Bhaskar and Berth Danermark (2006).

30 A semantic theory is one in which the specifications of meanings are determined in a symbolic system. A first notion of intelligence is where a person is considered to have a set of dispositions that other people do not have. A second notion of intelligence is where a person is adept at certain activities in the world. A third notion of intelligence is a collection of information of political or military importance. A fourth notion of intelligence is a categorisation of people into higher and lower kinds. A fifth notion of intelligence is construed as having no content of its own – it is used to denigrate and distinguish between people. A sixth notion of intelligence has the sense of being either artificial or human. A seventh notion has a specifically ethical meaning, and an eighth notion of intelligence acts as a marker of difference between people. A notion of intelligence can also be used to indicate ultimate superiority.

relations between them, may become redundant altogether. A final point that I want to make is that the social categories that I have discussed in this chapter (training/educative configurations, the concepts of assessment and woman, and the notion of probability) have different properties from what we might want to call bio-behavioural kinds, and their features cannot be exclusively explicated within a biological vocabulary.<sup>31</sup>

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31 A vocabulary, and, in particular, a biological vocabulary, is a linguistic configuration, with boundaries between itself and other vocabularies.



# Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher: learning together

Jon Nixon

## Introduction

David Scott, in his *On Learning: A general theory of objects and object-relations*, sets out an epistemologically grounded notion of what he terms the ‘discursive configurations’ of learning: ‘[t]he theory of learning that I have outlined in this book has to be set against current and other discourses – discursive configurations – of learning’ (Scott, 2021: 288). In this chapter, I explore how the discursive is configured within a particular intimate and deeply intellectual relationship, and how that relationship extended the parameters of learning, not only for the major protagonists of the story – Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher – but for those to whom they reached out through their writing, teaching, and extensive professional networks and enduring bonds of friendship and collegiality.

My underlying assumption is that learning is deeply rooted in our social relationships. Facts, ideas, and even opinions, may be abstracted from those relationships, but they are nevertheless embedded within them. The objectivity of our analyses, theorisings and interpretations is located within an intersubjective realm of social relationality. Clearly, this is a contentious claim, but I take heart from the fact that both Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas – whose differences on this matter were significant<sup>1</sup>

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1 See Habermas’s (2000) review of Gadamer’s (2004) *Truth and Method* for insights into the differences and commonalities between these two thinkers.

– agreed that within liberal democratic societies, truth can only be verified through a communicative process of agreement-making based on a mutual acknowledgement of underlying disagreements: established, that is, through a process of mutual understanding and multilateral compromise.

A secondary assumption is that human stories are important in understanding what learning is, and how, through a process of lifelong learning, we learn from each other and with one another. (Learning is not just a series of learning events, and Arendt’s broader perspective on education cannot be judged solely on her two occasional pieces devoted specifically to education and schooling – one at least of which was, as she herself acknowledged, misguided.)<sup>2</sup> Stories of individual lives embedded within their social and historical contexts introduce complexity, nuance, and the betwixt and between of human affairs into the theoretical mix. The relationship between Hannah Arendt and Heinrich Blücher provides a historically located and well-documented instance of mutual learning and mutual self-fulfilment through a complex process of learning together.

In what Gideon Rachman (2022) has termed ‘the age of the strongmen’ – an age in which the grand narratives of democratic leadership focus on the cult of personality, contempt for the rule of law, nostalgic nationalism and increasing authoritarianism – the little narratives of how big ideas emerge from men and women learning together, talking together, thinking together and doing democracy together have particular significance.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Arendt wrote only two essays explicitly devoted to education: in ‘The crisis in education’ (first published in 1961), which focused on falling educational standards within the US, she argued against what we might now term ‘progressive’ or ‘informal’ educational methods and procedures; in ‘Reflections on Little Rock’ (first published in 1959), she argued against ‘bussing’ policies, whereby black American students were transported by public transport from largely segregated areas in order to ensure integrated schooling (Arendt, 1977: 173–96; 2003: 193–213). Her argument regarding the latter was that children should not be used as pawns in political struggles for which adults should take responsibility. It should also be noted that in response to ‘Reflections on Little Rock’, Ralph Ellison, the famous black writer, accused Arendt of failing to understand the plight of the Southern blacks. Arendt subsequently wrote to him acknowledging her error (Young-Bruehl, 1982: 316). More recently, Danielle S. Allen and Kathryn T. Gines have both written detailed critiques of the argument put forward in ‘Reflections on Little Rock’, pointing out Arendt’s factual errors, and highlighting what they see as her misguided opinions (Allen, 2004; Gines, 2014), while Richard J. Bernstein (a sympathetic interpreter of Arendt’s work) has acknowledged that Arendt ‘failed to understand the disastrous consequences of hostile political, economic, and social discrimination of Blacks in America’ (Bernstein, 2018: 50).

3 Rachman includes Putin (Russia), Erdogan (Turkey), Xi Jinping (China), Modi (India), Orbán (Hungary), Johnson (UK), Trump (USA), Duterte (Philippines), Netanyahu (Israel) and Bolsonaro (Brazil) in his category of ‘strongmen’: male leaders (all male) who have used democratic procedures to undermine and erode democracy. See also the contributions from leading thinkers and political analysts included in Geislerberger (2017).

## Falling into step

Blücher was born into a working-class family in Berlin on 29 January 1899. After primary school, he continued his education in Reichenbach/Oberlausitz, a town in eastern Saxony situated in the south-east corner of Germany, close to the Polish border to the east and the Czech border to the south. In 1917, he was drafted into the army for active service before having graduated and, in the same year, joined the Spartacus League (or Spartakusbund), a Marxist revolutionary movement founded in Germany in 1915 by Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Clara Zetkin and others. Following the German Revolution of 1918, it formally renamed itself the Communist Party of Germany, and the following year it became a member of the Communist International (or Third International). In 1928, Blücher left the Communist Party and joined the anti-Stalinist Communist Party opposition, which was established that year, initially to modify, and later to replace, the mainstream Communist Party. After Hitler rose to power in 1933, the Communist Party opposition existed only as an illegal and underground organisation.

By his early thirties, Blücher had become a seasoned political activist: a Marxist and anti-Stalinist at loggerheads with both mainstream communism and the fascism that Germany embraced in 1933. He had also been married twice: briefly to Lieselotte Ostwald, whom – according to Arendt’s biographer – he had married ‘when he was too young to know better and divorced her not long after’; and again in 1932 to Natasha Jefroikyn, a Lithuanian who gained German citizenship by her marriage to Blücher ([Young-Bruehl, 1982: 133](#)). In addition, between 1918 and 1920, he had sought to continue his education by taking evening courses at the University of Berlin, and throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, he had collaborated with Robert Gilbert, musician and fellow member of the Spartacus League, on cabaret shows, operettas and various film projects. He was, in short, an imposing – and opposing – figure: twice married, an ex-soldier, politically engaged, and active within the leftist counterculture that flourished in Berlin in the years between the First and Second World Wars.

Blücher’s second marriage – to Natasha Jefroikyn – was again short lived. After their marriage, they lived together only intermittently and by 1935, the marriage had, according to the later divorce papers, irretrievably broken down. This was perhaps inevitable, in that Blücher had, the year after their marriage, escaped to Prague – a move no doubt necessitated by Hitler’s rise to power and Blücher’s membership of an organisation that

had been designated as illegal under the Nazi regime (Young-Bruehl, 1982: 133). There is no available evidence as to why Jefroikyn did not accompany Blücher on his escape from Germany to Prague in 1933, and then to Paris, where he arrived in 1934. All we know is that he was at considerable risk as a political dissident, and that she had gained German citizenship. The rest is open to surmise. What is clear is that Blücher's divorce from Jefroikyn was ratified in 1938, three years after their marriage had broken down, and two years after he had met Arendt.

The recorded correspondence between Arendt and Blücher commenced in August 1936 – she was 29, he was 37. It was, as Lotte Kohler in her introduction to her edition of the letters remarked, characterised by 'natural intimacy and unrestrained frankness'. Arendt and Blücher corresponded in German – their mother tongue – in an idiom that Kohler describes as one of 'unconditional partnership' (Kohler, 2000: ix). During her first post-Second World War trip to Europe as Director of Jewish Cultural Reconstruction – almost ten years into their marriage, and shortly after the death of her mother – Arendt is clearly reliant on Blücher for emotional security and continuity. The trip must have stirred up complex memories and emotions, involving as it did a reunion with Jaspers (her doctoral supervisor and continuing mentor and friend), with Heidegger (her ex-lover) and with Heidegger's wife (who was openly anti-Semitic).<sup>4</sup>

In a letter sent from Heidelberg during that trip, and dated early 1950, Arendt hurled at Blücher: 'Have you really forgotten what we agreed, that you would write once a week?' She continued:

I am very upset. I simply can't understand your complete lack of sense about the most primitive human responsibilities and obligations. I cannot believe that you have so little imagination that you can't imagine how I feel, careering about the world like a car wheel that has come off, without a single connection to home or to anything I can rely on. I write all this to you as bitterly and, if you will, as embittered as it looks to me, and as it has to look to me. (Kohler, 2000: 123)

In his prompt response to Arendt's troubled letter, Blücher reminded her of his own physical condition:

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4 The story told in this chapter is heavily reliant on the painstaking scholarship of Lotte Kohler. Throughout, I have referenced letters written by Arendt and Blücher to Kohler's (2000) edition of those letters – as I have Blücher's 'A lecture from the Common Course', which she includes as an appendix to that volume.

Now that luckily a second, smaller stone, and some more kidney sludge, have wormed their way out, I can confess to you how hellish the whole thing has been ... That you are very upset makes me upset too, particularly as I am supposed to have caused it. (Kohler, 2000: 123)

He also reminded Arendt that her friend Hilde Frankel – the mistress of the Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich, who had fled Germany and was about to publish his highly influential *The Courage to Be* (Tillich, 1952) – was dying of cancer, and provided a lengthy update on her mental and physical state. Characteristically, Blücher met Arendt's implied criticism head-on, while at the same time providing reassurance. He reassured her that he was maintaining their home, and fulfilling their duties towards their friends, while at the same time managing his own health problems: 'Don't be unsettled and unhappy', he concluded the letter, 'Your home here is standing, waiting for you' (Kohler, 2000: 126).

At the heart of their relationship was the security that – for both of them, but perhaps in varying degrees – sprang from continuity: the continuity of language through their shared mother tongue; of being and living together in a shared place; and, increasingly, of thinking in harmony with one another through their shared concern with what constitutes 'the political'. Their relationship – including, as it did, the necessary intimacy and privacy associated with marriage – also incorporated the core elements of friendship. Being lovers and being friends is different, but by no means mutually exclusive or even dichotomous. When – as in the case of Arendt and Blücher – thinking becomes a kind of contrapuntal melody within which disagreements become deeply harmonised, then the categories of 'lover', 'husband/wife', 'partner' and 'friend' become increasingly porous and blurred. The common and inescapable experience of learning together while recognising individual differences was the binding element that sustained their lifelong partnership.

How Arendt and Blücher fell into step in their thinking is crucial to an understanding of how learning together interfused their relationship. Falling into step had, in their case, involved a long and risky trek across continents. Blücher's contribution to this ongoing dialogue is more difficult to track because, while he was a great talker and teacher, he was not a writer. He published nothing in his lifetime, and the records that remain are contained within the published letters he wrote to Arendt and the records held of his work within Bard College, USA, where he taught, and where his archive is assiduously maintained. The dialogue he maintained with Arendt was crucial to the development of her thinking, and of their learning together.

## Diverse pathways

During the first ten years of their marriage, Arendt was transforming herself from a philosopher into a political thinker. This transformation was accomplished in large part through the process of producing her 1951 magnum opus, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1975). Her dedication of this book to Blücher was much more than a token gesture. He had been instrumental in her transformation from philosopher to political thinker, through both his continuing discussion of the major themes of the book as it developed and took shape, and through his deep respect for her as a writer, and for what he termed ‘the awkward beauty of true style’ as exemplified in that particular work (Kohler, 2000: 109).

Throughout that same period, Blücher was travelling in the opposite direction intellectually: learning how to transform himself from a political thinker and activist into a philosopher. Each was gathering past resources and taking stock of them within their current context, so that Arendt’s philosophical orientation to politics and Blücher’s political orientation towards philosophy were carried forward into their future work: she as a writer on the international stage, and he as an increasingly influential teacher of art history and philosophy at the New School for Social Research (from 1950 to 1958) and as Professor of Philosophy at Bard College (from 1952 to 1968). Both institutions were located in New York, which, notwithstanding Arendt’s frequent visits to Europe, became the place they made their home.

By the early 1950s, their intellectual trajectories had interconnected. But their respective transitions had not been easy. While Arendt had been writing *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, he had been struggling to reposition himself intellectually with a view to gaining employment in New York. This was no easy task, and it took its toll emotionally. Writing to Arendt in 1950, during her first trip back to post-war Europe, he expressed his own sense of frustration and alienation:

Nothing works out, in spite of many interviews. You know, I think all these people find me highly suspect. The most restrained things I say frighten them ... and they look down on me, even though I intimidate them. They have a bad conscience, and I seem to reinforce it by my mere presence ... I’m cutting myself to pieces in the process. (Kohler, 2000: 144)

The ‘bad conscience’ is no doubt a reference to the pervasive influence of McCarthyism – at its height between 1950 and 1956 – and to Blücher’s

vulnerability, given the extreme anti-communist mood of the times and his own political backstory. At the time, he also lacked US citizenship, which he gained a year after Arendt in August 1952.

If Blücher had been a sympathetic sounding board for Arendt towards politics, she was in turn a sounding board for him in his attempt to come to terms with the Western philosophical tradition. In 1948, in the letter in which he had responded to her news of her mother's death, he wrote: 'Something strange has happened to me: a sudden and crazed attack or, better still, an assault of productivity. Dutiful and unsuspecting ... And then came the "brainstorm"' (Kohler, 2000: 93). Later in the letter, he explained the significance of the brainstorm:

In two days and a night I saw in clear progression the new conceptual whole, the consolidation of my objective. And now, finally, my doubts are resolved and I realize that I have found new territory. I know now the continent that I discovered. Now I want to set foot on it. Or, first, to chart it. (Kohler, 2000: 95)

What he had grasped as a kind of *gestalt* ('the new conceptual whole'), he could now comprehend in terms of its constituent parts, and how those parts were causally related ('in clear progression'). He had, in short, perceived a history of thought, implicit in which was an argument about the nature of traditional Western philosophy: 'Kant was a servant, Nietzsche a master, Marx a despot, and Kierkegaard a slave. I am a *prospective citizen*' (Kohler, 2000: 95). This was the new territory – of learning and discovery – that Blücher set himself to chart.

He charted it through his work at the New School for Social Research and, crucially, through his leadership and development of what he termed 'the Common Course' that he instigated and developed as part of the liberal arts curriculum at Bard College. Writing to Arendt in 1952, while she was visiting Europe on a Guggenheim Fellowship, Blücher explained how he had been contracted to 'prepare a group of teachers for the project, to work out the plan'. He then went on to outline the nature of the course he hoped to develop:

It will be a philosophical course for *freshmen*, which will aim to teach them the meaning of *ultimate questions*, at the same time introducing them naturally to their various field of study. I want to turn it into a completely modern educational plan, which will take over from *progressive education*. (Kohler, 2000: 214, his italics)

Originally contracted to advise on the planning of the course, to prepare those who would be teaching on it, and to undertake some initial teaching during the first semester, Blücher in fact led it, and taught on it for the next 15 years. He thereby contributed significantly to the development of a liberal arts education tradition which remains a significant – if increasingly challenged – element within the North American higher education system (see [Nussbaum, 1997](#)).

In his final lecture for the Common Course, delivered in 1967 (recorded on tape, transcribed and then edited by Blücher), he summarised what the course had tried to achieve, and outlined what he saw as two opposing approaches to philosophy. He characterised the first approach as ‘no more than the general theory by which all present knowledge is organized, brought into a unity whose inherent tyranny, that is, the tyranny inherent in every system, will eventually bring it to fall’ ([Kohler, 2000](#): 393). We become acquainted with such systems, he argued, chiefly through ideologies which employ ‘high words’ to justify their ‘inherent tyranny’.

The second approach – the one he had tried to develop through the Common Course – sought to ‘cleanse the political atmosphere from the pollution of all these high words’ ([Kohler, 2000](#): 394). It involves an endless process of critical thinking and lifelong learning, whereby what we think we know is constantly questioned, and what we do not know is constantly acknowledged: ‘philosophy means nothing more than man’s readiness to live in the presence of what he does not know’ ([Kohler, 2000](#): 393).

Blücher became increasingly dissatisfied with didactic modes of teaching that are premised on the notion of the student as the passive recipient of knowledge. He did not rely on pre-prepared lecture notes, but on his capacity to think through a topic as he addressed his students, and he sought to engage them in discussion, and to learn with them. He modelled through his own discursive style of teaching what it was to be a philosopher: the idea was to *do* philosophy – to show it in action – rather than to present it as a *fait accompli*.

His own model here was Socrates, whose name he constantly evoked in the 1967 lecture. For Blücher, the Socratic legacy was not so much a method or style of philosophising as a democratic and democratising impulse: if to philosophise is to live in the presence of what we do not know, then we can all be philosophers; and, if we can all be philosophers, then philosophy is a deeply democratic enterprise. ‘Socrates’, as Blücher put it, ‘is not the philosopher-king but the philosopher-citizen, telling everybody that every man can be

a philosophizing being and that one can be a good citizen – that is, a political being – without being also a philosopher’ (Kohler, 2000: 398).<sup>5</sup>

Just as Arendt had become a thinker through her writing, so Blücher had become a thinker through his interaction with his students and his attempt to engage them in dialogue. And both had become fellow learners. Shortly after starting his work at the New School for Social Research, New York – and four years after the brainstorm – he wrote to Arendt regarding his course on art history and philosophy, and his sense of fulfilment at having engaged and motivated his students: ‘Big and long discussions. They won’t let go of me ... They form small discussion groups. They go to art exhibits together, and then tell me how much better they are able to appreciate works of art. Friendships blossom’ (Kohler, 2000: 197).

## A common world

Implicit in Blücher’s evolving ideas regarding the nature of philosophy and its relation to politics was a notion of human beings as necessarily relational, interconnective and interdependent. We are, as he put it in his 1967 lecture:

inveterate and incurable relationists, born to relate everything to everything in various manners and different forms. This is the most human of man’s passions, and a wonderful thing, perhaps even the source of all our creative abilities. The danger is only that once man believes he has found an absolute – the kosmos, or Being, or God – he can no longer stop relating everything to this One absolute. That is, instead of keeping his system of relations open and hence uncertain, he will invent a closed system where everything is once and for all related to everything else. Isn’t it marvellous? (Kohler, 2000: 392)

The openness of what Blücher here calls the ‘system of relations’ is crucial to Arendt’s and Blücher’s lifelong relationship, within which they shared intimacies, thoughts and ideas, information, worries (often in the earlier

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5 Socrates was a benign third presence in the relationship between Arendt and Blücher. In 1955, when Arendt was visiting Europe to participate in an international conference sponsored by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, Blücher wrote to her in Greece from New York: ‘Keep an eye out for Socrates, I’m sure he’s still lounging about somewhere there, and tell him how he amazes me’ (Kohler, 2000: 274).

days about money), and concerns (increasingly about their health). When they were together, they talked, became absorbed in their separate projects, met friends and acquaintances, and settled into the familiar habits and customs of being together. When they were apart, they corresponded by letter, occasionally spoke on the phone, and maintained a running commentary on the progress, ailments and achievements of their mutual friends in the USA and across Europe. These routines formed the bases of a relationship that was deeply intimate, yet oriented towards their wider circle of friends, acquaintances and professional associates.

During Arendt's various absences from New York, Blücher became a sympathetic listener to those of their friends who were, for whatever reason, passing through difficulties in their personal lives. He was particularly supportive of their mutual friend, Hilde Frankel, the mistress of the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, who felt deeply isolated, given Tillich's intermittent contact with her during the final stages of her illness. Arendt and Frankel had met in Frankfurt around 1930, and they had rediscovered each other in New York during the war years. Theirs was a deep friendship lasting until Frankel's death in 1950. Frankel was, as Eleanor Honig Skoller (1993: 121) puts it, 'endowed with an overwhelming naturalness that was endlessly fascinating to Arendt'. The final stages of her illness coincided with Arendt's first post-war journey back to Europe since her emigration from Germany and her flight from France.

Throughout that period, Blücher kept in close contact with Frankel, providing Arendt with regular updates on her friend's physical and mental state. In early 1950, he wrote to her as she was travelling through Germany:

Hilde is in a bad way ... She is really being tormented. Her pain is so overwhelming that she has to take more and more morphine. And she says that as a result she can only live like an animal ... Most of the time she can't read anymore because she can't take anything in ... I still prevail on her, quietly and insistently, to stay alive. (Kohler, 2000: 125–6)

He continued: 'She is thoroughly convinced that she will never see you again, which I dispute energetically, and I do believe she will live at least another six months. It is horribly sad, darling, to stand by and watch a person die slowly.' He concluded this section of his letter with the thought that 'she is like a dear little child that has come to harm' (Kohler, 2000: 125–6).

In a slightly later letter, Blücher made it clear that he saw this kind of human engagement and obligation as 'the origin of freedom'. While not alluding to Frankel or other specific instances, he clearly had in mind the

vital importance of an expansive – and expanding – relationality that was inclusive of their own relationship, while recognising the wider networks of friendship that they both shared: ‘That we are capable of intuiting ourselves in other human beings and intuiting them in us, to seek and to recognize, and that we are willing to do this – here lies the origin of freedom’ (Kohler, 2000: 131). Freedom, in other words, had its origins in the human capacity for mutuality and reciprocity. It can never be simply *individual* freedom, since the freedom of any individual is dependent upon the freedom of myriad other individuals. Freedom is necessarily *collective*, in its sensitivity and responsiveness to the way in which our freedoms rely on interdependency and mutuality.

This notion of freedom was central to the deeply shared humanism that lay at the heart of their relationship and their sense of being at home together. In the final sentence of the letter in which he had outlined to Arendt what he saw as ‘the origin of freedom’, Blücher explained:

that is why I have established an eternal home here in this world, and not in the supernatural homeland of Zion, right in the middle of this world, with your help and that of friends, so that I too can say: ‘where one or some of you are gathered, there is my home-land, and where you are with me, there is my home’. (Kohler, 2000: 133)

His home, he insisted, was not located in a ‘supernatural’ utopia, but ‘here in this world ... right in the middle of this world’. Insofar as his home was – as he put it – ‘eternal’, it was because of their worldly continuities and interconnections, which at once focused on and radiated out from his relationship with Arendt.

In her letters to Blücher, Arendt was constantly informing their shared worldliness through her sharp observations of places, people and events. On her 1949–50 trip to Europe, she wrote to Blücher with a vivid description of war-torn Berlin:

from Spandau to Neukolln is one big field of rubble; nothing recognisable; only a few people in the streets, like an incredibly spread-out village ... In the Eastern Sector nothing has been rebuilt ... Great unemployment. People grim, dressed worse, starving, still carrying sacks on their back ... Furthermore no one has any money, unbelievable poverty. Everything problematic. (Kohler, 2000: 133–4)

On this trip – her first emotionally gruelling trip back to Europe – she began to place in perspective the extraordinary trajectory of her life up until that

time. She wrote of Europe as a nightmare from which – with Blücher – she had escaped: ‘I think of you and feel as if I have escaped from a nightmare, a nightmare of seeking but finding nothing’ (Kohler, 2000: 134–5). Blücher remained for her – as she remained for him – her ‘home-land’.

Five years later – in early 1955 – as visiting professor in the Department of Political Science at Berkeley, she described for Blücher her first response to San Francisco Bay:

It is as beautiful as a dream. The chain of mountains and hills look a little Japanese ... [A]ctually they are not chains, not a real mountain range, but round hills that seem to grow and curve independently out of each other or out of the plain. I know such landscapes only from Japanese or Chinese painting. (Kohler, 2000: 229)

Towards the end of her teaching stint at Berkeley, she described the giant redwood trees of California:

that was incredible. As if one had always seen woods, but never a tree in its full majesty. A very strange growth pattern, as many trees issue from one root, growing in a circle, and then coming together again at the treetops ... The trunks like weathered rock. (Kohler, 2000: 257)

It was her experience not only of the human world but also of the natural world that Arendt wanted and needed to share with Blücher.

Arendt’s relationship with Blücher was the ‘one root’ without which the branch-like structure was unsustainable. Blücher had neither financial resources nor an international reputation to match that of Arendt; he had no ambition to write for publication or to become a public figure. He intermittently suffered from ill health, and he was averse to travelling by air, even on domestic flights. He was, however, generally acknowledged to be a great teacher in the Socratic tradition. He was an inveterate reader and, by all accounts, a superb conversationalist who delighted in controversy and debate. He was also loyal to the two institutions that had supported him and provided him with employment following his move to New York. Notwithstanding his strange mixture of vulnerability and strength – or perhaps because of it – he was undoubtedly Arendt’s ‘weathered rock’.

Among the papers collected in the Blücher Archive at Bard College is one in which Blücher was formulating a scale of human relationships, and the human capabilities associated with that scale: ‘Accepting the

whole human being from within – love; accepting the whole personality from without – friendship; accepting an independent person – political relationship; accepting an individual as a member of society; accepting strangers as co-workers’ (quoted in [Young-Bruehl, 1982](#): 433). In his relationship with Arendt, he had found the integration of the categories that comprise this schema. Their relationship – over the span of its years – embodied being lovers, friends, political allies and co-workers in their respective fields. Their learning together was inextricably entangled with each of these other categories.

## Deliberation and dialogue

If Blücher insisted on the distinction between two kinds of philosophy, then he was equally insistent on two kinds of politics: the politics of coercion and suppression versus the politics of deliberation and dialogue. Underlying this distinction is a particular view of what constitutes power, and how power relates to politics. Both Arendt and Blücher viewed power as the human capacity for collective action. ‘Power’, as Arendt ([1970](#): 44) put it, ‘corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together’. The ability ‘to act in concert’ makes possible the development of a politics of deliberation and dialogue. Only by distinguishing the notion of ‘power’ from related terms such as ‘strength’, ‘force’, ‘authority’ and ‘violence’ can we begin to identify and define a genuinely democratic politics – a politics, that is, of participation and engagement; or, as Blücher put it, the politics of ‘the philosopher citizen’ ([Kohler, 2000](#): 398).

Arendt’s attempt to clarify and distinguish the notion of power – both conceptually and linguistically – echoed the insistence in Blücher’s own teaching on developing a critical attitude towards words, and the way in which they may be used to mystify and entangle us in coercive ideologies. In his final 1967 lecture for the Common Course, he claimed that he and his colleagues at Bard College had sought to prepare students for the world in which they lived by focusing their critical attention on the relation between language and power. Evoking Socrates – ‘trying to interpret him anew, trying to use him for our own twentieth-century purposes’ – he provided a retrospect on the purpose of the course he had set up 15 years before:

we prepared ourselves for the time we live in, a century that has rightly been called an age of wars and revolution; moreover an age in which almost all words have turned into lies. Words and language are those instruments by which man can create both, lies *and* truth ... [W]ords have become the tools of power. (Kohler, 2000: 391)

It was, he argued, only through the process of becoming ‘examining and critical’ that we can release the collective power implicit in deliberation and dialogue:

Our political system will change only if citizens change ... So, let’s start the old discourse, the discussion again; let’s become examining and critical again, and raise all the old questions again – what is justice? what is truth? ... [T]he precondition for this activity is political freedom as it is for every kind of higher life; this very fact makes us all, or should make us all, philosopher-citizens. (Kohler, 2000: 399)

If democracies are premised on citizenship, and citizenship is premised on a polity that is both ‘examining and critical’, then the practice of philosophising as exemplified in Blücher’s own teaching is fundamental to democratic politics. Put more bluntly – as was Blücher’s custom – philosophising requires what he called ‘gall’: ‘Even if I could talk with all the facts in the world but didn’t have the gall, I would be but a paper sword and a paper shield’ (Kohler, 2000: 86). It was the gall – the sheer bloody-mindedness of speaking truth to self-declared power – that made all the difference between paper swords and shields, and those forged from more enduring material. This is what Blücher had learnt for himself, but also what he and Arendt learnt together.

Throughout his life, Blücher channelled his creative and analytical abilities into his voracious reading, his teaching and other collaborative ventures, and his friendships. The correspondence between Arendt and himself – and much of their conversation when together – was conducted in their shared mother tongue. Maintaining that line of linguistic continuity seems to have been crucial. Without it, neither might have had the courage to speak back to the world within which they found themselves. The correspondence between them was part of a complex process of translation – or mediation – from the relative comfort zone of their first language into the more complicated linguistic terrain of their adopted tongue. Their common language of German provided them with a space within which to flourish. From that space, they were able to move

out into the wider terrain within which, professionally and socially, they communicated and learned to express themselves in their adopted language. Without that space – the space of their love, friendship and mutual learning – the conditions necessary for flourishing would have been severely constrained.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that both Arendt and Blücher were preoccupied with how and why words matter – and, more specifically, with the relation between how words are used and how power is characterised and deployed. As a writer working in a third language – after German and French – Arendt could draft and redraft her texts, but as a lecturer working without a prepared script in a foreign language, Blücher had no such safety net. (PowerPoint, launched in 1990, was not then available as a safety net for lecturers who like to look as if they are doing the kind of thing Blücher was in fact doing.) Blücher's insistence on following his own instincts as a teacher and lecturer no doubt took additional gall. But he may well not have found those inner resources had it not been for the ongoing dialogue with Arendt: their support for one another, their testing ideas against one another, their care for – and, yes, their nagging of – one another. Their willingness and determination to learn together.

## Conclusion

Stories matter because they allow us to focus on the lifelong and relational process of learning: how we learn across our lifespans, and in relation with and to others, and within specific contexts and communities. Arendt and Blücher lived complicated and rich lives – both individually and together – but their mutual learning together reached out to a wide network of friends, colleagues and professional associates. To understand what learning means is to understand how it is embodied in the biographies of lives, and embedded within the relationships and social and political contexts that helped shape those lives – and within which those lives inserted their critical and sometimes oppositional presence.

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# Curriculum knowledge: a critique of the powerful knowledge discourse

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## Introduction

In the context of this book, this chapter examines a powerful hinge concept or conceptual frame, that of criticality. As with all concepts and conceptual framings, criticality has certain properties, such as being semantically contested, networked, interactive, powerful and dynamic. By way of revisiting some key issues regarding curriculum knowledge, this chapter, then, offers a critique of a currently ubiquitous and influential educational discourse – that of ‘powerful knowledge’ – which has become popularised chiefly through the work of the sociologist of education Michael Young and his associates (for example, [Young, 2006](#); [Young and Muller, 2013](#)). A set of related ideas and theoretical assertions, rather than a theory as such, powerful knowledge is a discourse that draws, eclectically and epistemologically, not (as might be anticipated) on Foucault’s work on knowledge and power and its application to the study of education policy ([Ball, 2013](#); [Foucault, 2008](#)), but on aspects of the work of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, and the English sociologist Basil Bernstein. Locating itself philosophically and politically within

'social realism' theory (Young, 2006), it also echoes Denis Lawton's (1975) work on comprehensivisation and the common curriculum, set within powerful narratives of access and inclusion.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, we reject the powerful knowledge discourse, on the grounds of its inadequately argued epistemological underpinnings, as well as its ideological and political orientations, which we see as regressive and in potential contradiction of the inclusive narrative within which it is framed. Although it is not our intention to present a theory of curriculum knowledge ourselves, we tentatively offer, in place of the discourse, an alternative understanding of, and approach to, curriculum knowledge, which we refer to as *powerful learning*. This approach also claims to have inclusivity at its heart. However, in contrast with the powerful knowledge discourse, which focuses on the 'acquisition' of certain prescribed, largely self-justifying knowledge, the central aim embedded in our alternative discourse is one of empowering students to become critical, lifelong learners and potential agents of change. In direct contrast with powerful knowledge, this discourse argues that knowledge is seldom intrinsically powerful, and that it only becomes so when conditions are made available for its effective use: that is to say, we cast a critical eye at the various social *contexts*, both inside *and* outside the classroom, within which learning takes place.

## The powerful knowledge discourse

The central tenets of the powerful knowledge discourse, derived from the writings and presentations of Young and his colleagues (for example, Young, 2018), can be summarised as follows. Curriculum knowledge does not exclude but takes precedence over other aspects of the school experience, concerned with socialisation, creative/expressive development, interpersonal skills and broader communication skills. Some knowledge (labelled 'powerful knowledge', although not further identified with any great degree of specificity) is intrinsically, rather than contingently, more important than other knowledge. This important knowledge must be transmitted and acquired through the school curriculum, within a range of traditional subject areas, each of which is characterised not just by subject content, but by a particular distinctive, subject-bound form of knowledge.

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1 It is this latter feature of the powerful knowledge discourse, perhaps, with its conscious or unconscious echo of Foucault's 'power-knowledge' neologism, which gives it much of its initial, if somewhat romantic, appeal.

Epistemological ‘boundaries’ (or insulations) exist between the subject areas and the types of knowledge they comprise, and these boundaries, perceived as non-arbitrary, have to be maintained. This subject-specific curriculum must be taught by well-educated experts in their field (that is to say, a prioritisation of practitioners’ knowledge), properly resourced, and, although not fundamentally changing, continuously updated in light of new knowledge as it emerges in the world at large. It is only in this way that the full breadth of knowledge, and subsequent access to truth, can be ensured. Access to ‘important’ or ‘powerful’ knowledge should be freely available to all young learners, and not just to a privileged minority – that is to say, it should be available in state schools as well as in private schools. In fact, private schools should be abolished (Young, 2021). The nature of this curriculum knowledge, and not just the purposes to which it might be put, is qualitatively different from the knowledge that is acquired by learners outside the school setting, at home and in local communities. Out-of-school knowledge has no place in formal education, even as a basis on which to build new knowledge. This is because the purpose of formal education is to provide learners with knowledge that they cannot, or at any rate do not, access outside formal education, and not ‘to celebrate, amplify or reproduce people’s [out-of-school] experience’ (Young, 2006: 22).<sup>2</sup>

While we are able to find some points of agreement with the powerful knowledge discourse – for example, a shared concern regarding excessive and ill-informed interference by central governments in the sphere of public education, which limits schools’ capacity for self-regulation, and which tends to be driven by soundbites and short-term political and economic goals (Young, 2006: 30) – we also have substantial objections. What follows is a summary of the principles of these objections.

## Vagueness and ambiguity in the discourse

Our first concern about the powerful knowledge discourse relates to its enduring ambiguity, which lends it what might be seen as an unfortunate capacity to be ripe for all manner of often very contrasting readings and

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2 Young is notably dismissive of ‘learner-centredness’, describing it – along with ‘competence-based approaches to vocational education’ – as a ‘flawed and one-sided educational “theory”, that keeps being “re-discovered” despite the substantial body of research’ documenting its ‘weakness’ (Young, 2006: 29, his speech marks). Rather unhelpfully, Young does not elaborate on what the ‘flaws’ in learner-centred education are, and he offers no references to any specific set of research findings from the ‘substantial body’ to which he alludes.

appropriations. The Australian teacher Alaric Maude (2015: 84), for example, offers an extrapolation of the discourse as allowing us to ‘discover new ways of thinking; better explain and understand the natural and social world; think about alternative futures and what we could do to influence them; have some power over our knowledge; be able to engage in current debates of significance; go beyond the limits of our personal experience’. On the other hand, the UK Conservative Government’s Minister of State for School Standards, Nick Gibb (reported in Enser, 2022), has felt justified in recruiting the discourse to the cause of the so-called knowledge-rich curriculum, with its adherence to a traditionally populated subject-based curriculum, which has nothing to do with developing ‘new ways of thinking’ or students having ‘power over their knowledge’, but rather with filling young learners’ heads with facts and opinions that are frequently of dubious value, and that are potentially more disempowering than empowering. It is no surprise that Enser (2022: n.p.) expresses a concern that ‘the term “powerful knowledge” is losing all meaning as it gets used and abused by people from different sides of an endless debate’.

An ongoing reluctance to provide satisfactory answers to important questions that lie at the heart of the discourse – notably: What exactly is ‘powerful knowledge’? In what sense is it powerful? – has also provoked questions and criticisms from fellow academics. As one of the discourse’s fiercest critics, the philosopher of education John White concludes, having followed with great care several attempts by Young and Muller to provide internally coherent answers to the above questions, that it might appear that when it comes down to it, ‘powerful knowledge’ is actually nothing more or less than ‘the knowledge pursued and taught by specialised groups such as mathematicians, biologists, geographers, historians and experts in literature’ (White, 2019: 4; see also White, 2018). In other words, powerful knowledge is powerful because it is powerful (and because we say so).

White is not alone in sharing his concerns about the ambiguities and incompleteness of the powerful knowledge discourse, or in highlighting what he clearly sees as the dangers inherent in the looseness that characterises the discourse itself, and in the affective appeal of its title (White, 2019), including its capacity not only to be recruited in support of conservative policies and practices, but also to dominate the curriculum studies agenda to such an extent that it draws curriculum theorising, and, indeed, more broadly, educational theorising, away from what are arguably more important issues and debates. Deng (2018: 273), for example, has suggested that, far from the rather grandiose

claims put forward within the powerful knowledge discourse, its focus is ‘inward-looking, to do with acquiring knowledge for its own sake at the expense of other aims’.

## Social realism

Nowhere is the ambiguity inherent in powerful knowledge more evident or more confusing than in its chosen location within the sociological and philosophical approach to curriculum theory known as social realism. In his 2006 essay ‘Education, knowledge and the role of the state’, Young (2006: 21) claims to turn his previous curriculum theorising away from both (‘Leftist’) social constructivism<sup>3</sup> and (‘Rightist’) curriculum essentialism, arguing, instead, for a third-way epistemology that ‘takes a social realist approach to knowledge’. This approach, Young (2006: 21) explains, is ‘realist ... in the sense that it recognizes that knowledge cannot be reduced to the interests or activities of those who produce or transmit it’. In other words, at some level, knowledge is knowledge, whatever we may think about its mode of production and dissemination; what is important is who has access to it, how universal access to it is facilitated (or not), and what the acquirers of knowledge do with it. In a further elaboration of what he refers to as his ‘interpretation’ of social realism, Young (2006: 21) explains that his understanding of the term is ‘quite distinct from its use in art and literary criticism’, advising, albeit without further clarification of this distinction, that it rests on a number of assumptions – these being, essentially, the key components of the powerful knowledge discourse that we have already identified; that is to say: ‘the question of knowledge ... must be central to any educational policy’; ‘knowledge about the world, if it is to be the basis of the curriculum, involves concepts that take us beyond both the contexts in which learners find themselves and those in which knowledge is acquired or produced’; ‘a distinction is essential between the theoretical knowledge produced by scientists and other specialists ... and ... everyday practical knowledge that people acquire through their experience in families,

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3 Young’s (2006: 23) apparent *carte blanche* dismissal of social constructivism, which, he claims, ‘sees nothing special about any one particular ordering of knowledge: all are contingent’, reveals an unfortunate tendency in the powerful knowledge discourse to simplify and over-generalise alternative understandings with resort to sweeping, unreferenced statements, rather than to engage with such understandings critically and creatively.

communities and workplaces'; and 'the primary but not only<sup>4</sup> purpose of educational institutions is to take people beyond their everyday knowledge and enable them to make sense of the world and their lives and explore alternatives' (Young, 2006: 22).

Young's (2006: 21) suggestion that the social realist approach within which he situates this set of assumptions offers 'a radically different approach to the sociology of educational knowledge' – one that concerns itself with 'the conditions of knowledge' – may be seen as something of an exaggeration, given the extent to which social realism (as defined by other sociologists, but also in Young's version) draws on a substantial body of existing theory and research, notably by the English sociologist Basil Bernstein. What is more curious, however, is Young's idiosyncratic 'interpretation' (which feels more like a redefinition) of social realism itself. As we have already seen, Young identifies his version of the concept as markedly different from social realism as a movement and a theory in the field of visual arts, where it refers, centrally, to creating representations of poor and working-class people that reveal the real conditions and power relations within which they live – and suffer – inside socially unjust systems (rather than, as was often the case, romanticising or 'ghosting' them). It is easy to see why Young would wish to distance himself from such an approach, given his emphasis on knowledge-as-knowledge, rather than (for example) on exploring the underpinning bias in curriculum selection. What is less clear is his apparent rejection of the broader *sociological* appropriation of social realism, even as he embraces it – an appropriation which actually bears very close comparison with social realism as understood and applied in the visual arts. This sociological appropriation is clearly and succinctly expressed, including its debt to Basil Bernstein, in Alan Sadovnik's 'Foreword' to Barrett and Rata's (2014) edited, four-part book *Knowledge and the Future of the Curriculum: International studies in social realism*, the entire first, third and fourth sections of which are devoted to the theme of powerful knowledge. Sadovnik explains:

His [Bernstein's] project was concerned with how the macro-level (social, political, and economic structures and institutions) is dialectically related to the way in which people understand systems of meaning and *how, in the context of power relations, schooling*

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4 It is the 'not-onlyness' of (for example) social development as much as the discourse's insistence on the maintenance of subject boundaries that marks it out from Vygotsky's theory.

*often serves to reproduce social inequalities ... Taken as a whole, Bernstein's work provides a systematic analysis of the relationship between society, schools, and the individual and how schooling often systematically reproduces social inequality. (Sadovnik, 2014: x, our italics)*

Young's interpretation of social realism would seem to differ so markedly from Sadovnik's account as to raise the question: Why locate the powerful knowledge discourse within it in the first place? One possible answer is that this is simply a faux identification that produces an illusion of wider theoretical support and justification for what is, at heart, as Deng (2018) implies, allegiance to a regressive theory of 'knowledge for knowledge's sake'. An alternative, and perhaps more likely, explanation is that in an enthusiastic adherence to the work of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim (for example, Young, 2006), Young has simply conflated social realism with Durkheim's (2014) notion of the 'social fact' – a concept which allows for a socially constructed entity (a 'social fact', such as the school curriculum) to be studied in, as it were, a decontextualised way from its history. This effectively involves a symbolic uprooting and re-location of 'power', away from curriculum knowledge's mode of production into knowledge itself – leading, in this case, to a self-justifying defence of the traditional school curriculum, taught in traditional subject disciplines, comprising preselected knowledge understood as being 'objectively' included.

## Curricular and 'everyday' knowledge

Essential to an acceptance of the powerful knowledge discourse is the qualitative distinction it insists on between different 'kinds' of knowledge. The first of these distinctions, drawing heavily on Lev Vygotsky's (1962; 1978) theorising around concept development,<sup>5</sup> is between, on the one hand, theoretical, non-context-dependent knowledge, which is learned

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5 The shift from 'concepts' to 'knowledge' in the powerful knowledge discourse may seem a small, perhaps semantic issue; however, we suggest it is a significant one, underscoring a contrast in spirit and understanding between Vygotskian theory and the powerful knowledge discourse. This contrast is perhaps best illustrated in Vygotsky's (1978: 88) insistence on 'development', and of a key function of education as enabling and assisting young learners to 'grow into the intellectual life of those around them' – that is to say, an emphasis on both cognitive and social growth, in which concepts may (and may be encouraged to) develop and change over time, and on a specific, ongoing process of socialisation, rather than, as in the powerful knowledge discourse, a prioritisation of knowledge 'acquisition'.

(or ‘acquired’) in school (comparable to Hirst’s ‘procedural knowledge’ [Hirst, 1998; Hirst and Peters, 1970]),<sup>6</sup> and, on the other hand, ‘everyday’ or ‘practical’ knowledge, that is context-specific and that is acquired and learned in informal situations outside school (broadly comparable to Hirst’s ‘propositional knowledge’). It is the former of these that is ‘powerful’, because ‘theoretical knowledge has the capacity to take young students away from everyday knowledge’, opening up for them a new world in which they are enabled ‘to think beyond their experience and not just be trapped by it’ (Young, 2021: n.p.).

Although Vygotsky’s work has proved immensely influential among educationalists in many countries during the past four decades or so, this particular aspect of it is not without its difficulties. It is hard to support an argument, for example, that the *qualitative* (as opposed to simply *situational*) differences proposed by Vygotsky between in-school and out-of-school learning has any basis in fact. Essentially, it remains nothing more than a working hypothesis, to be accepted or rejected. In fact, it is difficult to imagine what kind of factual basis *might* be found to support the claim, or how much Vygotsky actually knew, or possibly could know, about the content and nature of young learners’ out-of-school learning experiences.<sup>7</sup> Even with a substantial and varied research population, it would surely be a struggle to arrive at anything other than very tentative conclusions, and even then there would remain questions to be answered regarding the reliability and validity of any measurement tools or of respondent testimony. There is, too, an unhelpful conflation in the theory, which appears, as we have indicated, to make these two forms of knowledge of concept development *site-dependent*, such that scientific concepts, requiring what Vygotsky (1962) refers to as mediated

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6 The debt owed by the powerful knowledge discourse to the ideas of Hirst and Peters, both in relation to placing knowledge at the centre of curriculum theory, and for disaggregating it into subjects or disciplines, is considerable although seldom acknowledged, reminding us that the idea is not new and, in fact, may be seen to represent an example of what Young calls ‘re-invention’. Indeed, Young could almost have written himself Hirst’s (1998: 246) account of ‘liberal education’ as an ‘appropriate label for a positive concept, that of an education based fairly and squarely on the nature of knowledge itself, a concept central to the discussion of education at any level’ (see also Hirst’s support of the ‘distinct disciplines’ and ‘forms of knowledge’ in Hirst [1998: 260]). There are, of course, also echoes in the notion of in-school (‘valorised’, curriculum) knowledge and out-of-school (non-curriculum) knowledge of Durkheim’s (2008) notion of the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’.

7 To make theoretical assumptions about people’s learning experiences and profiles without adequate research evidence (in this case, arguably, substantial ethnographic research) is always a dangerous business – particularly so when it involves young people, whose lived experience is likely to be very different from that of academic theorists. Almost inevitably, it gives rise to accusations of elitism, paternalism and patronisation, as well as having the capacity to lead to unhelpful and misguided universalisations and categorisations.

instruction (Alves, 2014), cannot be acquired and developed outside the school learning environment, while everyday concepts are not acquired and developed within it – a supposition which overlooks or demeans some of the useful, transferable knowledge that might take place in the informal geographical space of the school playground, such as how to settle arguments, or in the psychic spaces in lessons, between teaching and learning, such as knowing how to read and ‘play’ a social system.<sup>8</sup>

These difficulties with this aspect of Vygotskian theory are inevitably repeated within its appropriation within the powerful knowledge discourse; however, they are amplified and added to in the discourse by what we see as its variances with both Vygotsky’s epistemology and his broader educational philosophy. To begin with, it is important to point out that, as Young (2006) acknowledges, Vygotsky was, in spite of his unwitting recruitment to the cause of the powerful knowledge discourse, in no sense a theorist of knowledge per se, or, for that matter, of curriculum, or even of public education. A linguist and developmental psychologist, his principal interest was not so much in the *social production and distribution of knowledge*, or in the ‘knowledge content’ of school curricula, as in the processes and social (interactive) conditions in which learning takes place. Central to this interest are considerations of the ways in which cognitive development (as opposed to ‘knowledge acquisition’) relies on and develops through *language* (from which, from an early stage in human development, it becomes inseparable); on the *fundamentally social nature of learning* (Vygotsky, 1978: 88; 1962: 51); and on the key role of a pedagogy, in which the teacher’s principal task is to lead learners forward into an enhanced cognitive capacity that is always ahead of where they currently are (Vygotsky, 1962).

There are, undeniably, references to this overarching theory of development in the powerful knowledge discourse literature. Muller and Young (2019: 14) write, for example, of how ‘successful pedagogy’ leads to students:

becoming empowered in a range of ways: in the quality of their discernment and judgment; in their appreciation of the range and reach of the substantive and conceptual fields of the subjects; and in their appreciation that the substantive detail they have learnt is only part of the hinterland the subject has to offer. They are able to make new connections, gain new insights, generate new ideas.

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<sup>8</sup> See Bernstein’s (2000) notion of ‘recognition and realisation rules’; see also Edwards and Mercer’s (1987) *Common Knowledge*, and the distinction they draw between ‘principled’ and ‘ritual’ knowledge.

However, here, as elsewhere, the discourse tends to present and judge ‘successful pedagogy’ in terms of its (hard-to-demonstrate) outcomes, rather than by the processes (at the heart of Vygotsky’s theorisation) by which those outcomes are achieved.

## Knowledge ‘relationships’

Vygotsky’s emphasis on sensitive, interactive *pedagogy* connects with two other key differences between his theory of development and the powerful knowledge discourse, both concerning what we might call knowledge relationships – or interrelationships. The first of these concerns the interrelationship in Vygotsky between everyday and school learning, and the way in which, through appropriate pedagogy, the latter builds on the former (Alves, 2014). The second concerns the recognition and apparent support given by Vygotsky to inter- and transdisciplinary knowledge.

The position of the powerful knowledge discourse regarding the role of informal, out-of-school knowledge and experience within formal education has already been made clear in Young’s (2006: 22) assertion that ‘the purpose of education is not to celebrate, amplify or reproduce people’s [out-of-school] experience’. While this does not specifically preclude building curriculum knowledge on the basis of everyday knowledge, it certainly does not advocate it – any more than it promotes the kind of student-centred teaching and learning supported by Vygotsky’s theory, but rejected by Young (2006: 290) as ‘flawed and one-sided’. Vygotsky also differs from Young, however, when it comes to relationships not just between in-school and out-of-school knowledge, but *within* curriculum knowledge itself. Although both Vygotsky and Young speak of the transcendental, transferable qualities of curriculum knowledge once it has been internalised and ‘mastered’ (Vygotsky, 1962: 97), it is only Vygotsky (1962: 102) who speaks of that quality in terms in what we are calling interdisciplinary knowledge conversations, appearing to reject the notion of school instruction in which intellectual development is ‘compartmentalised according to topics of instruction’, and opting instead to identify a more generalised contrast between two broad kinds or fields of knowledge: on the one hand, ‘narrowly specialised training in some skills such as typing involving habit formation and exercise’ (akin again to Hirst’s ‘procedural knowledge’ and, we might add, to much ‘everyday’ knowledge, although Vygotsky does not say as much), and, on the other hand, ‘instruction ... which activates large areas of consciousness’ (Vygotsky, 1962: 97). As in the powerful knowledge discourse, Vygotsky (1962: 97)

specifically relates this kind of knowledge to ‘the kind of instruction given school children’; however, he continues, in direct opposition to arguments favouring disciplinary ‘autonomy’, to argue that ‘instruction in a given subject influences the development of the higher functions far beyond the confines of that particular subject’ – focusing not on the *differences* between subject disciplines, but rather on their *commonalities*. ‘[T]he main psychic functions involved in studying various subjects’, he concludes, ‘are *interdependent* – their *common bases* are consciousness and deliberate mastery, the principal contributions of the school years’ (Vygotsky, 1962: 97, our italics).

## Knowledge in a changing world

Our final concern with the appropriation of Vygotskian theory by the powerful knowledge discourse returns us to an issue we have already raised in questioning certain aspects of the theory itself, specifically to do with the relative situatedness of ‘powerful’ (curriculum) and ‘everyday’ concepts and knowledge, and how secure our judgements can be regarding both the what and the how of young students’ out-of-school learning.

If this issue was a problem for Vygotsky, it is arguably even more of one for powerful knowledge. Clearly, we inhabit a world today that in many ways is very different from the one Vygotsky, or indeed the young learners he encountered, would have known: a world in which, for example, for many people, including large numbers of young people, information (and opinion) in vast quantities and across a wide range of fields is readily available at home ‘at the touch of a button’, via computers, mobile phones and television screens. One key difference between engagement with information in this way, as opposed to in traditional classroom settings, is that it gives learners far more control over their learning, enabling them to *select* what information – what knowledge – they wish to access and engage with, and *how* they choose to engage with it, rather than having it selected for them (Kress, 2006). The extent to which such information, which may be unmediated other than through its own internal commentary (as in, for example, popular television programmes about the natural world), is ‘internalised’ and becomes ‘part of the child’s independent developmental achievement’ (Vygotsky, 1962: 38) – in short, the extent to which it becomes ‘transportable’ *knowledge* – cannot be taken for granted either way. What is clear, however, is that ready access to information and communications technology does not only ‘bring knowledge into the home’, with the added capacity to empower young people to become far more ‘tech

savvy' than their elders (including, often, their teachers); it also challenges and suggests affordances for developments in how knowledge (and ideas) are engaged with inside the classroom.

We suggest that the rapid growth and availability of digital media is an aspect of modern life that any educational discourse or theory – including the discourse of powerful knowledge – has to engage with, responding to the serious questions and challenges it poses about the nature and sites of learning, about how schools of the future might – or should – organise themselves, and about the continuing relevance and efficacy of current knowledge – and of subject-based curricula. Bridget Somekh (2006), taking into account the influences and affordances of information and communications technology, while simultaneously echoing those aspects of Vygotskian theory concerning the social, collaborative nature of cognitive development, offers her own suggestions for a 'Curriculum of the Future'. She argues:

a curriculum appropriate for the twenty-first century cannot be understood as an offering for individual learners, decontextualised and isolated from human interaction. It needs to be reformulated as an open knowledge framework for collaborative learning, enacted by the interactions of teachers, pupils and a wide range of tools ... Curriculum, when defined in terms of the learning that results from teacher–pupil–ICT interactions, requires a commitment to an open, exploratory pedagogy, and the radical restructuring of schools to allow learners to take the kind of control of their own learning that ICT enables and invites ... and provide much more open access to knowledge, flatter structures in which teachers' and learners' roles are interchangeable, and pedagogical practices in which learners play an active part in structuring their own curriculum. (Somekh, 2006: 128–9)

Somekh's support of a curriculum that prioritises not only collaborative learning between students but also across traditional subject boundaries returns us to Vygotsky's apparent support of, and the powerful knowledge discourse's apparent discomfort with, cross-curricular teaching and learning. In its fixation on the distribution of 'important knowledge' locked inside discrete school subjects, the powerful knowledge discourse not only denies the possibility and effectiveness of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary knowledge, but does so without any convincing justification, and without explaining why alternative curriculum models (for example, topic- and issues-based curricula) might not function

equally effectively, or even more so. Nor does it give any acknowledgement or credit to the kinds of cross-curricular collaborations that took place in many UK schools, with demonstrable success, during the last three decades of the last century (see [Moore, 2015](#): 69–70). This second set of knowledge disaggregations into knowledge ‘kinds’, as with the proposed distinction between everyday and theoretical knowledge, looks for support not so much to research evidence as to already existing theory: in this case, to some of the ideas of Basil Bernstein. Just as in the appropriation of Vygotsky’s theory, however, that of Bernstein’s is partial and, we would argue, flawed, if anything undermining the argument of the powerful knowledge discourse for maintaining strong subject boundaries, rather than supporting it.

## Subject ‘boundaries’

As we have seen, the boundaries between so-called everyday and scientific concepts (if we accept them) are clearly not viewed or intended by Vygotsky as barriers to development, but rather as pedagogic spaces within which new learning and cognitive development take place. The same is broadly true of Bernstein’s (2000) conceptualisation of boundaries and ‘insulations’. For Bernstein, who, like Vygotsky, had a great deal to say about the nature and importance of pedagogic relationships (for example, [Bernstein, 2000](#): 3–86), the boundaries he references (by way, he says, of ‘metaphor’) between, for example, school and the wider world, between specialist knowledge and curriculum knowledge, and (here) between subject disciplines, are flexible spaces in which negotiations, disagreements and conversations can take place. In Bernstein’s own words:

the boundary is not etched as in copperplate nor as ephemeral as in quicksand, and is sometimes more enabling than disabling. I have been concerned with how distributions of power are realised in various, and often silent, punctuations of social space which construct boundaries. I have been equally concerned with how these boundaries are relayed by various pedagogic processes as to distribute, shape, position and opposition forms of consciousness. ([Bernstein, 2000](#): xiii)<sup>9</sup>

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9 We are tempted to wonder if the interpretation of Bernstein’s theory by the powerful knowledge discourse here arises from a misreading of ‘concerned with’ to mean ‘concerned by’ rather than, as elsewhere in Bernstein, ‘interested in’.

This circumspect refusal on Bernstein's part to argue either in favour of or against strict boundaries, including those between subject disciplines, coupled with his reference to the nature and role of 'distributions of power', is a far cry from Young's account that Bernstein considered 'insulation between disciplinary fields and insulation between educational and everyday knowledge' to be 'The *key condition for the acquisition and production of knowledge*' (Young, 2006: 23, our italics). In effect, it indicates a clear dissonance between Bernstein's theorising and that of powerful knowledge, not dissimilar to that between social realism and Young's version of it, raising key issues concerning the nature of school curriculum content and structure – not least related to what, and by what means, certain knowledge is included in curricula and other knowledge is excluded: in short, those issues rejected by Young as constructivist and unhelpful. It is to this neglected issue of selection, and its importance, that we turn next.

## Valorisation: the 'Who decides?' question

An abiding issue for many working within the discipline of curriculum studies concerns the questions that are never far from Bernstein's analyses: Who decides what is included in the school curriculum and how it is constructed? On what bases are these decisions made? What ideologies, philosophies and political orientations underpin them? A counter approach is that these are not questions we should be asking ourselves: they are peripheral and pointless, and simply draw our attention and our intellectual labour away from more important questions. This alternative approach – including its embedding in the powerful knowledge discourse – is often underpinned by a view that, although the curriculum is indisputably designed and mandated by certain individuals, and although it is undeniably socially produced, essentially the curriculum 'is what it is': its contents and organisation, even if not self-evident, are in no need of justification.

The former approach is perhaps most forcefully argued in the educational and social theorising of the French anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu – in particular, in his 1977 work (with Jean-Claude Passeron) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, in which he describes curriculum selections as essentially 'arbitrary' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). 'Arbitrary', in this formulation, does not imply 'random'; rather, it represents a claim that curriculum selections – in particular, the selections of knowledge that comprise the curriculum – are always both

deliberate and partial, rarely possessing any *intrinsic* claim to inclusion that should give them precedence over any number of other possible claimants. Not only are they always selections; they are, typically, selections made by selectively empowered people to serve their own interests and to maintain a socio-economic status quo, rather than, despite claims to the contrary, serving the interests of the majority of young people to which they are ‘made available’ (or, alternatively, on whom they are imposed).

We have already expressed our concerns regarding an apparent refusal within the powerful knowledge discourse to challenge the ubiquitous distribution of curriculum knowledge in traditional subject disciplines. We are equally concerned, however, about the ‘social fact’ concept buried within the discourse, which is happy to talk of the importance of ‘context’ in relation to the classroom itself (as the site of acquisition), but which declines to engage with the wider socio-economic and cultural influences in curriculum design examined by Bourdieu, including what is actually taught (and not taught) within each subject discipline. This includes, as in Bernstein’s analysis (and, in other ways, in Bourdieu’s), how power relations in the macro socio-economic system influence, and are reflected and repeated in, power relations in the micro system of the school curriculum and examination syllabuses.

Young and Muller’s decision not to engage with this issue is worrying. This is not because they are not entitled to explore and develop the particular theory of knowledge they do (which, in parallel with largely discredited Leavisite approaches to literature study, focuses on the nature and impact of the ‘social fact’ itself, in isolation from its relationships with and beginnings in the social world in which it is produced), but because, apart from its too-easy appropriation within conservative policy and thinking, it has become so popularised within the field of curriculum studies that it threatens, as Deng (2018) has suggested, to draw attention away from other important issues – including, we would suggest, ongoing social injustices within wider systems, and the role of schools and school curricula in enabling and supporting them. Not only that. Although the discourse does contain, as we have seen, generalised reference to the importance of ‘hard work’ and ‘effective teaching’ by ‘experts’, it continually underplays the role of pedagogy in public education, tending, in contrast with both Vygotsky and Bernstein, to treat pedagogy and curriculum as two separate but connected ‘social facts’, rather than as two facets of a whole. We would argue that it also ignores the important context of student experience, not only in terms of working with ‘prior’ or out-of-school knowledge and experience to build new

knowledge and promote higher order concept development, but also in relation to students' differing perceptions of themselves as learners, and their deeply held views about what they believe they are capable of achieving academically, and what future prospects might be available to them in the workplace. In this way, alongside a largely unproblematised reification and instrumentalisation of knowledge (over more complex, interdisciplinary cognitive and creative growth), the powerful knowledge discourse appears to invite us to imagine idealised learners, neutrally differentiated by social background, but simultaneously universalised through equality of access, embracing, in the manner of other popularised initiatives based in narratives of equity and inclusion ('Every Child Matters'; 'No Child Left Behind'), an implication that there is no difference of note between, on the one hand, making something available to someone, and, on the other hand, their possessing either the ability or the desire to accept it.

## Concluding thoughts: knowledge and empowerment

In this chapter, we have critiqued the currently popular discourse of powerful knowledge, questioning its weakly argued bases of everyday and theoretical knowledge, and the necessity of maintaining current subject-locked distributions of curriculum knowledge,<sup>10</sup> in addition to its acknowledged reluctance to engage with some of the wider contexts of curriculum *policy*, including the partial and subjective nature of curriculum selections. We have expressed concern regarding the discourse's overplaying of decontextualised knowledge content, by its underplaying of pedagogic issues, by its reluctance to engage sympathetically with students' experiences, and by a vagueness and theoretical circularity which invites contrasting interpretations and, as Deng (2018) has suggested, seems to answer the question 'What is powerful or important knowledge?' with the answer 'It is curriculum knowledge'.

We might also suggest that this issue of vagueness – or ambiguity – arises from a form of essentialism within which, for all its claims to the contrary, the powerful knowledge discourse is framed. It is, for example, quite possible to agree with Young and Muller that some knowledge is more important than other knowledge, while, at the same time,

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10 Elsewhere reflected in Young's (2006: 24) support for discipline-based 'autonomy' in educational research.

disagreeing as to what that knowledge is: so that the question: ‘What is powerful knowledge?’, although seeming to anticipate a definitive answer, is, in essence, no more than an invitation for opinion. If we were to respond to such an invitation, what might our own list of ‘alternative powerful knowledge’ include? Without going into more detail than space allows, it would undoubtedly represent a major departure from the kind of curriculum endorsed by the powerful knowledge discourse, and most commonly in existence. What knowledge, we might ask, could be more important and powerful, for example, than political knowledge related to how different kinds of democracy are shaped, or the key differences between major political parties? Or knowledge about how to react in emergencies in ways that might save our own or another’s life? Or about sexuality and gender, in a way that contributes to a culture in which LGBTQ+ students feel comfortable – and are helped to feel comfortable by non-LGBTQ+ students? Or critical literacy, including knowledge about the internet and social media, and about how to distinguish fact from opinion? Or, at a time of global, existential environmental crisis, about the natural environment and the positive and negative impact of our actions on it? Or about poverty, and what might be done to eradicate it?

Unlike the current much-vaunted ‘knowledge-rich’ curriculum, with its emphasis on reproducing and passing on valorised knowledge from the past, each of these alternative selections is aimed more deliberately towards promoting future critical, engaged, empathetic national and global citizens and lifelong learners, rather than limiting its ambition to developing intellectual satisfaction (knowledge for knowledge’s sake, to reprise Deng [2018]). However, we might also prioritise, from within a largely personal, therapeutic perspective, knowledge of how to work with paint and other media, or how to work collaboratively with others to respond to and solve problems, or how to ‘read’ others’ behaviour rather than simply respond to it reactively. We might encourage personal growth and communication skills through the expressive and performing arts, or throw out the whole idea of passing on a fixed and sanctified body of knowledge altogether, basing our curriculum on asking – and discussing – ‘big questions’ related to religion, beliefs, crime and punishment and so forth. And we might consider – why not? – approaching these through some of the ‘great disciplines’ (most of which seem to be marginalised, both in current school curricula and, more oddly perhaps, within the powerful knowledge discourse): that is to say, philosophy, psychology, ethics, political science, and even – dare we say it? – sociology.

Of course, it is true that any knowledge deemed to be ‘powerful’, whatever it includes, is only ever *potentially* so, and this is why, whatever

constitutes the curriculum, we prefer not to talk of powerful knowledge as though it contains or embodies a fixed and protected value which is always (practically, symbolically, psychologically and, above all, readily) exchangeable for some good, but encourage, instead, an alternative discourse that we might term *powerful learning* – which, while acknowledging that some knowledge, such as the knowledge of how to read and write, or how to mount an argument or put across a point of view, might be intrinsically empowering, seeks to identify learning that has the capacity to empower the learner, not just inside but outside the school classroom – always taking into account the caveat (overlooked in powerful knowledge): *as long as circumstances allow*.

This issue of circumstance is as critical as it is no doubt troubling. It is all very well talking of knowledge acquisition that enables young learners to ‘think beyond their experience and not just be trapped by it’ (Young, 2021: n.p.). However, the sad fact is that many students are ‘trapped by experience’, and by circumstance, and may continue to be so once they have departed formal education. While some curriculum knowledge might provide long-lasting personal enrichment, and is to be valued for that, much of the knowledge acquired in school is only likely to be useful – to *become powerful* – if there exist opportunities and encouragement in the ‘real’ world (of social realism, in its original sense), to enable it to be put into practice. Specialist subject knowledge may be of little use to a young person unable to secure paid employment commensurate with their education and qualification, while an appreciation of literature may lie idle under the time- and energy-consuming business of having to make ends meet and get through the day.

None of this is to suggest that curriculum knowledge is unimportant or lacks the capacity to empower. What it does suggest is that we need to be careful about the claims we make for curriculum knowledge, and to continue to think carefully, critically, and with as open a mind as we can muster, about what a school curriculum might look like in the future, as opposed to what it looks like now. Respectfully and tentatively, we suggest that if curriculum knowledge is to be truly empowering, or at least have the capacity to be so, it must include a strong element of critical literacy and critical citizenship, and give far more scope for collaborative thinking and knowledge production than at present: a curriculum very similar, in fact, to the one outlined by Bridget Somekh (2006), which requires a return to the curriculum drawing board, rather than endless tinkering; which takes full account of the rapidly changing ways and circumstances in which knowledge circulates in the social world outside the classroom; and in which knowledge, even if we accept that it may differ qualitatively from

subject to subject, frees itself from traditional subject silos – enabling learners to develop those understandings of the world claimed by and for the powerful knowledge discourse within pedagogical relationships, in which different areas and aspects of knowledge are continuously brought into conversation with one another, and in which the asking and exploration of questions is at least as important as the ‘acquisition of knowledge’. If this involves a rejection or reinvestigation both of the content and of the distribution of curriculum knowledge, and a re-examination of what ‘power’ and ‘powerful’ mean in the context of public education, so be it. In critiquing a particular discourse, that of powerful knowledge, we are also implicitly endorsing the idea of error or mistake.

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# Learning, higher education and the university: an ecological approach

Ronald Barnett

## Introduction

The world is struggling into a new age, the ecological age. However, the idea of ecology has yet fully to be appreciated, not least in its pointing to an interconnectedness between entities. Picking up this aspect, we can refer to, say, a learning ecology or a knowledge ecology. In doing so, we – tacitly, at least – indicate that learning or knowledge is a zone in which entities cluster together; or might reasonably do so. Furthermore, learning and knowledge constitute separate but overlapping ecozones.

We can call up, variously, a sense of systems of *learning*, or the spaces of learning in society *and* their interconnections or *lack thereof*. Correspondingly, in relation to *knowledge*, we can summon up a sense of systems of knowledge, formal and informal, institutional and personal, and we can inquire into the distribution of knowledge in a society, and its maldistribution. *Epistemic* connections, whether at individual, institutional, societal or even global levels, are characteristically ill-formed.

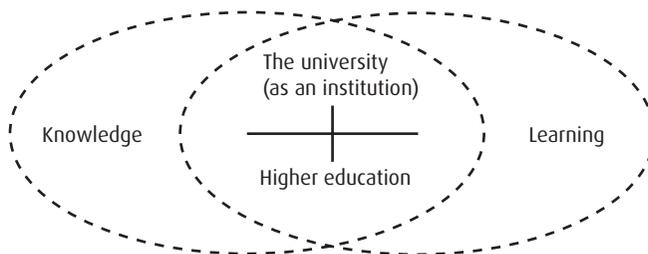
‘Ecology’, so understood, is fact and value intertwined. It alerts us to a region of some value, and it invites us to look not only at connections between its entities, but also at their lack of connections. Learning or knowledge, as ecosystems, may be *impaired*, with their absences affecting life chances and life flourishing and, for example, public communication and understanding. We can, therefore, inquire into impairments in such ecosystems, marked out in ways in which the entities in question are

failing to be properly connected (disciplines work largely by themselves; in a wealthy society, adults exhibit high levels of illiteracy; individuals are seduced by ideologies circulating in social media; and the public sphere is disjointed).

This ecological perspective – of impairments in ecosystems evident in *absences of open interconnectivity* – raises large issues for learning in the context of higher education and the university. And these issues become poignant when set in the context of a world in incessant motion (Nail, 2019), motion that presents continuous uncertainty, not least because of conflicts in the world and their effects on sheer *being*. For example, learning has to be lifelong: that is a commonplace. But what kind of learning? For learning may have injurious components (global warming; enhancing power structures; ideology).

The territory of this chapter, therefore, is that of: i) higher education; ii) the university; iii) the ecozone of knowledge; and iv) the ecozone of learning; and the interweaving of these four spaces, and their spread into society and the wider world. Schematically, the territory before us has the configuration shown in Figure 11.1.

When placed in this ecological territory – of learning and knowledge understood as ecozones – large responsibilities, indeed *ecological responsibilities*, fall on universities; and these responsibilities hold at the pedagogical *and* the institutional levels, if the potential in those very concepts (of higher education and university) is to be realised.



**Figure 11.1** Learning and knowledge as ecozones and their intersections with each other *and* with the university and higher education (Source: Author)

## The university and higher education

There is a marked tendency these days to treat the concepts of higher education and university as equivalent. In English, the terms ‘higher education’ and ‘university’ (or ‘universities’) are often used interchangeably, being deployed in close contiguity and even in the same sentence, as if they are not merely joined at the hip but are the same entity. Justifications are to hand for this discursive tendency.

We talk naturally of systems of higher education and, in many jurisdictions, universities account for the overwhelming majority of the institutions that comprise a higher education system; so, understood *institutionally* and as a matter of policy frameworks, higher education and university overlap considerably. In turn, students on programmes of higher education are, for the most part, studying in universities (or are enrolled on programmes organised and/or accredited by universities). At the *pedagogical* level, too, therefore, there is strong contiguity between higher education and university. Moreover, these two aspects intersect since, even in so-called research universities, income from students constitutes the largest income stream and sets of interests of such universities.

This collapse of the two concepts – ‘higher education’/‘universities’ – into a single concept has doubtless been exacerbated by the emergence of mass higher education, whereby systems of higher education are witness to 50 per cent or more of young people participating in higher education (so-called ‘high-participation’ systems [Cantwell, et al., 2018]). Further, several countries that had instituted binary systems of higher education (with polytechnics or technical institutes alongside universities) have merged those parallel systems into unitary systems of universities. And so, for all these reasons, universities generally are not unreasonably understood *primarily* as sites of higher education. The provision of higher education is by far the largest function of universities, even within a proliferating array of functions that they possess.

I want to push back against this conceptual collapse, not simply because we have here a conceptual melange, but more because we are losing a space where important conceptual significations can be observed. It is time for some conceptual re-engineering (Cappelen, 2020) so as to place ‘higher education’ and ‘university’ in differing, if overlapping, conceptual spaces. This conceptual manoeuvre is crucial for the argument here.

Briefly, I want to place ‘university’ in an institutional and system space. The term ‘university’ gains its major conceptual weight when we

ask questions of the kind: What are the functions of universities?; To what extent should research and teaching be integrated in universities?; How do and how might universities best serve society and even the world?; From which direction comes the greatest impingement on universities' autonomy?; and, What responsibilities might reasonably be attributed to universities?

In contrast, the term 'higher education' gains its own specific centre of conceptual gravity when we ask questions of the kind: What is 'higher' about higher education?; How might we understand the conceptual difference, if any, between 'liberal education' and '*Bildung*'?; At the level of higher education, how – in general – might we characterise the teaching role?; and, How might we construe the relationship between 'teaching' and 'learning', not to mention 'skills', 'knowledge', 'understanding' and 'being'? In other words, the term 'higher education' gains conceptual weight when it turns on the pedagogical relationship and function, and where we pursue interests in the development and experiences of students.

These two conceptual spaces – of 'university' and 'higher education' – certainly overlap. For example, we may ask questions along the lines of: Is there a particular level of human development that is (empirically) *or* that might be especially (conceptually) associated with universities? The question posed earlier as to the relationship between research and teaching is also to probe the *confluence* of the university *qua* institution and higher education as a pedagogical space. And, as a further example, the matters of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity are situated in the overlap between the university as an institution and the pedagogical formation of students (in 'higher education'). Nevertheless, despite this overlap between the concepts of university and higher education, it is important to hold fast to their lying in distinct, if overlapping, spaces – institutional and pedagogical – that are not just conceptual, but also spaces in the 'real' of the world. This distinction allows us to pursue matters separately of the two domains *and* of their interrelationships.

## Ecosystem and ecology

Let us now turn to the idea of ecology, and I start by distinguishing 'ecology' and 'ecosystem'. An ecosystem is a system of a kind, and ecology is the *study* of an ecosystem or ecosystems. I shall focus on the former.

By 'ecosystem', I refer to a situation where: i) entities form a cluster with a grouping that possesses an integrity of its own; ii) the grouping in question has a tendency to reproduce itself; but iii) that tendency may be

disrupted, characteristically by human interventions; such that iv) an ecosystem will often exhibit some form of deformation; and so v) will be falling short of its ideal or full state. To say this is not to presuppose that an ecosystem is naturally a site of peace or harmony: to the contrary, vi) some degree of disruption or conflict may be beneficial for the resilience and durability of an ecosystem. Nor is it to imply that there are natural or tight boundaries to an ecosystem: again, to the contrary, vii) an ecosystem may spread (it may possess – to draw on terms from Deleuze and Guattari [2007] – rhizomatic or nomadic properties). Indeed, an ecosystem is typically a large and hazy formation of some kind. It follows that to speak of an ecosystem is not neutral or value-free but is viii) fact and value combined, for the idea harbours a sense of there being desirable or worthwhile forms that any ecosystem might attain. To point to an ecosystem is to imply that one is in the company of a feature of the world that is inherently valuable, and that could be developed and even improved.

It may be noticed that in this eight-fold depiction of ‘ecosystem’, I have not resorted to the concept of assemblage (Delanda, 2013). An ecosystem is not an assemblage. Neither is it an aggregation of disparate entities – the entities of an ecosystem are not only materially related to each other but are *conceptually* related to each other – and *nor*, as indicated, is an ecosystem value-free. Once an ecosystem is identified, we are then willy-nilly in the presence of a formation that is valuable, likely to be falling short of its potential, and deserves the attention of humanity. Moreover, that falling short is characteristically accompanied by an actual impairment of some kind, and so there befalls on humanity responsibilities to *repair any such impairment*.

Given these considerations, *both* learning and knowledge may be understood as ecosystems, with each exhibiting all eight of the attributes of ecosystems just identified. Both can be said to be large – and even global – clusters of entities such that, in principle at least, each possesses its own integrity, has self-reproducing tendencies, is liable to spread, and rightly so too (as learning and knowledge are dispersed across society), but which is subject to malformations brought on by human actions and institutions, as both learning and knowledge are dispersed unevenly across society, and even in pernicious ways (so giving rise, for example, to forms of epistemic injustice). So viewed, the ecosystems of both knowledge and learning are value-laden, being invested with large hopes and aspirations, which are all too often thwarted.

## Learning and knowledge

So far, I have run learning and knowledge together, and now I want to compare them as ecosystems, bringing out their singularities and their overlaps; and I shall do so in the context of universities and higher education (bearing in mind the earlier distinctions between those two latter concepts).

Universities are sites of knowledge creation, but they are also sites where students, in pedagogical processes of higher education, are brought into particular kinds of relationship with knowledge. Typically, for universities to be worthy of the name (of ‘university’), students are drawn into an open relationship with knowledge. Of the main topics that they encounter in their study programmes, students are expected ultimately to be able to demonstrate not that they can reproduce what they have encountered, but that they have taken on an *understanding* of matters such that they can autonomously – and preferably spontaneously – conduct high-level cognitive and performative acts of analysis, evaluation, integration, synthesis, computation, creation and action.

Until very recently, an umbrella concept that did justice to these connotations of higher education was that of ‘critical thinking’ or even ‘criticality’ (Barnett, 2015), but that sentiment seems suddenly to be waning. Despite any such waning of ‘criticality’, I think that it would still be widely conceded that a genuine higher education points to those higher order cognitions and skills to which I have just referred.

Learning, then – at least at the level of higher education – necessarily involves understanding; but so, too, does knowledge. Knowledge, we may say, is a collective set of validated understandings, albeit always in dynamic formation. This observation takes on a particular point in relation to the academic world, which, over the last two hundred years or so, has developed subsystems of critical and semi-public dialogue, with specialist literatures and processes of peer review. (These processes are graphically reflected in world rankings of universities, which are based primarily on universities’ research performance, and which have come to distort universities’ knowledge-creation functions.) The presence of understanding here takes on substantial form, with debates and change in the disciplines amounting to exchanges between rival forms of understandings.

Both learning and knowledge, therefore, necessitate and have a foundation in (the presence of) understanding. In this respect, the two are homologous, both conceptually and as sets of social practices. Learning

involves a more individual form of understanding, while knowledge involves a more collective form of understanding, but there is overlap here, for *both* learning and knowledge contain both individual and collective moments of understanding. I would make just one further point here.

There are around twenty-five thousand universities in the world, and perhaps not much more than 2 per cent are seriously research-intensive. Nevertheless, for a university to live up to its name, students should be brought into the level of understanding that emerges in an awareness of organised knowledge and its dynamic and changing forms. Using a term that has rather faded away, we may say that students generally should acquire a *scholarly* awareness. Their teachers are educators who may not be conducting research themselves, but who are familiar with at least some of the relevant literatures, and that the fields in question contain argument and change.

The general point is that, while they possess their own singularities, there is overlap between learning and knowledge; and this overlap takes on deep aspects in relation to universities and higher education. Both universities and higher education (which we distinguished earlier) build on understanding at both individual and collective levels. 'Understanding' is itself a complex concept which has received scant attention in the (philosophical, sociological and educational) literatures, but it is crucial here. Understanding can be not only deep or shallow, but also wide or narrow, and, again, can have individual and collective forms. So, as well as a depth aspect, there is also a *range* aspect to learning and knowledge. In what follows, I want to pursue this range aspect of knowledge and learning, while also holding in view the depth aspect.

## The idea of *range* in relation to learning and knowledge

Learning in higher education can be assessed for its range, most immediately across the disciplines. To what extent is a student's study programme held within the boundaries of a single discipline, or does it straddle two or more disciplines? Even where it does straddle disciplines, how tightly are those boundaries guarded? Suppose a student who is taking a multidisciplinary programme identifies a concept or issue or feature of the world that has been taken up across the disciplines in her study programme: is the student permitted the pedagogical space to introduce in one discipline the approach to the topic in question that she has encountered in one of her other disciplines?

It may be the hackles go up when, say, a student tries to refer to a psychological approach to the matter of perception when she is in a philosophy or a sociology course. This is a form of epistemic injustice which we may term *disciplinary injustice*. In it, a student's programme may appear to offer much range, but in practice that range is held within tight internal limits.

Such epistemic range by no means exhausts the matter of range in the pedagogical context. A student's learning experiences might contain elements of clinical experience or fieldwork or outreach into the community; it might involve collaborative project work, where students in a group design an object, whether hard or soft; it might involve students imagining themselves as other entities (imagining themselves as a molecule, for instance); and it might call for students to address intractable value conflicts pertaining to large issues in the world. So, to epistemic range can be added performative range, experiential range and value range; and doubtless other forms of range as well. Students are being invited to become themselves in a welter of ways across new pedagogical regions.

Of any region into which a study programme extends, we may inquire into the pedagogical space made available: does a student have room for manoeuvre in framing her learning path? (Does it possess 'heutagogical' properties? [Adams and Barnett, 2022]) We may also inquire into the extent to which a student's experiences are intended or are serendipitous. And we may be interested in the extent to which a student's learning lies within the physical university environment, and to which it propels her into the wider world.

However, the range of a student's learning extends even further. All students possess their own *learning ecologies* (Barnett and Jackson, 2020), which is the totality of all the learning activities and situations in which they are placed (and place themselves), not only in relation to their university programmes, but also in their more personal lives. Empirically, it turns out that most students have a wide and varied hinterland of learning experiences. They may be working alongside their studies, they may be taking language courses, they may be involved in cultural or sports activities, they may be assisting other families (and their children) and communities, not only close at hand but even in far-off lands (perhaps in organising activities in charities or through their own personal efforts). In addition, their learning will be going on in their peer groups and in their own families. In contrast to lifelong learning, this pattern of learning has come to be known as *lifewide* learning, with multiple strands of learning and development taking place in parallel, and with each strand possessing its own mix of formal and informal learning.

## Systems of interconnectedness

We have just encountered the notion of learning ecology. We can resort here to the term ‘ecology’ because on view is an interconnectedness of entities that are not just contingently connected, but also conceptually connected (through learning being present in each strand of experience). Moreover, as befits ecologies generally, we are in the presence of fact and value combined: a person’s learning ecology is real and can be interrogated, and it is a large configuration of value; and not only of personal value, but also of social value and, indeed, public interest. And, again, as with ecologies in general, a person’s learning ecology persists over time, and yet is liable to harbour internal tensions. Moreover, a person’s learning ecology possesses the quality of autopoiesis, being self-sustaining *and* self-reproducing.

However, a learning ecology may turn out to be distorted, or in peril, in some way, and questions arise as to how any such impairment has come about, and where repair might be possible. Perhaps a student has become so absorbed by her university study programme that she is neglecting her family responsibilities, or is failing to honour obligations to which she committed herself in a student society or local swimming club. Or, to the reverse, perhaps she has become so immersed in writing poetry or taking the lead in a new band that her university studies are faltering. In all her activities, our student is advancing herself, and is continually learning (new skills, techniques, procedures, systems, ideas) and, in the process, taking on new dispositions *and* personal qualities (Barnett, 2007), but the pattern of her lifewide learning has become lopsided.

## Learning systems as such

We have been glimpsing that our student’s own learning ecology is intertwined with learning situations and systems that extend far beyond the student, and that may even be worldwide. Nations and the world have learning processes (Habermas, 1987), exhibiting formality and informality; and degrees of intentionality. Nations possess their own educational systems, but nations’ citizens also have varying access to mass media, which include media that are state-controlled or state-steered *and* media in the private sector, both online and in print. Learning systems include, too, professional life, corporations, think tanks, charities and a welter of governmental and non-governmental organisations, all of which play parts in the creation and circulation of information and ideas.

Issues arise, therefore, as to the character of the learning systems to which individuals are exposed, and through which they might develop their own personal learning ecosystems. To what extent do citizens have access to a mix of information channels and circuits of debate? To what extent are information channels regulated, and in which sets of interests?

In the wake of such empirical questions arise nice philosophical issues: Do citizens have *rights* to enjoy multiple channels of information and access to a range of ideas? What is to *count* as an open and unbiased situation of public communication? Are any restrictions on the circulation of ideas *legitimate*? Does the idea of a Habermasian (Habermas, 1991) *ideal speech situation* have application in a world of structured difference, where there are manifestly disadvantaged groups in the growth – or thwarting – of public understanding? And does that other contiguous idea of Habermas (2005) of the *public sphere* (as a public learning space) have application any more, for are there not now *multiple* learning spheres, more or less split off from each other?

Such issues matter for the sake of societal learning and for individuals' learning ecologies, not least in an increasingly intertwined world. If the circulation and creation of ideas is impaired – and even distorted – then individuals' learning ecologies are going to be truncated, and individuals will be unable to flourish as they might. They will become vulnerable to ideologies engineered by the powerful battalions in the world.

Learning as an ecosystem will always fall short of its possibilities, its entities either weak in themselves and/or failing to exhibit their *potential* collective unity and strength: in education, disciplines fail to communicate with each other; adults exhibit high levels of illiteracy (even in wealthy societies); the mass media are tightly controlled, by the state and/or by private sector corporations and individuals; and the available channels of information are unduly limited. As a result, not merely is there a limited number of modes of communication and information, but also those channels that are present neither exhibit a wide range of frameworks nor bring those frameworks into proper contention with each other. Communication in society is characteristically distorted *and*, in turn, citizens are insufficiently exposed to conflicts of viewpoints.

## And what of knowledge?

Knowledge and learning are, in the formal sense of the term, entangled (Barad, 2007). Each implicates the other. Knowledge cannot arise and accumulate and be made available in educational systems without some

learning taking place; and learning cannot occur unless some new knowledge is taken on board. It follows that learning ecologies and learning systems are intimately intertwined with knowledge, understood as an ecosystem.

When placed in an ecological perspective, we can ask of a knowledge ecosystem: To what extent is knowledge readily available in society? Do its subsystems work well together, or are they characterised by epistemic hegemony, with some forms dominating the knowledge landscape? For some sixty years or more, we have heard of crises in the humanities (Plumb, 1964), not least in the wake of the emergence of the power of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), now being joined by medicine (STEMM) (Cohen, 2021): are we witnessing a global down-valuing of arts and humanities? And what of the knowledges of disadvantaged or marginalised communities? For De Sousa Santos (2016), they are largely invisible in the dominant knowledge circuits. (In his view it is the 'Global North' that is in the dock here, but that analysis entirely neglects the role of Asia, and especially China, as the systems of global science have recently evolved.)

Recently, the theme of epistemic injustice has splayed out, in recognising many forms of such injustice, going well beyond the 'hermeneutic' and 'testimonial' forms identified by Fricker (2010), but perhaps that debate has still some way to go, both inwards, to take account of the epistemic injustice felt by those working in the arts, humanities and cultural spheres, and outwards, to take account of the claims of entities of the natural world. Since knowledge has been unduly shaped over the past three hundred years – and especially over the last half-century – by an instrumentalism and a separation from nature, there is an onus on educational systems to rebalance knowledge so as to exhibit a concern for the intrinsic worth *both* of human life *and* the entities in the natural world, both organic and inorganic.

More than a greening of knowledge systems, what is in question here is a *worlding* of knowledge systems (Norgard and Bengtsen, 2018), such that knowledge starts from the world. In the recent literature, the term 'onto-epistemological' can be seen (Swanson, 2015; Van der Tuin, 2014): for all its awkwardness, it legitimately points to a responsibility before knowledge efforts to take on a strong ontological dimension, with epistemologies taking their cue *from* the world.

## Recapitulation and development: the internet age

I have been placing the concepts of learning and knowledge in an ecological perspective, with each concept understood as a region of interconnectivity among cognate elements (of societal openness and communication). We have glimpsed overlaps and relationships – indeed, reciprocities – between learning and knowledge (understood as ecosystems). We have noticed, too, both that ecosystems work at *both* individual and societal (and even global) levels, and that the two ecosystems – of learning and of knowledge – can fairly be said to be impaired, containing distortions brought about by embedded interests and differential power.

En route, issues have arisen over the availability of knowledge and learning systems across society. To the degree that these formations are ill-balanced and unevenly spread, so there will be effects on individuals' learning ecologies (their learning opportunities will be thwarted through life), and society will be limited in its capacities to understand itself and take collective action where that seems sensible. Moreover, we are witnessing a progressive fragmentation of society between those who have access to knowledge and learning systems – and can exploit them for good or for evil – and those who do not have such resources, and who are therefore susceptible to manipulation by those in power who frame and energise ideologies that serve the latter's interests. Coupled with the presence of new digital social media, such *unequal epistemic power* takes on disturbing dimensions. Such are the conditions for the emergence of populism and threats to democracy.

We should note that mention of the emerging internet age has barely flickered across this chapter. Space precludes a proper treatment of this new age, but its looming presence should be registered, not least because it impinges on both learning and knowledge, and in several ways. Take, for example, the phrase 'learning machines': is that an oxymoron? Can machines learn as such? Or the phrase 'artificial intelligence': is the use of the term 'intelligence' there not an honorific use?

More generally, how might the fourfold relationship between human being, learning, knowledge and the internet be understood? Is it simply a contingent matter as to whether the internet hinders or aids the growth of knowledge and the enhancement of learning: in some circumstances, it is the one, and in other settings, it is the other? Or is there a general set of relationships to be discerned here, to be understood as a fundamental shift from an analogue to a digital world (Hassan, 2003), and into a 'hyperconnected era' (Floridi, 2015)?

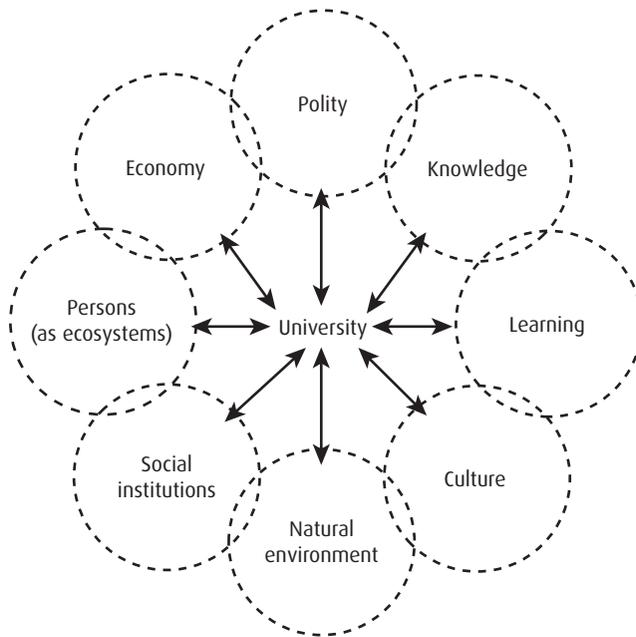
Many are concerned about the rise of an algorithmic age (Peters, 2013), where unassailable algorithms hold much sway over life; of an internet of things, which presages a displacement of human judgement and action; of a diminution in the quality and depth of understanding, as one is presented with an unending and fast flow of data (in academic life, one barely has time to read a corpus of journal abstracts, and certainly not the hundreds of papers, the titles of which appear before one in internet searches); of the rise of 'big data', susceptible of being handled only by technologies and resources in the hands of the few, so raising questions about accountability, democracy and judgement; and of social media, prone to capture by monied owners, so distorting the public sphere and the circulation of ideas.

Sentiments such as these are generating alternative responses of fight, flight or negotiation. In their wake, new terms appear – such as 'post-internet' (Mosco, 2017) and 'post-digital' (Savin-Baden, 2021). The term 'post-humanism' has appeared in this milieu (Braidotti, 2013; Herbrechter, 2013), but it has also rapidly become a contested territory, in which some look to computer-based machines and sophisticated technologies to extend human powers to become superhuman, while others are concerned that humanity should look to derive a new future beyond the internet, involving new relationships with the whole world, in particular understanding that humans are but one set of entities on this Earth, which is shared with other (organic and non-organic) entities.

## Sighting ecological responsibilities for the university

I now want to draw out the implications of the remarks I have made so far for what we may term the *ecological university* (Barnett, 2018). In doing so, I shall advance a general theory as to the relationships between learning, knowledge and the university.

The ecological university is a university that takes seriously its networks with the whole world. It is sensitive to the world being comprised of a number of major ecosystems, in which it is (conceptually and necessarily) implicated. Perhaps eight such ecosystems stand out: knowledge, learning, the natural environment, society (social institutions), the economy, culture, persons and the polity (Barnett, 2022) (Figure 11.2). The ecosystems of both the natural environment and the economy appear here, but neither is privileged, since all eight ecosystems are intertwined *with each other*.



**Figure 11.2** The ecological university – each university entangled with eight ecozones, and possessing its own ecological profile across them (Source: Author)

It will be recalled that one characteristic feature of an ecosystem is that it is impaired and/or is falling short of its possibilities in the world, a shortfall that is largely the result of human action. Accordingly, humanity has responsibilities in *repairing the impairments* in the ecosystems of the world, and to repair, for example, not only malformations in the natural environment, but also the ecosystems of knowledge, learning, persons, culture, the economy and so forth. Their being interconnected, a sensitivity towards and action in any one ecosystem calls for a sensitivity towards and action in all the other ecosystems.

Each university has its own ecological profile or footprint, in the extent to which it can and might move across each ecosystem. Whether it is large or small, whether it is a specialist or multi-faculty institution, whether it has age and endowments on its side or not, whether it has a particular orientation or not (perhaps it is a faith-based institution), and the extent to which it is steered by the state or by private sector interests: all these factors play a part in discerning the ecological possibilities available to a university.

As indicated, both the knowledge and the learning ecosystems are societal and even worldwide. Not only are learning systems to be found

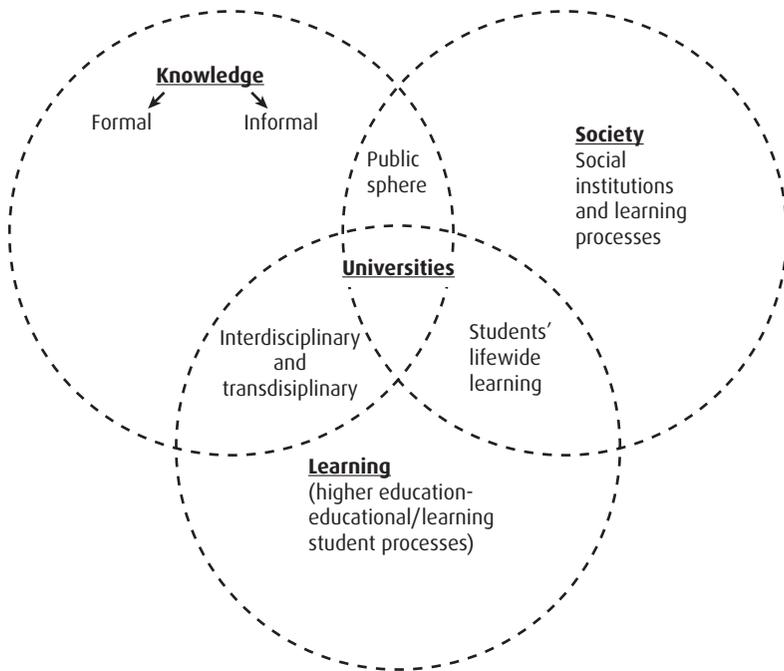
across the world, but the world itself is a learning system, and at personal, organisational and national levels; and these intermingle. Again, as noted, a person's learning ecology is a reflection of the opportunities for learning in a person's life-world. This may be limited both in a totalitarian society, where channels of information and communication are tightly controlled, and also in a traditional society. Correspondingly, a university may be considered to be a learning organisation, but the possibilities for its self-learning as an organisation may be limited.

With knowledge, the matter is even more complicated. Heidegger (1998) famously observed a fundamental difference between an entity being ready-to-hand and present-at-hand. Not, I think, often noticed is that Heidegger spent much more effort in elucidating ready-to-hand than present-at-hand: it was in entities that were ready-to-hand, and towards which persons had an organic and immediate relationship (the craftsman with his hammer), that Heidegger was particularly interested. Heidegger was much less interested in entities that were present-at-hand, and which presaged formal analytical and distance-making modes of being. Perhaps this lopsided interest on Heidegger's part lies partly behind his notorious 1933 inaugural rector's speech (Heidegger, 2018) at Freiburg University, and his doomed rectorship there. Be that as it may, what can be said is that universities are sites of knowledge and learning that serve to sponsor and to promote present-at-hand modes of being. They serve to distance (human) being from the world, and doubly so.

On the one hand, the dominant universities in the world – in the Global North, and now also in Asia – have actually privileged modes of knowing that separate the knower from the known (heralded in Descartes' Cogito – '*I know, therefore I am*'). This was a mode of knowing that, in its going-it-alone disposition (Gellner, 1992), opened the way for instrumental modes of knowing, an implicit purpose of which was to effect control over the world. On the other hand (but intimately linked), learning in universities has come primarily to be the acquisition of skills, in which students-as-graduates are understood as units generating additional innovation and economic growth in society. Terms such as *Bildung* (in the Humboldtian continental European tradition) and liberal education (in the English tradition, à la Newman), and, most recently, criticality and critical being (Barnett, 1997) – which were accepted as marking out a genuine higher education – are falling by the wayside, despite the efforts of their continuing evangelists. A sense that a higher education especially has to include the inculcation of certain kinds of epistemic virtues – both dispositions *and* qualities (Barnett, 2007) – is fading from view.

However, this gloomy set of observations cannot stand as the last word, as a matter both of analysis and of hope. Earlier, this chapter drew attention to the interconnectedness of the world, and all its facets (or ‘objects’, in the terminology of this volume) – material and ideational; human and non-human; organic and inorganic; technological and natural. I drew out that analysis by pointing to the presence of large ecosystems that bear upon universities. As described here, the ecosystems of learning, knowledge and society have something of the character shown in Figure 11.3 in their interconnections with the university.

So much for the ‘analysis’, but what of ‘hope’? Hope emerges in that the ecosystems to which I point are not just interconnected, but are also *increasingly* interconnected. This increasing interconnectivity was glaringly apparent in the Covid-19 pandemic, its global impact involving interactions between entities in all of the spheres just mentioned (material and ideational; human and non-human; organic and non-organic; technological and natural). So, increasing interconnectivity can have *woeful* consequences. But, correspondingly, and also evident in the



**Figure 11.3** The university and its entanglements with the three ecosystems of learning, knowledge and society (compare with Figure 11.2) (Source: Author)

pandemic, increasing interconnectivity makes possible interventions that have beneficial consequences; and quite rapidly at that. The world is in a position to understand itself, and to take collective action.

However, in order that the world can move towards becoming ‘a wiser world’ (Maxwell, 2014), those movements towards interconnectivity have to be quickened, not least to address manifest impairments in ecosystems. One impairment sustained by universities lies in their *knowledge management* systems (to adopt a term), and, glaringly, in the disciplines. Disciplines find it difficult to engage with each other. Moves have certainly been taking place over the last half-century or so in the directions first of multidisciplinary, and then of interdisciplinarity. Still ahead lies *transdisciplinarity*, which is necessary if universities are to advance and disseminate forms of knowledge and learning that are adequate for an ecological age. This latter move would amount to a sea change, for whereas multi- and interdisciplinarity take their bearings from epistemology (and knowledge interests), transdisciplinarity takes its bearings from ontology, and from concerns with, and interests in, the whole world, indeed in the Earth as such.

## Conclusions

Both knowledge and learning in university settings are part of societal, and even global, networks (of knowledge and learning). We may term these networks ‘ecosystems’, for they share the characteristics of ecosystems, being each a loose cluster of like entities, self-sustaining and worthwhile in themselves, yet evincing internal conflict, impairment and fragility, often as a result of humanity’s inhumanity to ecosystems in general. These observations work at the levels of universities as institutions and of higher education processes, especially of students’ experiences and their pedagogical situations.

On the first level, issues arise as to the responsibilities and possibilities of individual universities towards learning and knowledge as societal ecosystems. If the knowledge ecosystem is warped, such that information and communication systems are ill-distributed in society, the potential for society to be a learning society, learning about itself, and able collectively to move forward wisely, is going to be truncated. In no society is participation in higher education 100 per cent, and the median figure is perhaps around 30+ per cent, with most advanced countries being around 50 per cent. If society is not to be marked by a new social divide between those who have enjoyed higher education and those who

have not (and some recent happenings have indicated the doleful effects of this divide), then each university has seriously to think about its *learning responsibilities* towards those in society whose life experiences will never encompass universities. If access to knowledge systems, the character of learning systems, and the public understanding of complex matters are grotesquely ill-distributed – as they are – then universities have responsibilities in helping to rectify this serious situation.

On the second level, that of students' learning ecologies, in an interconnected and changing world, learning has to be lifelong, but this lifelong learning has also to be *lifewide*, open to students becoming themselves across multiple ecosystems – of nature, the economy, culture, knowledge and so forth. But, in a milieu where access to knowledge is limited and learning systems are warped, students' learning ecologies are all too easily restricted – both within and beyond the university – and their opportunities for lifelong learning are truncated.

At both individual and societal levels, therefore, responsibilities arise for the university, in relation to *both* learning and knowledge – *ecological responsibilities*, indeed. And the university is implicated *qua institution* – after all, *every* university is located in worldwide knowledge and learning systems – and *pedagogically and communicatively*, to reach out across society to aid the public understanding of complex matters, and so advance public spheres. In an interconnected world, in which knowledge and learning are crucial at societal and global levels, as well as the individual level, the ecological frame brings with it very large implications for the university.

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# 12

## Feminist pedagogies

Sandra Leaton Gray

Feminist pedagogy frames education as taking place within an essentially patriarchal society, providing for resistance against it by subverting established mechanisms of social reproduction. In this sense, it is derived from critical theories of education, such as those of Freire (2000)<sup>1</sup> and, latterly, bell hooks (1994).<sup>2</sup> Feminism itself is by no means monolithic, as it takes multiple forms, which generally reflect different social and political mindsets, and which vary in conceptualisation, as well as in the degree of activism embraced. (See also [Chapter 8](#), for a discussion and explication of the concept of woman.) These forms can range from extreme communal, participatory forms, focused on collective enterprise, with the individual subsumed to the needs of the group, to extreme libertarian forms, where the group is subsumed to the idea of individual gender (or personal) rights.

Examples within this range include liberal feminism (advocating for women's democratic and legal rights), critical and intersectional feminism (which asks how elements such as race, class and gender impact on experience), normative feminism (which locates the human experience within a global agenda for change), feminist naturalism (which explores the ways cultural-historical factors can enable rather than distort knowledge), radical feminism (which seeks a full reordering of society, eliminating all male supremacy), epistemic feminism (which privileges the social location of the knower), political feminism (which seeks to

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1 See [Chapter 15](#) for a full account of *Conscientização*.

2 bell hooks's feminist theory recognises that social classifications (for example, race, gender, sexuality, class and intelligence) are interconnected, and that if this intersection is ignored, then this creates oppressive conditions for women and changes the experience of living as a woman in society.

politicise the private realm), decategorising feminism (which seeks to collapse categories, and then replace them with self-identification), libertarian feminism (which emphasises an individualised model of identity) and ecofeminism (which examines the relationship of women to nature and the environment).

Forms of feminism frequently overlap and intersect, and they also change, so this does not form a complete list. They are sometimes grouped together in four meta-typologies: liberal, Marxist, radical and postmodern feminisms, although arguably this simplifies the complexities within each model (and is contestable, as it could just as easily be formulated into six, eight or more categories). They are also influenced by educational praxes, which allows them to be personalised and promulgated in different ways, although each rejects the idea of knowledge as immutable and fixed. Some feminist pedagogies are even subject to criticism, for example, engendering accusations that they privilege the intellectual positions of a white female hegemony (for example, when university courses on feminism have been established, and are run by, white faculty to the exclusion of others). As such, any more fine-grained intellectual mapping of the field runs the risk of being relatively arbitrary and transient, although it does help us compare and contrast different approaches.

## **Feminist pedagogy, embodiment and human relationships**

The idea of gender within feminist pedagogy is usually expressed dyadically via concepts of male and female, and concerns embodiment in learning. However, just as the various ersatz categories of feminism above sometimes change and morph together, some models of feminism blend a concern for embodiment in learning with the idea that society is undergoing a process of de- and re-gendering, as the complexity of sex and gender becomes better understood over time. Considered this way, feminist pedagogy represents a dynamic (rather than static) process in which educational power relationships are repeatedly scrutinised and challenged, and frequently decentralised, and human relationships are reconfigured in response. As such, learning becomes a process of mutual formation, as well as a mechanism for resisting the moral violence inherent within many hierarchical structures common to education (for example, the valorisation of certain forms of achievement framed to privilege empiricist formations of knowledge).

Addressing the nature of the human relationship is core to feminist pedagogy and its mission. This takes place across a number of domains,

including reflection on the self, the relationships among students, relationships between student and teacher, the implementation of classroom practices, the organisation of lessons and programmes of study to promote co-construction, and the organisation of educational settings themselves. In this sense, it acts as an encompassing philosophy embracing teaching, learning, critical pedagogy and the human, while also acting as a form of activism via praxis. Yet this is refracted through diverse *Weltanschauungen*,<sup>3</sup> resulting in the variety of feminisms described above (and potentially many more).

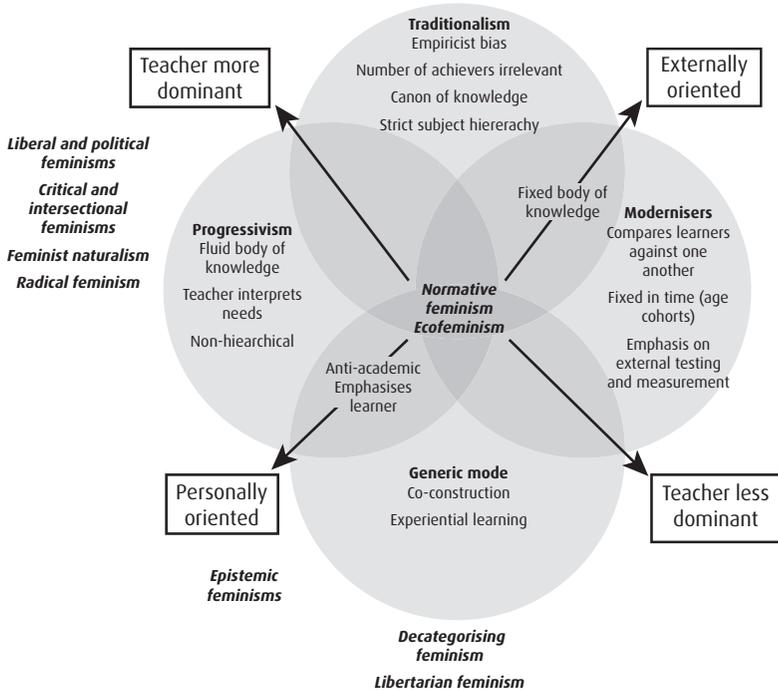
For example, in Leaton Gray and Scott (2023), we wrote about the relationship between the work of nineteenth-century curriculum thinker, Dorothea Beale of Cheltenham Ladies' College, based on a uniquely female quasi-monastic model of professional growth, which we argued represented a form of Christian feminism. Similarly, we considered the work of the early twentieth-century US university administrator, Lucy Diggs Slowe at Howard University, as a form of pragmatic feminism. Both forms of educational philosophy and praxis arguably grew out of the surrounding environments and cultural histories of the women concerned, leading to overlapping but differing worldviews. On the one hand, Beale sought to remediate educational inequalities experienced by young British women that had their roots in the dissolution of female monastic institutions during the Reformation. This had closed off most routes to post-elementary education for girls and, Beale (1866) argued, left them intellectually starved. In response, Beale designed a rigorous curriculum for girls that mirrored that of male students, while also developing in parallel the idea of a vocational community of women teachers. On the other hand, Diggs Slowe sought to meet the educational needs of a new type of student, namely black students who formed part of the first post-slavery generation. This was done within the confines of a male-dominated university, where her students were not accorded the same rights and opportunities as their male counterparts, and were even sexually harassed (Bell-Scott, 1997). Both feminisms could be compared to, or collapsed into, some of those in the long list in the first paragraph of this chapter, but they can also be seen as distinct, emerging as a result of particular forms of educational praxis grounded in the unique *Weltanschauung* of each woman curriculum thinker.

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3 *Weltanschauung* (the plural is *Weltanschauungs* or *Weltanschauungen*) is a German word denoting a person's or a group's philosophy or view of the world. I am using the German word here because there is no real equivalent in the English language.

## Feminist curriculum, pedagogy and assessment

Overlaying multiple feminisms on to a developed version of the model that I initially published in Leaton Gray (2004)<sup>4</sup> to describe different ways of conceptualising the curriculum in different educational contexts (see Figure 12.1), it is possible to consider the broader educational implications of feminist pedagogy. This comparison technique is considered to have some currency, as it allows for a degree of alignment against the idea of progressive pedagogy, to give one example (Stake and Hoffman, 2000).



**Figure 12.1** Mapping feminist pedagogies in relation to curriculum conceptualisations (Source: Author)

Mapping feminist pedagogies against various binaries allows us to categorise and analyse them in a more nuanced way than simply attributing them to differences in *Weltanschauung* (repeating the caveat that any choice of feminisms is always going to represent an arbitrary decision). Two binaries chosen here are:

<sup>4</sup> In turn, derived and developed from Bernstein (2000).

1. Proximity of power in relation to the teacher, or relative teacher dominance – this considers how far the teacher mediates the learner experience.
2. Personal versus external orientation – this considers how far a form of feminism represents a direct or indirect form of collective activism requiring a particular body of knowledge to underpin it.

One example of an orientation moving towards the external (as opposed to the personal) would be *liberal* and *political feminisms*, via teaching learners about the history of the Suffragette movement, with a view to promoting a vision of inclusive democracy generally. Another example would be *critical* and *intersectional feminisms*, developing teaching materials reliant on statistical data of intersectional categories, to be shared and discussed with learners. Both of these also require significant involvement of the teacher to curate and mediate the learner experience, which locate them towards the teacher holding the balance of power or being more dominant.

Examples of moving towards the personal (as opposed to the external) would be *decatagorising feminism*, *libertarian feminism* and, to a degree, *epistemic feminism*. All of these focus on the idea of privileging individual identifications and/or individual rights, located far away from the direct influence of the teacher. Here we see the curriculum rooted firmly in the concept of the learner being at the centre, with the learner co-constructing a reality particular to themselves with the teacher, rendering the teacher less dominant than in some other forms of feminist pedagogy. This might be rationalised or justified in the context of a wider feminist tradition, but ultimately it is a highly personal approach, and one that allows more readily for identification in ways that are not exclusively female or male (for example, non-binary).

Finally, we see *normative feminism* and *ecofeminism* located relatively centrally within this model. This is because they rely on external data or perspectives to mediate the learner experience, and on a teacher to mediate this, but, at the same time, there is an experiential, reflective aspect required, which allows for locating the idea of the self in relation to the wider world. This then loops back to incorporate the personal experience into the collective.

## The fragmentation and reformation of feminism(s)

The twenty-first century represents a time of significant change in our understanding of the social world, as we move away from the idea of grand narratives of history, as Lyotard (1979) argues, and, with it, relatively fixed categories of identity and experience (for example, a binary distinction between male and female). The same significant change, manifested here as a form of fragmentation, is happening in terms of feminist pedagogies, as teachers respond to increasing complexity within public and private life. One way of seeing this is as a form of uncertainty, but another is to understand it as a broadening of curricular conceptualisations and approaches available to teachers, as they seek the means to allow learners to flourish via new claims for knowledge. This broadening promotes the idea of the co-construction of knowledge as a means of stimulating critical thinking, encourages a sense of community or solidarity depending on its social location, seeks learner empowerment through amplifying the role of choice and agency in learning, amplifies learner voice through facilitating the sharing of personal experience and giving opportunities to those who have been ignored or silenced, and encourages critical self-reflection.

This means that feminist pedagogical perspectives can be scoped and exercised in different ways. One way is in terms of teaching the history of feminist thought in a relatively structured way, which fits within a relatively traditional model of instruction (for example, covering the Suffragette movement as part of a public examination history syllabus). Another way is via a professional praxis that almost exclusively serves to empower and liberate the individual. In addition to these examples, there are potentially any number of alternative feminist pedagogies that can be deployed or exploited as the teacher and learner see fit. To subvert Lyotard, this multiplicity of narratives, with associated disruption of boundaries, could be seen as representing a logical staging post in what is a broader project of education and democracy.

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## A play-pedagogy

David Scott

A concept, such as pedagogy, is both a material and a discursive object, and consequently has all the characteristics that we have come to associate with these types of objects. In the real world, boundaries are drawn between objects. As a discursive object, the concept of pedagogy can be understood as being polysemic, semantically contested, networked, interactive and dynamic. In addition, as an object, it has causal powers, both as a conceptual object and also because it is in the world, or at least in a world.<sup>1</sup> The concept of pedagogy, then, can in part be understood by and through the trace-objects that constitute its past; these trace-objects are, however, only fragments of the meanings that people gave to the notion.<sup>2</sup> A conception of *Bildung* has as its central concern a notion of learning and, therefore, ineluctably a notion of pedagogy. These two object-relations, connecting *Bildung* and learning, and *Bildung* and pedagogy, operate discursively, and are binding relationships, in that it is impossible to think about a *Bildung* or construct a *Bildungstheorie* without at the same time incorporating some notion of learning and some notion of pedagogy. This chapter addresses the discursive notion of pedagogy by examining its place in our three networks of meaning (see [Chapter 1](#)), antecedently, contemporaneously and in terms of how it is used in the world. This chapter also focuses on a particular pedagogy, a play-pedagogy.

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1 Pedagogy, then, can be understood as a concept in the traditional propositional sense, and, in addition, as a practice.

2 It can be only partly understood because there are two other dimensions of meaning: the antecedents of the concept and how it fits in a vast network of other concepts in the world.

There are many different views of what pedagogy might be and how broad it is as a concept, with three overarching theories in existence.<sup>3</sup> The first is a model<sup>4</sup> of pedagogy that can be developed from the idea that knowledge is transposed from many different locations and time points, and that it emanates from outside the learner. It is the means by which knowledge evolves in the world, and it is transposed from location to location, and from one time moment to another. The second is a functional model of pedagogy that is understood as a carrier of something such as identity, social positioning or concept acquisition.<sup>5</sup> A third approach is that pedagogy is a mechanism (using this word without its mechanical and deterministic elements) or apparatus, and has properties, including causal powers, that operate in the churn of other objects (discursive, material, relational, configurational and, perhaps more importantly, human). Pedagogy, then, as a concept and as a praxis, can be understood in several different ways, and in a *Bildungstheorie* as the means by which we develop as human beings.<sup>6</sup>

This *Bildungstheorie* has several forms: negating, absenting, progressing, intensifying, extending, unfolding, articulating and realising. Negating is a process of semantic realignment. As such, it connects an expression of an object, object-relation, object-configuration or person to another expression of these objects with a meaning that is opposed to the meaning of the original expression. Absenting is both something which is not there and an active process of making something absent with the intention of bringing it back into the fold. This is a pedagogy of absenting and returning those absented objects to the world.<sup>7</sup> Progression in one of

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3 Alternative views of the concept of pedagogy inevitably technicise the notion.

4 I am using the term 'model' here to suggest a set of objects with logical relations between them and projectable capacities.

5 Basil Bernstein (2002) suggested that pedagogy was the means through which the accumulated knowledge of a society could be produced, distributed and allocated, then transposed into an institutional form, and finally changed into a set of criterial standards. In Bernstein's terms, this pedagogisation comprised three fields of activity: an area of production and distribution, a field of recontextualisation and a field of reproduction. Without a full understanding of what knowledge is, Bernstein trivialised the conception of the transformative process. In addition, he treated culture and cultural formations as rationally coherent and logically consistent.

6 Maxine Greene (1978: 103), for example, talked about its meaning-making qualities: 'Each one's life-history, in fact, is a history of emergences and transformations. Consciousness arises, writes Merleau-Ponty [1945], in the realisation that "I am able", meaning the realization that one can reach beyond what is immediate, make horizons explicit and transcend what is a field of presences towards other future fields. What were once perplexing shapes and fragments on the fringes of the perceptual field are thematized, transmuted into symbolic forms. Naming occurs; interpretations occur; meanings are built up; intersubjective relations entered into; gradually, the embodied consciousness constitutes a world.'

7 See Bhaskar (2002).

its many pedagogic forms can be thought of as intensification. Whereas extension refers to the amount or range of progression, intensification or complexity refers to the extent to which a sophisticated understanding of a concept or a praxis has replaced a superficial account or activity. There is also a type of progression, abstracting, which involves moving from a concrete understanding of a phenomenon to a more abstract one.<sup>8</sup> A pedagogic response to this type of progression is to revisit and reconstruct a set of ideas or operations at different levels of complexity at different stages in the learning programme, or at different moments in the life course (see Bruner, 1966).<sup>9</sup>

The idea of progression can be understood as a process where the result is already present at the first moment and is openly revealed at the second moment. This model of the unfolding of the enfolded understands learning not so much as learning something that is external to the learner, but as the realisation of an implicit potential that human beings have. This is a pedagogy of completion or realisation. A notion of progression is implicit in an increased capacity to articulate, explain or amplify an idea or construct. The learner retains the ability to deploy the skill, and, in addition, she can now articulate, explain or amplify what she is able to do and what she has done. If we want to articulate an experience, there are several conditions: knowledge of the object, knowledge of the process and knowledge of how the object and the process can work. These iterations of progression are all pedagogic forms and learning approaches.

## Etymologies and antecedents

We can examine the etymology of the word ‘pedagogy’, or at least what other people have thought is its etymology, while at the same time accepting that an etymology is not the same as how the concept was used in the past, both discursively and in a material sense. Its common late sixteenth-century meaning, ‘the science of teaching’, was derived from the medieval French word *pédagogie*, which, in turn, was derived from the Latin word *paedagogia* and from the Greek word *paidagōgia*, which roughly can be translated as ‘education, attendance on boys’ (giving us a

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8 Abstracting in this sense has been superseded semantically by a notion of abstracting as a summary of an argument.

9 A spiral curriculum, a concept widely attributed to Jerome Bruner (1966) refers to a type of curriculum in which key concepts are taught throughout the curriculum, but with deepening layers of complexity, or in different applications.

marked gendered description of the word). The word *pedagoge* was first used in the fourteenth century to refer to ‘a schoolmaster, teacher of children’, and versions of it can be found in the Old French *pedagoge*, meaning ‘teacher of children’, which, in turn, is derived from the Latin word *paedagogus* and the Greek word *paidagōgos*, meaning ‘slave who escorts boys to school and generally supervises them’ (see *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2001–23). Later, a new meaning seems to have been attached to the word, ‘a teacher or trainer of boys’, from the words *pais*, meaning child, *agōgos*, meaning leader, and *agein*, meaning to lead (drive, draw out or forth, move). In the seventeenth century, the word acquired a new meaning: ‘a dogmatic and narrow teacher’.<sup>10</sup>

The word *pedagogy*, then, has continued to change its meaning and, consequently, how it can be used, so that it now reflects a different set of commitments than it did before. These are etymological derivations, and not exclusively conceptual derivations. In ancient Greek society, a distinction was made between the activities of teachers or pedagogues (*paidagōgos*) and subject teachers (*didaskalos*). A pedagogue, and consequently a pedagogic activity, became divorced from the idea of a subject teacher, and from a notion of didactics or learning a subject or subjects.<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Kant (1903), for example, writing in the latter part of the eighteenth century, distinguished between the nurturing of the child and formal instruction, the point being that pedagogy was at this time understood as more than just instruction. Kant further distinguished between the two insofar as he suggested that instruction is a training for school and guidance is a training for life.<sup>12</sup> The distinction between education and training had not yet taken on its modern meaning (see Chapter 8). The instructional element in pedagogy had earlier been introduced, at least in an informal way, by John Comenius (2012) in his

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<sup>10</sup> A fuller account of these etymologies can be found in Scott (2021).

<sup>11</sup> Here is one iteration: a pedagogue is a moral guide and custodian of a child-learner (this is complicated by the fact that many of these pedagogues were trusted slaves, who assumed an authority role in relation to their charges) and, in addition, a pedagogue was not a subject teacher. This revision and modification of the master–slave role is captured in remarks attributed to Socrates by Plato (1997). In a conversation between Socrates and a young boy called Lysis, Socrates asked Lysis whether there is anyone who controls him. Lysis replied, ‘Yes, he is my tutor here.’ Socrates then asked whether he is a slave. Lysis responded, ‘Why certainly, he belongs to us.’ Socrates concluded the exchange by saying, ‘What a strange thing ... a free person controlled by a slave.’

<sup>12</sup> In *Über Pädagogik (On Pedagogy)*, Kant (1903: 1) suggested the following: ‘Man is the only being who needs education. For by education we must understand nurture (the tending and feeding of the child), discipline (*Zucht*), and teaching, together with culture. According to this, man is in succession infant (requiring nursing), child (requiring discipline), and scholar (requiring teaching).’

book, *The Great Didactic (Didactica Magna)*.<sup>13</sup> This new meaning of didactics suggested that the point of life was to develop as a rational, self-regulated and devout human being.

Throughout most of medieval Europe, most formal learning took place under the patronage of the Catholic Church. A variety of Catholic pedagogical styles and techniques can be identified. Each of them has different pedagogical properties, and each of them gives a different meaning to the concept of pedagogy. The styles flex and overlap with each other. An exegetical approach is fundamentally organised around a holy book or books, and the associated commentary and interpretation. The curriculum is holy reading and prayer. More subtle and non-dogmatic processes of exegesis abound in the history of Catholic education.<sup>14</sup> For example, in Maximus the Confessor's *Ambigua ad Joannem* and *Ad Thalassium*, two traditions of monastic spiritual pedagogy are described: the exegetical *aporiai* tradition, a hermeneutic process that seeks to resolve difficulties posed by certain biblical passages, and the *quaestio-responsio* – a question and answer approach (Chapman, 1911). The *Ad Thalassium* and the *responsio* were, in essence, a form of spiritual catechism leading the learner to a mystical contemplation of the logoi and logos of creation.<sup>15</sup> These exegetical approaches were not gendered, except insofar as the doctrinal, ordinal and ethical contents of the curriculum were sexuate (see Leaton Gray and Scott, 2023).

Reflection on the world is a second type of Catholic pedagogical approach. An example of this is an Ignatian pedagogy (that is, a pedagogy developed within the tradition of St Ignatius).<sup>16</sup> The thrust of this pedagogy was that doing the spiritual exercises (to know the will of God) would transform the learner, so that she would make appropriate decisions about how to act in the world. Without this sense of spirituality, the subsequent ethical precepts held by her, which compel her to behave in this rather than that way, are empty and, moreover, likely to be misguided and wrong. Reflection in this sense, then, also embraces action

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13 *The Great Didactic (Didactica Magna)* was first published in Czech in 1648, in Latin in 1657 and in English in 1896.

14 See Louth (1996).

15 For Maximus, the logos is the centre of all the logoi, where these are understood as divine acts of will expressed at the moment of creation. It is this time moment that sees the birth of the logoi. Through the logoi, a well-ordered cosmos is brought into being – the logoi comprise the principles of procession (creation) and conversion (change).

16 The living of Ignatian values through the charism of Ignatian spirituality involves an orientation towards serving Christ in the world using Ignatius' tools of the Spiritual Exercises, including prayer, contemplation, spiritual direction, discernment and the daily Examen of Consciousness.

in the world. The person behaves in a reflective manner. Meanwhile, as an essential part of a Catholic liberal theory of education, a pedagogy of individual self-discovery was developed and used. The goal here is for the individual learner to achieve an independent point of view, and a personal Catholic voice. This can perhaps be described as a form of spiritual apprenticeship. A more organised Catholic form of external engagement reached its height of popularity in the medieval enthusiasm for service, using the resources of the surrounding community for learning scenarios. This approach has connections and relations with a pedagogic approach developed by the philosopher John Dewey (1998), learning by doing, which comprises a notion of phronesis or practical wisdom.<sup>17</sup>

Another way of framing the concept is through determining what counts as a pedagogic activity. The curricular emphasis is now on instrumentality and examinability as criteria for certain types of knowledge being included in a curriculum, and others being excluded. Indeed, the concept of pedagogy is now understood as exclusively didactic, with this borrowed idea more in line with how pedagogy is used as a concept in Europe. Didactics has acquired a more instrumental function. A praxis of critical pedagogy, in contrast, is designed to produce habits of thought that underpin and go deeper than our everyday thinking. Paulo Freire (1970) argued for an educational approach which encouraged learners to think critically about their education by making connections between their own individual problems in life and the social context or indexicality<sup>18</sup> of their lives. This emancipatory pedagogy is a praxis in which the learner engages in a cycle of developing theory, applying that theory, evaluating the results, reflecting on them and then theorising anew. Social transformation is the purpose and intention of this praxis at the collective level.

## A play-pedagogy

Some examples of learning objects – what it is that we should learn to fulfil our *Bildung* – are: learning how to care for someone, learning that 8 plus 8 equals 16, learning how to listen, learning about the spatiality and

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17 In Aristotelian ethics, the *Nicomachean Ethics* for example, phronesis is distinguished from wisdom or intellectual virtues, such as episteme and techne (Aristotle, 2018). The reason for this is because it has an essentially practical character.

18 Indexicality is the phenomenon of a sign pointing to (or indexing) some object in the context in which it occurs, and in relation to a taxonomy of objects.

temporality of objects in the world, learning what an adverb is, learning how to take part in a conversation, learning how to paint a wall, learning to be kind, learning how to kick a football, learning what kicking a football might mean, learning how to argue a case, learning how to express a wish, learning what a father is and what love is, learning what being a part of a way of life might be like and much more. These learning objects have dispositional elements, so, for example, you do not just learn how to count up to 16, you understand the activity of counting upwards as enframed in a complicated network of concepts and what things are.<sup>19</sup> In effect, this commits us to understanding concepts as being embedded in our three networks or constellations of meaning: the antecedents of the concept, its relations to other relevant concepts, and the way the concept is used in the lifeworld. Grammar, then, is a semantic idea;<sup>20</sup> in trying to understand the grammar of a collection of pedagogic processes and learning objects, we are always looking at what is meant by them and their arrangements. Grammar is not understood in terms of its linguistic reference, but rather in terms of how it can show meaning.

A child learns by using their imagination and being allowed to use their imagination. The reason for this is to develop and extend her ability to determine the possibilities of objects, and this includes an argument that learning is about developing the imaginative possibilities of how a concept can be used in a way of life. This supports the notion of learning as being about dispositional concepts and acquiring these dispositional concepts as they are used in the world, and as they fit within a framework or network of other dispositional concepts. This is achieved by determining the possibilities of use and being that inhere in these objects (conceptual or otherwise), even if only for a brief period of time

The principles that undergird a notion of play-pedagogy are complex and interrelated. A play-pedagogy is a concept that acquires its semantic content from meanings that are given to both words, and then used in combination. These words can only be understood in relation to how they are used in the world or a world. Indeed, using criteria, or acknowledging that there are always criteria being used in judgements that are made, points to the purpose or function of these criteria – the use of any criterion signifies a set of enablements and constraints as to how a word or concept

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19 Stanley Cavell (1979: 177) described this enframing in the following way: 'In learning language, you do not merely learn the pronunciation of sounds, and their grammatical orders, but the "forms of life" which make those sounds the words they are, do what they do – e.g. name, call, point, express a wish or affection, indicate a choice or an aversion, etc.'

20 A view endorsed by Wittgenstein (1953) in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

can be used. Using the term ‘play-pedagogy’ allows us to say something about two human activities or practices, playing and learning; and, consequently, a concept such as this is better understood as an active, engaged and committed activity in the world. A play-pedagogy has a particular relationship to knowledge, and this can be expressed as a means by which we learn about particular objects that are in the world, but that can only be learnt in a particular way. In addition, ethical and taxonomic valuations that inhere in the concept and in the practice of play-pedagogy are central to the meanings we can give to it. It is also worth noting that the concept of play-pedagogy has attached to it properties that relate to the grammar of the pedagogic process.

The concept and practice of play is determined by the principle that looking at things as if they could be otherwise is a worthwhile activity. Play is about transformational possibilities; that is, it both creates the conditions for being imaginative, and it allows the practice of imagination to function. This transformational process refers to ideas, materials, media and actions, creating in the process novel ways of thinking about these activities. There are three possibilities here: introducing into the learning setting alternative ways of seeing and thinking of which the learner was not aware; reworking the meanings that the learner has given to objects, object-relations and object configurations in their mind; and making something more coherent and adequate than it is at present. Play is the transformation of acts of imagination into actions in the world. There is also the sense that can be given to a play-pedagogy of understanding and connecting with other people’s minds and circumstances. In order to behave well towards other people, and to empathise with them and their circumstances, we must have a strong sense of imagination, because in imagining we step outside our own beliefs, understandings, reflections and memories in a transgressive sense, and thus implicitly accept that there is another person or persons who is not like us.<sup>21</sup> This both affirms to us the existence of other people and other minds, and allows us to behave in ways which are not purely solipsistic.

Following the principle that a pedagogy or learning process is logically dependent on the meanings that inhere in the learning object, play as a practice would seem to fit this best; and this is because play has characteristics that better align with the exercise and development of an imaginative capacity in the learner. Playing, then, is not a rest from

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<sup>21</sup> Pretending and imagining are sometimes thought of as homologous concepts. An obvious distinction between the two is that one is a state of the mind and the other is a behaviour in the world.

learning – a way of renewing the energies and capacities of the learner before they embark on harder and more demanding tasks – but an essential pedagogic process for the learning of certain types of objects in the world, and, perhaps more significantly, for laying the foundations for learning other types of objects as well. Pedagogy, then, is an important element of a *Bildung*.

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# Thingful learning: towards an object-oriented pedagogy

Søren Bengtsen

## Introduction: fearing the thingful

Western philosophy has been haunted by a fear of the object, or the thing.<sup>1</sup> From René Descartes (1996), we learn that only the subject is real and may escape the evil trappings of the world of things that forever threaten its rising above the world through an object-detached pure thinking. Even though Descartes (1996: 19) acknowledges that the subject is a ‘thing that thinks’, the thingness includes an immunity to objects, as only thought ‘is inseparable from me’ (Descartes, 1996: 18). From both Immanuel Kant (2012) and, later, Jean-Paul Sartre (2001), we learn that the thing stands in contrast to the freedom of the subject, with its ability to transcend the thingness (and, thereby, fate of bondage), either due to the power of reason (Kant) or to the restlessness and craving will of the for-itself (Sartre). The struggle between subject and object has defined the way we understand ourselves as a cultural contrast to the natural surrounding and environment of a bland world of ‘things’, without any redeeming powers, inner life, true value, worth or even reality. The object and the thing have been bywords for a lower, meaner and dehumanised form of existence and being, and have been granted only instrumental value due to their possible usefulness to the human being.

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1 In the chapter, I fluctuate between the terms ‘thing’ and ‘object’. For the sake of the argument here, I use the two terms interchangeably. The reason why I use both terms is that the philosophies I engage with sometimes use the term ‘thing’ (Descartes, Kant, Sartre, Heidegger, Bhaskar, Lingis) and sometimes use the term ‘object’ (mainly Harman).

As argued by Roy Bhaskar (2008: 16), the debunking of the object is a sign of a 'barely concealed anthropomorphism in philosophy', and it reveals a 'strong anthropocentric current' in philosophy, which has 'sought to rephrase questions about the world as questions about the nature and behaviour of men' (Bhaskar, 2008: 44). According to Graham Harman (2002: 33), even Martin Heidegger's ontological analysis of the thing reveals an underlying human-centred ontology, as only 'Dasein [is] able to insinuate cracks into [the] totalizing machinery, liberating specific fragments from what would otherwise have been a single homogeneous effect'. To Harman (2002: 34), Heidegger maintains 'the human/inhuman rift' in philosophy carried over from earlier centuries. For Emmanuel Levinas (2003: 42), the totalising effect of Western philosophy is a general reduction of 'the other to the same' and, thereby, not allowing the subject itself 'to be alienated by the other'. The primacy of the subject in Western philosophy constitutes what Levinas (2003: 44) calls 'the ontological imperialism', which creates an ontological hierarchy situating the subject (whoever that may be) above the object, or the other, and gives the subject the privilege of projecting its own values and belief systems on to the surrounding world. As Harman (2005: 244) strikingly puts it, human beings make up just a few billion objects among other objects, and 'are not special guests at the table of Being whose absence would simplify the universe immeasurably'. The human being is one kind of object among others, and it 'makes no difference to Being itself whether humans die off or not; the axes of the world will continue their strife long after we have all succeeded in murdering each other' (Harman, 2005: 244).

Recently, similar criticism has been voiced by Rosi Braidotti (2019) through her discussions of what it means to be human today. In the intersections between transhumanism and posthumanism, Braidotti argues that for any biological future to be sustainable, we have to rid ourselves of the understanding that the world exists for the sake of the human being, and even the assumption that any worthy future would include the existence of humans. The posthumanist view has been taken up within educational studies through the criticism of the inherent anthropocentrism in the higher education curriculum, and the argument that 'Dichotomies such as human-nature and human-Earth, no longer work or fit' an education for sustainability (Gildersleeve and Kleinhesselink, 2019: 5). Such views can be traced back to the line of argument in Michael Bonnett's (2004; 2009) work on nature as a tangled web, rather than the background for the stage of the human. Other strands within educational studies include the exploration of alien ecologies beyond human awareness (Bengtson and Barnett,

2017a; 2019), perhaps even resulting in possible dark pedagogies (Lysgaard et al., 2019), fundamentally challenging the human outlook and selfwarded privilege as the goal of evolution. A different approach is found in the recent work by Joris Vlieghe and Piotr Zamojski (2019) arguing for a ‘thing-centred pedagogy’, where education becomes a celebration of the world through the engagement with, and appreciation of, the object of our study, rather than focusing primarily on either the teacher or the student. Related object-oriented approaches to education may also be found earlier, in the work of, for example, Rømer (2011) and Bengtson (2014).

In this chapter, I aim to do two things in order to contribute to the growing literature on object-oriented education. In my approach, I mainly draw from the American philosophers Alphonso Lingis and Graham Harman. First, I aim to explore the human being’s obsession with objects to show that autonomy and emancipation achieved through education does not remove or distance the human being from the world of things, but actually releases the human being from its subjecthood, and merges it with its surroundings. Second, I aim to discuss the implications for a thingful learning and an object-oriented pedagogy, in which the dignity of what is other, the humility in the face of what lies beyond the human realm, and a respect rising from pluralism, lies embedded. In line with Lingis and Harman, I argue that a renewed interest in objecthood and thingness will enable a much overdue breakout from the hegemonic subject, and will unleash the human being into a more diverse and sustainable world.

## Object-obsession and thingful becoming

Things speak to us, and we speak to them. Since early childhood, and through our entire lives, we use things and objects as tools for projections, thereby extending the way we see the world and ourselves into a different material and tangible reality. We assign certain meaning to a watch given to us by our father, to a pebble with a hole in it found on the beach during a particular summer holiday by the sea, or to a cheap paperback copy of our favourite novel first read in high school, and now yellowed and coffee-stained but impossible for us to throw away. We sit at the same desk in the classroom, which gives us comfort and signals a form of identity and belonging, and we are very hesitant to change our old computer, as we know all the quirks of its processing and are familiar with the, now long outdated, software.

Things are not simply there as an anonymous and bland background to the autonomy of the self, as a vague scenery for a detached subject to traverse at will. In our very being and becoming, we are mixed up and infiltrated with things; they anchor us to the world, and they enable certain social and cultural identities to unfold, while hindering others. As Lingis (2011: 67) writes, things ‘lure us, provoke us, direct us, charm or hex us’, and the self-conception of our actions and personal growth often takes place in connection with things as a form of ‘Fetishism’, in which we recognise ‘a realm of good or bad luck’.

Not only do we possess things, but we are also, in turn, possessed by *them*. The human being is a thing-entangled being. Never do we experience ‘the world’ in a pure and uniform way; we always encounter a world of things – our small flat in the city, which is starting to feel too small for the family, our neighbour’s black Mercedes that we have always found too shiny and well-polished for a quarter in this part of town, and the long row of birch trees marking the entrance to the old cemetery on our way to the grocery store. Just as we are never merely learning something at random, we are always learning something in particular – a maths problem that we humbly give up solving as its mystery escapes us, the fascinating method of airborne navigation applied by Goldsmith insects, or the dark and painful colonial past of our country. We are never learning about the world in a vague and general sense; we are always learning about certain things, events, lifeforms or persons in the world.

As Lingis (2011: 84) argues, we stay in touch with things through words, hobbies and education as we ‘recognize and respect those who have long and deep experience with things’. It is through the careful thought, study and deep experience of people who have ‘dwelt long and intimately with a painting by Rembrandt, a temple in Cambodia, a willow tree in one’s backyard’ that we feel inspired and learn, as only they seem to be able to find and formulate the right words with which to speak of them (and perhaps even *with* them). The relationship with things goes beyond the mere practical and instrumental, and assimilative, purpose. As Lingis (2011) argues, our relationship with things is, as with people, defined by tact. Tact is about finding the right words, and the right silences, to describe and engage with things, and an unrestrained ‘garrulousness is as much a lack of tact about things as it is about people’ (Lingis, 2011: 84). When learning about specific things (religious customs, geometry, sonnets, postmodern architecture, existential angst, deep ocean whales and the like), we become careful, and tactful, in order to find the right words, concepts or theories that capture them most fully – and we critically revisit these concepts and theories in order to refine,

nance or redefine them as time goes by. Lingis (1998: 64) goes even further, and argues that we do not merely encounter things as random dead objects filling up the setting of the human stage, but that we are, ‘despite our own stock concepts and our taxonomies, continually implicated in things that are trying out their reality [on us]’, and a thing is there as an imperative:

We are not grasping the carpentry of things in their appearances nor subjectively fabricating images of them, but find ourselves caught up in their images, their shadows, their reflections, halos, the harmonics of their colours, the rhythms of their forms. The facades, caricatures, projections and reflections of things are interesting; they do not outline something of practical interest, but involve us in themselves. We find ourselves among them and carried on by them into a time of fate. (Lingis, 1998: 101)

As human beings, we are not so much obsessed by ourselves as we are obsessed with things, and, as Harman (2005: 140) argues, contrary ‘to the usual view, what we really want is to be *objects*’. This is not in the Sartrean sense of becoming reduced to a tool, a means to an end or an object of ridicule – but to ‘become distinct forces to be reckoned with’ (Harman, 2005: 140) that shape the world in particular ways and contribute with a sense of beauty, power or fascination. It is not absolute freedom we strive towards, but the entanglement with things. As Harman (2005: 141) argues, ‘we take out large mortgages to buy huts in forests or the seaside, or we trade our freedom to follow one unique person’, or to spend our lives caring for and protecting animals, plants, persons, sacred and profane places, village squares, deserted and abandoned places, collections of rocks, toys or precious junk that are dear to us. Things outline our world, and sometimes our fate, and we often educate ourselves to understand exactly that form of absorption into the world – the thingbound existence. As Harman (2005: 137) writes, we are seduced by the charm of objects, which is their ‘innocent absorption in being just what they are, which in each case is something that we ourselves can never be’.

Our process of becoming does not only take place in the vicinity of things (Kant) or through the mediation of a general ontological thingness (*Zeug*) of the world (Heidegger); it also happens through the multiple, and always particular, encounters with things. This feature of thingful becoming, Harman (2005: 245) terms ‘allure’, which happens not only between human beings and other objects, but constantly as well between various objects themselves. Allure is the irresistible, magnetic pull in

multiple directions simultaneously, when individual, particular things pull us towards them. Often, we simply just call this ‘perception’, which, again, places the active, and real, power with the human being, and reduces the surroundings into passive, dull objects to be conquered by the human gaze. Harman (2005: 245) argues that the situation is the opposite; that in most situations, we, as human beings, are the objects gazed upon and pulled at by our surroundings, which makes our becoming thingfully ‘vicarious, buffered, and asymmetrical’.

In our process of becoming, we become, increasingly, thingful, and full of things. Learning, education and formation do not separate us and detach us from things but, on the contrary, create an ever-increasing entanglement with things. However, this is not a pessimistic but an optimistic point. Becoming object-bound and thingly involved enable us to connect with, and become absorbed into, the world. This is not to say that this can only lead to a positive result, as things do not carry an inherent feature of an absolute good (to human beings). It does mean, however, that the process of becoming has to be defined in terms of fascination, wonder, bafflement and surprise – in supplement to the rather staler terminology of knowledge, skills and competences. We may be knowledgeable, skilful, and competent, but only so due to a prior, and more fundamental, process of enchantment, allure and enjoyment.

## The otherness of objects

In philosophy, and the philosophy of education, we are too often brought up with the understanding that things are either flat, dull and without an inner being (reserved only for human beings), or instrumental in the sense that they connect with us and become a useful extension of our practical and technical pursuits. Things are, in short, there for the sake of humans; the lords of being. However, in Lingis and Harman, we learn that things and objects cannot, like any other being, be reduced to how human beings disclose their practical, technological or aesthetical usage and meaning. Things are withdrawing, and only leave us with a faint trace of their deeper, and stranger than we may possibly fathom, being and becoming. As Lingis (1998: 63) writes, the ‘key, inner formula of a mango, a willow tree, or a flat smooth stone, is never grasped; the real thing is before our perception as a task for an exploration’. Contrary to views from social constructivism and other anthropocentric knowledge paradigms, the real thing cannot be reduced to the sum of all that we, as human beings, have recorded of it. The thing ‘closes in upon itself, remains

exterior, always beyond all that our perceptual samplings have turned up of it, not a given but an external ordinance' (Lingis, 1998: 63). As Harman argues, the reality of things cannot be rewritten into the stale and bland vocabulary of positivism, where all things (and beings in general) are simplified to electrochemical units and atoms – splintered, fragmented, and devoid of all personality, diversity and beauty. As Harman (2005: 19) writes, in our anthropocentrism and human narcissism, we have lost sight of the possibility that autonomy does not only apply to what is human, but also to what is entirely different and other:

Other objects have surprises in store as well: lemon meringue, popsicles, Ajax Amsterdam, reggae bands, grains of sand. Each of these things remain a unitary substance beyond its impact on others – and obviously, none of them is an ultimately tiny particle of matter from which all else is built. They are not ultimate materials, but autonomous forms, forms somehow coiled up or folded in the crevices of the world and exerting their power on all that approaches them.

The being of things escapes us, and we quickly lose interest if they do not immediately mirror or resemble our own personal, social or cultural pursuits. However, things are not there for the sake of human beings, and we have a lot less control over things than we would like to think. More often, things have us in their sway, and they compel us to form ideas, to organise ourselves, or even to become inspired in our creation of values for our societies and cultures. As Lingis (1998: 63) underlines, the 'reality of things is not given in our perception, but orders it as an imperative'. In our encounter with things, we only glimpse their ontological halo or periphery of being, and things are not offering their services to us, but constantly withdrawing from our reach. As Harman (2005: 245) notes, things are 'signalling from beyond – from a level of reality that we do not currently occupy and can never occupy, since it belongs to the object itself and not to any relation we could ever have with it'. At the time we become conscious of admiring the reflection of light in the diamond, the speed and agility of the deer, or the colossal posture of the mountain rising before us out of the mist, we are already long gone into the reach of things and are delivered over to their powers.

Things are not necessarily our friends, and certainly not our slaves, and they often do not need to form alliances with human beings to persist or unfold. When we become entangled with things, and try and bend them to our own purposes, we quickly, and often painfully, realise that 'every implement may break, misfire, explode', and may 'harbor the

possibility of the death of the agent and of the deletion of the field' (Lingis, 1998: 83). Not to say that things are divided into inherently good or evil beings, an anthropomorphic illusion that Nietzsche (2007) unmasked long ago. Indeed, as Lingis (1998: 83) underlines, every lure 'may be a snare, every path an ambush, every stone on that path may be a trap beneath which lies the abyss', and it is through our sensing of the 'recalcitrance of things [that] our hand senses its own possible impotence'. In our involvement with things, there are no guarantees for a happy outcome (for us, the humans), and often we fall prey to the temptation to exploit things, through technology, to exert power and dominion over specific social groups, ethnicities, genders, or the very things themselves.

Our fascination with things may lead to a power drunkenness or warped ethics, and, even if things inspire and charm us, they may also, as Harman (2005: 141) points out, 'deliver us to bondage in repulsive places, whether these be libertine dungeons, Nibelung underworlds, fields of chemical warfare, or outright slaughterhouses'. To learn from things, it is central that we disentangle ourselves from the way we inscribe our own moral values and social codes into *their* being and becoming (Nietzsche, 2007), both animate and inanimate, and allow ourselves to become open and non-judgemental in our entanglements with things. Things may become our teachers instead of being reduced to mere teaching material, or digital media instrumental to learning and teaching. Learning from things requires humbleness, wonder and respect, and the ability to sidestep the taken-for-granted super value of humanity. Thingful learning may not make us, immediately, more job-ready, professional or technologically competent – and it may even ruin the idea of technology as the colonial dominion of man over the thing – but it may result in a deeper form of learning where the depths of things are probed, and new worlds open up (also for humans). Thingful learning implies the resistance towards instrumentalism (making things submissive to humans), projectionism (inscribing human values of good and evil into things) and fetishism (subordinating human freedom to the perceived will and nature of things). Thingful learning implies adapting to the rhythm, time, space and imperatives of the specific thing. How we explore the sound of crystal is embedded in the carefulness with which we treat it, just as the patience while waiting for the blood moon during the next total lunar eclipse is linked with a deep wonder and urge to be closer to extraterrestrial forms of being that we will only be able to encounter from afar. Thingful learning is, surely, unsettled through our ambivalence and double standards when we carefully, and enthused, watch the flickering flight of a butterfly through its (seemingly) chaotic movements across a

forest lake, while we, at the same time, print our students' assignments for marking on paper from forests scorched and exhausted through generations, and press the plastic keys on our computer in a silent atmosphere of impending planetary destruction.

## Learning as enjoyment and desire

Paradoxically, in a time focusing more on global sustainability, the climate, and the responsibilities to endangered species, higher education is often conceived of as subject-oriented. Universities are responding to object-oriented problems with subject-oriented solutions. In a time when there is a great need to understand other cultures, complex ecosystems, and life conditions of life forms we cannot live without, the response is to focus on generic competences and transferrable skills narrowly relevant for the job market, the *human* mindset and *human* world. Universities are much overlooked alternatives to such a view, and higher education has a great potential for unleashing the object-oriented desire in the coming generations. Besides being possible pathways to certain jobs and careers, universities are powerful thingful institutions. Teaching and learning take place more as a thingful becoming than as a process of skills-centred learning (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019). When trying to figure out how to build a bridge across a great chasm in the mountains, students of engineering are not, first and foremost, preoccupied with exactly what skills of calculation or what competences in group work they develop – they are immersed in the *thing*: the angle of the mountain slopes, the quality of the stone and earth, the wind systems, gravity pull, pressures on the construction over time and the like. They *become* the gap and the bridge vicariously. Learning does not remove us from the world, but brings us ever closer to it and 'lets us step inside dimensions of reality and experience afresh different aspects of the world' (Barnett and Bengtson, 2020: 86). Through higher education, we may hope not only to understand the world as a flat, two-dimensional, and cerebral layout, but actually, through years of studying and research, to 'see with the eyes of the tiger, or the space-traveller, or the prisoner of war, or listen with the ears of the diplomat or feel with the hands of the mountaineer' (Barnett and Bengtson, 2020: 86). To learn is to traverse the world of things, and to become entranced by them.

Contrary to the typical view, the main objective of higher education is not to obtain stronger control of the world through a fine-tuned set of skills and competences. The main purpose is to learn how to enjoy the

world of which we are part. As Levinas (2003) argues, perhaps somewhat overlooked, as pointed out by both Harman (2005) and Joldersma (2008), learning about and being able to respect what is different and other to ourselves is possible only with a background of enjoyment. What sustains us and makes us belong to the earth are not the tools and instruments we may develop for all kinds of useful practical purposes. As Levinas (2003: 110) writes, we live *from* ‘good soup, air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep’, and their ‘existence is not exhausted by ... utilitarian schematism’, but they are ‘objects of enjoyment’. Things that really matter are always ‘more than strictly necessary; they make up the grace of life’ (Levinas, 2003: 112). Enjoyment, for Levinas, however, does not validate hedonism or self-indulgence. As Levinas (2003: 117) argues, enjoyment allows us to ‘note the difference between need and Desire: in need I can sink my teeth into the real and satisfy myself in assimilating the other; in Desire there is no sinking one’s teeth into being, no satiety, but an uncharted future before me’. By probing, studying and engaging, and by becoming entangled with things, higher education makes us realise that things have much greater potential (and being) than as mere tools and designs for the human being to exert itself.

Where the need would only reproduce what we already know, and know how to do, desire takes us beyond ourselves into a wider and unknown world. Learning about the depths of things may also mean that we unlearn commonly held beliefs about ourselves and our society and culture. As Biesta (2013) argues, there is a profound risk in education. Thingful learning challenges traditional understandings of learning as necessarily connected to personal growth and formation. Letting go of one’s need to assimilate the things we study, in order to allow for the desire to engage with their otherness and how they may not resemble our own endeavours, and may even work against our needs, may be deeply unsettling. We may learn that the natural energy resources may not sustain our societies for as long as we thought, or that our misconceived linear process of cultural evolution has not contributed to greater diversity, but to a more narrow realisation of the human potential, or that our earlier glorified past rests on imperial and colonial ventures. There are ‘no guarantees that higher education will lead out of the cave’ and, possibly, ‘higher education could, unintentionally, get students sidetracked into an existential or epistemological darker place’ (Bengtsen and Barnett, 2017b: 124). The potential for any form of higher education, and critical and deep learning, is, however, to become entirely caught up within the things we study – and to grow out of the subject and emerge within the object. Learning is not about becoming released from the world, but, on the contrary, is an ‘absorption into the world’ (Harman, 2005: 253).

As Harman (2005) argues, we exist in the interior of objects, not confronted with them from the distance of an autonomous subject. We are not studying or learning *about* things; instead, through learning, we realise that we exist on the interior of objects – submerged into realms of existence we may come to navigate and connect deeply with, but not through rational grammar and imperial cognitive schemas. As Lingis (1996: 33) writes, the world ‘is not a framework, an order, or an arrangement, but a nexus of levels’, which we cannot monitor or survey from above, but there are different styles and rhythms of being that we may try to catch on to. The ‘things subsist not as givens, but as tasks to which perception finds itself devoted’ (Lingis, 1996: 35). Through profound learning, we realise that our very existence on the interior of objects is ‘defined by sincerity and involvement, not transcendence and critique’ (Harman, 2005: 255). With Harman (2005: 255), I argue that learning does not release us from having ‘fewer naïve beliefs than the fool or the hack’, but allows us to believe ‘in even more things, and more surprising things’. Learning is not first and foremost about asserting ‘one’s own unique critical liberation in the world and trying to burn down traditional or reactionary temples, the key is to listen closely to the faint radio signals emitted by objects ... to hear what was never heard before’ (Harman, 2005: 255). Learning is listening. Learning allows us to engage with things in ways that foreground our joy and enjoyment of things – not ourselves. Learning enables the move from having a need to know, and being able to programme, control and direct the world, towards a desire to know things from within themselves and, thereby, to come closer to realms of existence perhaps entirely unrelated to the human being. To learn is to become unrelated to the known, to desire the unknown (Bengtson and Barnett, 2017a).

## Towards an object-oriented pedagogy

Learning is not directed, first and foremost, towards knowledge, skills and competences, which make up what Lingis (1994) and Biesta (2006) term the ‘rational community’, where worldviews and mindsets are reproduced in the upholding of epistemic, social and cultural sameness. Learning is directed towards diversity and pluralism that cannot result from an anthropocentric and subject-oriented form of learning, which is why we need to pay much greater respect to an object-oriented pedagogy. In thingful learning, aesthetics is central, but not understood as decoration or motivational aspects of a particular form of learning style or preference

in the individual or group. Aesthetics should be understood in the ontological meaning of the term, where learning happens due to the deep enjoyment, desire and involvement with things that are otherwise and different to ourselves. Aesthetics makes possible the realisation that we live and learn on the interior of objects, not in confrontation with, or in mastery over, them.

Further, thingful learning has a foundational ethical dimension. As seen also in Lingis (and perhaps more implicitly in Harman), enjoyment and desire have an ethical core. The ethical component in thingful learning, which is also foregrounded in Lingis (1994; 1998), draws from Levinas's (2003) argument that ethics must be seen as prior to knowledge, understanding, competence and mastery. We cannot begin to learn and develop, if we have not already questioned the dominance and rights of our own worldview and privilege. I argue, with Levinas (2003: 43), that learning takes place through a 'calling into question of the same – which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same', and which is only 'brought about by the other'. The goal of learning is not autonomy, but a reversed asymmetry, where I allow the thing to teach me – instead of my own teaching the thing, or teaching with things, as mere course examples. Perhaps stretching Levinas (too far?), I argue that things have a face (in the Levinasian meaning), in the sense that they 'cannot be comprehended' or 'encompassed' by my own understanding, social and cultural norms, and being. Learning may happen if the relation to things is 'maintained without violence, in peace with this absolute alterity' (Levinas, 2003: 197).

In a related way, with Marion (2012), I argue that learning may take place if our relation to the thing is not (only) constituted by the thing as idol, manifesting our own mirror image, but always also as icon. The thing as icon is characterised not from 'the hand of a man but from the infinite depth that crosses it', and the essential in the icon 'comes to it from elsewhere or comes to it as that elsewhere whose invisible strangeness saturates the visibility of the face with meaning' (Marion, 2012: 21). Learning is not detached and disconnected from things in a cool, controlled form of safety or mastery, but is to become involved with things – to become entangled and mixed up with things. Opening to the otherness, strangeness and allure of things cannot take place without risk. It may become, in Nietzsche's (2002) formulation, a 'dangerous game'. When involved deeply with things, we cannot be sure to return to the same point of departure, and the more object-oriented our learning becomes, the more we risk eroding the untouchable throne of the enlightened subject.

Thingful learning runs against the smooth and circular form of active learning, and student-centred learning, in the sense that thingful

learning is centred on things, not persons. Letting oneself submerge into the realm of the specific thing may result in an experience of darkness and nothingness, where ‘students do not arrive at a conclusion nor achieve an identifiable outcome’ (Dall’Alba and Bengtson, 2019: 1483). In thingful learning, students may ‘start to not-know’, and experience a weird and unsettling form of freedom that ‘is utterly free, hauntingly and dreadfully free’, where we may reach a ‘point zero’ for learning, where it ‘stirs, awakens, and becomes active out of nothing’ (Dall’Alba and Bengtson, 2019: 1483). When probing things deeply, normal estimates of time and space may become weird and strange. How may time be understood from the being and becoming of a mountain, or the ancient pines and aspen trees living for thousands of years? What does space and volume mean from the view of ants, deep sea whales or planets? Thingful learning depends on the ability of reversed assimilation – of letting oneself becoming assimilated into the realm of things, instead of the typical approach to learning as anthropomorph and circular.

An object-oriented pedagogy to facilitate thingful learning is not an ivory-tower pedagogy, and it certainly cannot rest on the laurels of a remote, detached and distant philosophical ethos. An object-oriented pedagogy calls for thingful involvement, engagement and entanglement with the world (and everything in it!). However, an object-oriented pedagogy does challenge the understanding of education seen from the rational community, where one educates for what one already knows, to maintain the status quo and to expand a worldview and society of sameness and totality. An object-oriented pedagogy has to be ‘characterized by learning for the unknown and wrestling with questions to which we do not know the answer’ (Bengtson and Barnett, 2020: 7). An object-oriented pedagogy opens up to, and recognises and acknowledges, a world of diversity, plurality and difference. It is the acknowledgement that animate and inanimate objects are not living in one and the same world, but are, on the contrary, occupying an infinite number of worlds – sometimes intersecting and overlapping, and sometimes not. As I have touched upon earlier (Bengtson, 2014), such a view does have certain implications for how we wield and deploy language and conceptualisation in educational theory and practice.

An object-oriented pedagogy must be particularly sensitive and critical towards the language and concepts used, in order to avoid assimilation and anthropocentrism. However, we do speak from an anthropomorphic worldview, and we are, in fact, human beings (as things among other things), and so to become thingful in our learning, our languages and concepts have to be permeable and open. In Bhaskar’s

(2008: 67) words, ontology must become ‘flat’ and without tyranny; not flat in the sense that everything can be reduced to the same, but flat in the sense that no ontology holds dominion over others. As Bhaskar (2008: 116) underlines, science and learning can only take place *because* the world is open, not the other way around. I am not arguing that an object-oriented pedagogy easily solves the issues that human beings have in *their* world – other pedagogies and theories on learning are much better equipped for that. What I am arguing is that to truly educate for sustainability, not just in the anthropocentric meaning (what is sustainable for the world we, as human beings, know and care for), our learning has to become increasingly thingful, and our pedagogies increasingly object-oriented. The good news is that the things are all around us – the world is already open. Our task is to make ourselves open to the world.<sup>2</sup>

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## Some concluding thoughts about learning

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*The Times* Commission on Education produced its final report in June 2022.<sup>1</sup> It made 45 recommendations for reforming the English education system. These ranged from the banal ('Every primary school should have a library' [*Times Education Commission, 2022: 22*]) to the interesting but undeveloped ('A British Baccalaureate at 18' should be authorised that would be 'an equally rigorous but broader qualification than A-levels with academic and vocational options under the same umbrella' [*Times Education Commission, 2022: 38*]). What is missing from this report and its recommendations are: a coherent theory of learning; an in-depth understanding of educative processes (as opposed to training processes<sup>2</sup> – see [Chapter 8](#)); a theory of curriculum that is based on a real understanding of how we learn (children and adults); and a sense of coherence and consistency. (Recommendation 16, referring to the need for a British Baccalaureate, which has some holistic elements, is in conflict with Recommendation 17, which suggests that 'at 16 pupils should take a slimmed-down set of exams in five core subjects' (*Times Education Commission, 2022: 39*), seemingly in denial of some fundamental Baccalaureate principles, such as holism, breadth, *Bildung*, coherence, solidarity and comprehensiveness.)

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1 At the time of writing this last chapter, we cannot know the significance of this policy document. It may have a long-lasting effect, or its influence may be short-lived.

2 The key to understanding what has happened to the English education system over the last thirty years is the imposition and entrenchment of managerial and training processes, replacing educative and learning approaches. These managerial processes have also been given precedence in other public services, and in other countries around the world. Much more needs to be written about this, and especially about one of its consequences, the reduction of scholarship and research in the academy.

In this book, we (the book's authors and, in particular, David Scott in [Chapters 5, 8 and 13](#)) have focused on some of these Baccalaureate principles, without any of us going beyond them and developing a *Bildungstheorie*, with its central curricular component, learning. In this last chapter of the book, we will be attempting to rectify this, and, in addition, we will identify some transgressive learning strategies. These refer to a projected state of affairs which is in opposition to a current state of affairs, and usually the status quo. These strategies are: counter-conductings, emancipations, decolonisations, immanent critiques, textual readings, decategorisations, absentings, praxis(ings), transframings, reflections and textualisations. They can also be curricularised, as, fundamentally, all knowledge-development activities can be.<sup>3</sup>

Here are some suggestions from which a Baccalaureate curriculum could and should be derived (see [Chapter 5](#)). There are 12 areas of life: epistemics (knowing), modalities (communicating), temporalities (genealogising), spatialities (positioning), physicalist sciences (cognising), hermeneutics (understanding), technologies (enhancing), meditations (philosophising), ethics (being), valorisations (valuing), corporalities (embodying) and creativities (being creative), and these are the building blocks of any curriculum that we want to construct. The easy part of making or constructing a curriculum is to describe or give a credible account of knowledge production and curriculum formation with regards to the concept and practice of learning. The difficult part is making a judgement about what those forms of knowledge might be and what they cannot be, that is, those dispositions, cognitions, processes and embodiments that we think are appropriate for inclusion in a curriculum, and those that should not be included. This is not a directory of pedagogic knowledge, because the learning object has logical and other types of inferential connections and relations with the way it can be learnt, and thus its pedagogy is derived from the constitution of the learning object, its learning *modus operandi*, and the characteristics of the learning environment (see [Chapter 1](#)). It also involves a series of rational choices (see [Chapter 3](#)) and, consequently, finding good reasons for those choices. The key relations in this *Bildungstheorie* are: maturation, progression, narration, possibility, projection, praxis, edification, justification and teleology.

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3 This process of curricularisation is complex, as it also has to take account of current framings of the curriculum, which in most countries around the world can be characterised as neoliberal.

## Curriculum models

In the first instance, we need to understand what these curriculum notions are, what disciplinary limits and enablements they have, and how they connect to other concepts and conceptual frameworks. The concept and practice of curriculum is characterised by its polysemic, ideological and contested nature. There are 10 possible curriculum discursive configurations: systemic technological, critical reconceptualist, sociocultural or cognitive constructivist, phenomenological, epistemic foundationalist, conservative restorationist, autonomous instrumentalist, economist, postmodernist, and neoliberal, which focuses on competences, and extra-national single surface comparative and assessment-driven implementation mechanisms. There are, or have been, more of these discursive configurations, but these are the most important ones.

Systemic-technological versions of the curriculum are characterised by an underpinning belief in science as the model for determining what should be included in a curriculum and how it should be delivered. In this version of the curriculum, atomism, pre-specification and control are prioritised, with the curriculum conceptualised in terms of behavioural objectives and an input–output model of schooling. Behavioural objectives<sup>4</sup> are derived from the philosophical theory of behaviourism, and they have been used specifically within the discipline of education to provide an explanation for the play of social and educational objects. Behaviourism is a complicated philosophy, which makes three interrelated claims. The first of these is that if we are trying to understand human behaviour and the life course, we should not be concerned with what is in people’s minds, but with how human beings behave. The second claim is that behaviours can be explained without reference to internalised events in the mind. The third claim is that if psychological terms are used as descriptors or evaluative markers, then they should be replaced by behavioural terms. Examples of this are: the use of behavioural modification drugs, such as antipsychotics, to override volitional and intentional cognitive processes of the individual; behavioural techniques to predict the behaviour of populations during the recent Covid-19 pandemic; and training processes to replace educative processes for becoming a teacher in schools in the UK and the USA.<sup>5</sup>

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4 Lawrence Stenhouse (1975) in the 1970s and 1980s criticised the behavioural objectives movement, although this criticism seems to have had little effect.

5 They were remarkably unsuccessful.

There is a set of curriculum perspectives that offers a more critical approach to knowledge, and therefore to the curriculum, what should constitute a curriculum and how it should be constructed. A praxis of critical pedagogy seeks to surface, and, in the process, subvert existing material and discursive arrangements, such as racist, sexist, homophobic and unequal social relations. It is predicated on a clear ethical position with regards to society and to the way society reproduces itself (this usually takes the form of socialist, communitarian, anti-capitalist, feminist, liberal and other frameworks and beliefs), although some versions of critical pedagogy emphasise the need to disrupt conventional school knowledge structures and the reproductive processes that accompany them, without specifying alternatives for learners.

A third curricular movement can be described as sociocultural or social constructivist. A particular iteration is cultural-historical activity theory. It was inspired by Lev Vygotsky, and as its centrepiece, it had the triangular model of subject, object and mediating artefact. When people engage in a learning activity, they do so by interacting with the material and discursive world around them. What they are doing is entering into a social practice and taking part in social activities. For Vygotsky (1978), our contacts with people and their environments are mediated by artefacts, such as physical tools, discursive practices, arrangements of people, technologies and social norms. Vygotsky was primarily concerned with meaning structures and, consequently, the development of a notion of semiotic mediation, which constituted an abnegation of the behaviourist paradigm.<sup>6</sup>

A fourth curriculum tendency is interpretivism. Those frameworks that broadly fit into this category understand the curriculum from a phenomenological, ethnographic, cultural-anthropological, interpretive, ethnological or ethnomethodological position. The key elements are meaning-making and human volition in both understanding and implementing the curriculum. Phenomenology, the driving force behind this curriculum perspective, is a meta-philosophy that focuses on three key aspects of learning: the relationship of the individual to and with the world; the subsequent conception and activation of being in the world; and how our descriptions, words, frameworks and theories can provide us with some purchase on that world. Whereas behaviourists are

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6 Learning can be seen as adaptive rather than transformative, and Vygotsky's (1978) work has always been associated with the latter rather the former (see Scott, 2021): 'A word devoid of thought is a dead thing, and a thought unembodied in words remains a shadow ... The teacher must adopt the role of facilitator not content provider ... Through others, we become ourselves ... By giving our students practice in talking with others, we give them frames for thinking on their own' (Vygotsky, 1978: 1–31).

concerned with the behaviour of individuals, and sidestep the inner workings of the mind, phenomenologists argue that a notion of consciousness is essential to any theory of learning.

Curriculum theorists have also sought to develop universal and objective forms of knowledge, which provide a rationale or justification for a school, college or university curriculum. Before we discuss these types of theories, we should note that a descriptor such as objectivity, a key term in post-truth discursive politics, contains multiple rather than singular meanings, as it is used in the world. In Scott and Scott (2018) the concept and practice of objectivity and objectivising is given six different meanings: that something can exist objectively without it being perceived by human beings; that if something meets a set of truth conditions, it is objective; that something is objective when the relevant knowers' traces, such as values and interests, are bracketed out; that something is objective if it can be directly accessed through observation; that something is objective if its mode of application to the world is correct; and that something is objective when more than one knower can agree on its truthfulness. Bearing this in mind, we can say that epistemic foundationalism has three principal forms: cognitive-impressionism, cognitive-universality and metaphysical essentialism. A theory of cognitive-impressionism suggests that an idea is correct or apt insofar as it impresses itself on a person's consciousness with such force and conviction that they cannot doubt it. Cognitive-universality suggests that reality is unknowable, but that the mind operating in an essentialist way supplies the structuring mechanism for the apprehension of the object. A third type is metaphysical, and this refers to transcendental and ontological essentialisms, both of which have epistemic consequences.

Conservative-restorationists suggest that the curriculum should be anchored in the past, and they argue for canons of influential texts, the inculcation of values rooted in stability and hierarchy, formal and didactic modes of pedagogy, strong insulations between theoretical and everyday knowledge, strong forms of classification between different aspects of knowledge, and, in some cases, a belief that curriculum knowledge is either intrinsically justified or even universal. Michael Young and Johan Muller's (2010; 2015) curriculum framework (discussed and critically examined at some length in [Chapter 10](#)), which is an example of this, is underpinned by two knowledge claims. The first of these is that a curriculum should comprise objective knowledge, and that a notion of objectivity is a precondition for any inquiry or practical application of knowledge in a curriculum. The second knowledge claim is that this knowledge emerges from, and cannot be reduced to, the contexts of its

production and acquisition. This means that real knowledge, and consequently powerful knowledge, is emergent, non-reducible and socially differentiated.

There are also various types of curriculum instrumentalism. Autonomous instrumentalists argue that it is possible to provide a justification for the contents of a curriculum by focusing on the acquisition of certain virtues or dispositions (see [Chapter 8](#)). There are two problems with this approach: establishing what the good life is or what an appropriate virtue might be, and then identifying experiences for children in school which will lead to the development of dispositions to allow the individual to live the good or virtuous life. This framework therefore incorporates an idea of the good or virtuous life as the endpoint and, indeed, determinant of what should and should not be included in a curriculum. The point is that, even if this cannot be precisely articulated, it can still act as a means for determining a way forward, an ethical desideratum.

Economism understands the aims and purposes of formal education as directly to produce trained workers for an efficient and effective economy, whether market-based or state-controlled. It is the reduction of all social facts and processes to economic phenomena. This has implications for the curriculum, such as the exclusion of other curricular purposes than economic ones. Instrumentalism has come to be associated with any normative view of life as the endpoint and purpose of formal schooling.

A postmodern framework suggests that fixed and stable values are no longer influential, that identities are decentred, that relations between individuals are unstable, that structures are emergent rather than permanent, and that progress in society is an illusion. A postmodern approach to the curriculum refers to how that reality can be known, and therefore how this form of knowledge is reflected in the construction of a curriculum. Although postmodernist thinkers differ in their approaches, it is still possible to identify a range of views held by theorists who have described themselves as postmodernist, or who have been described as postmodernist by others.<sup>7</sup> The first of these is a rejection of correspondence views of reality (see [Chapter 4](#)). The second of these principles is a distaste for universalising modes of thought and global narratives, and the third principle involves a rejection of ethical and teleological ideas. Adopting a postmodern perspective has certain implications; principally, that

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<sup>7</sup> Such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard.

knowledge of the world cannot lead to the production of propositional, objective and verifiable knowledge that results in a science of pedagogy and curriculum, crossing physical, geographical and temporal boundaries.

All these curriculum viewpoints have, in the main and around the world, been replaced by neoliberal curriculum perspectives. Neoliberalism is a concept which embraces the idea of free-market capitalism. It is generally associated with policies of economic liberalisation, privatisation of public corporations, deregulation, globalisation with the development of cross-border economic organisations, austerity, reductions in government spending, and a substantial increase in the size and extent of the private sector. It is an attempt to shift control of goods and services to profit-making organisations. It also has significant implications for how we can understand the world, issues of truth, objectivity and realism, and how we organise that world socially.

Neoliberal ideas are now the prime organisers of education systems around the world, and they can be understood in curricular terms as: traditional (and inevitably neoliberal) knowledge forms and strong insulations between them need to be preserved; each of these knowledge forms can be expressed in terms of lower and higher level constructs, and the latter have to be taught before the former and sequenced correctly; knowledge can be constructed in behaviourist terms; certain groups of children are better able to access the curriculum than other children, and, as a result, a differentiated curriculum is necessary to meet the needs of the different types of learners. The teacher's role is to impart this body of knowledge in the most efficient and effective way, and not to suggest how a curriculum should be constructed and valorised, with the consequence that they are stripped of some of their agentive powers. (For an example of this type of knowledge, see [Chapter 10](#).)

## Pedagogy

Knowledge as a concept and as a practice is transformed at the pedagogic site in every learning event in the world. What this means is that elements or constituents of learning events (how the learning event is constructed or set up – its properties – the simulation of the learning object, the representational mode of the object, the degree and type of amplification, control in the pedagogic relationship, the type of pedagogic text and the way it works, relations with other people in the learning process, temporal relations, feedback mechanisms and its relations with other learning

objects) are fundamental to this pedagogic transformation. In the learning process, the learning object takes a new form because of changes to its properties.<sup>8</sup>

The first of these is the property of simulation. In a simulation, a new medium is chosen which gives the learning object a new form, these media being virtual, graphic, enumerative, enactive, symbolic and oral. Indeed, in relation to how it is constituted, there is inevitably a gap between the formation of the original object and the mediated object. The implication of this is that the pedagogical relation between the learner and the world is never direct, but is realised through the mediated object. If we treat this form of mediation seriously, then we are also endorsing an indirect form of realism (see [Chapter 3](#)).

A second property is the type of truth criterion that the knowledge-creator adopts. There are five conceptions of truth, or at least we can say that there have been five principal conceptions of truth which have had some form of credibility over time: truth as correspondence, truth as coherence, truth as what works, truth as consensus and truth as warranted belief. This property refers to a determination of the relationship between knowledge and the world, although it should never be assumed that this relationship is straightforward, linear or easily determined (see [Chapter 1](#)).

A third property is amplification. Amplification is a central term in the field of rhetoric, and it stands for all the ways that an argument, explanation or description can be expanded and enriched. Amplification, in this context, refers to the capacity of the pedagogic object to increase in size, in extent or in effect, as by the addition of extra material. The use of a microscope in a science laboratory, or the use of the internet to extend the reach of the learning object, or the taking of a deliberate and alternative position from the accepted norm for the sake of debate or to further the argument, but always to deepen the learning process, are typical examples of amplification.

A fourth property is control in the pedagogic relationship. Framing refers to the message system of pedagogy. A syllabus with set topics, to be completed in a predetermined order, within a specified time, is strongly framed. Weak framing occurs when the teacher is able to select topics by themselves, and to organise the sequencing and pacing of material according to a different set of criteria than the official specification. Two types can be identified. The first refers to the relationship between the teacher and the learner *and* the curriculum developers (who may be

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<sup>8</sup> For a fuller account of these properties than the one in this book, see Scott (2021).

politicians, policymakers, school and college principals and the like). The second refers to the relationship between the teacher *and* the learner, and, as with our first account, this refers to the amount of control either one or the other has over the constitution of the message or the messages conveyed by the learning process.<sup>9</sup>

A fifth property is the type of task given to the learner in the pedagogic setting. Learning tasks have a number of elements: media of expression, the logic of this mediated expression, its fit with a learning model, its assessment mode, and its relation to real-life settings. Media of expression include oral, graphic, pictorial and enumerative modes. Each of these media have an encompassing logic to them, so that a task which requires a written response to a request is of a different order as a learning experience to one which requires an oral response. A further task-property is the mode of assessment that inheres in it, with these modes of assessment being broadly understood as formative or summative, although these general valuations obscure a range of assessment activities. There is also the authenticity of the task, and this refers to whether and how the task relates to real-life settings. The pedagogic activity or learning task has a logical relationship with the learning model being employed. Frequently, there is a mismatch between them, so that the task or activity (an oral response to a question, a written analysis of a text, a feedback or concept-mapping exercise, solving a problem, evaluating an object or object-configuration, and the like) and the type of learning model that is being adopted are incompatible.

A sixth property is the relationship between the learner and other people in the pedagogic setting. One way of characterising the relationship between the text or object and the learner is by determining its strength along a continuum ranging from a diffuse (large numbers of other learners) to a concentrated (small numbers of other learners) mode. What this means is that the message being conveyed is embedded in a relationship between a diffuse or concentrated stimulus and a recipient. Since the relationship is both from the catalyst to the learner or learners, and also from the learner or learners to the catalyst, then this is going to influence the type of message received by the learner. We can model the world as a sequence of messages passing along a chain.<sup>10</sup>

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9 This property has some relation to Basil Bernstein's (2002) notions of framing and classification, although, in our view, it is superior to it.

10 The stimulus is clearly of a certain type. These are message conveyance systems, or processes of semiotic transmission that operate with and through a particular stimulus.

Learning is always embedded in temporal arrangements of one type or another – a seventh property. A curriculum is an arrangement of time given to different items of knowledge, so any learning episode is going to be embedded in these arrangements. For example, pace of learning is important, that is, the pace at which a student completes a learning activity, or the pace at which they are expected to work against a norm. Pace can be understood as a performative construct, so that it is not meant to provide an empirical description of how a person has performed, but is designed to act as a stimulus to increase the pace of learning for the general population – it thus has an explicit normative function.

The most important of these properties is those relations that the learning object has with other learning objects (and this comprises a series of choices by the curriculum developer). Curriculum arrangements for any school system apply to all aspects of their teaching and learning environments: subjects to be taught, relations between subjects, core and optional curriculum elements, different types of teaching groups, forms of assessment and the like, and they cannot be analysed as separate items. These curriculum arrangements can be placed on a linear scale, with traditional/fragmented approaches at one end, and networked approaches at the other. In between these two ends, there are eight notional points on the continuum: connected, nested, sequenced, shared, webbed, threaded, integrated and immersed.<sup>11</sup>

## Progression

At the beginning of this chapter, we suggested that the key relations in a *Bildungstheorie* are: maturation, progression, narration, possibility, projection, praxis, edification, justification and teleology, with progression or development taking precedence. We also suggested that the *Bildungstheorie* being developed in this book is a work in progress (see [Chapters 1 and 5](#)). However, the key notion underpinning it is some form of progression from one state of affairs to another. Progression or development, as a concept and as a practice, is plurisemantic, in that it can have dialectical, historical, super-agential, hierarchical, absented and materialistic meanings, among others. All of this implies that we are dealing with several different objects (material, discursive, configurational and agential), and several relations between them or several relational objects

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<sup>11</sup> See Fogarty (1991).

that connect them. The objects are the different stages of progression or being, and the relations are the connecting links between them. Acknowledging this allows the realisation of a number of learning models: mimesis, dialogism, mutuality, falsification, semiosis, reflection, meta-cognition and repetition. Each of these in turn is underpinned by a particular theory of learning, and thus any model of learning that is employed is constructed in relation to how we can know the world and what it is.

For some learning theorists, mimesis is the primary form of learning.<sup>12</sup> It applies to processes of social and cultural learning and is, as is all learning, object specific. The spectrum of mimetic learning is wide. In this form of learning, the body, its senses, imagination, language and desire play an important role. It is not the same as imitation or simulation, because it points to the idea of something outside the mind which the learner aspires to have or to be like. This external object may be another person, an environment or an invented imaginary world.

Dialogism refers to a conversation or shared dialogue in which participants explore or criticise ideas. Participants in the dialogue do not have to be dispositional equals; indeed, in most cases, one of them is more experienced than the other. The elenctic method, or Socratic debate,<sup>13</sup> is a form of cooperative learning based around an argumentative dialogue between individuals, and it is designed to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out underlying presuppositions. This learning mode involves a process of questioning and answering to enable the learner to evaluate objects and object-configurations, and to explore how they can be used. It has a coaching and an observational form.

Mutual forms of learning assume that the learning relationship is between equals. Examples of this type of learning include: being offered emotional support if learning proves to be difficult; exchanges between learners so that each individual can test their theories, ideas and constructs against those held by other learners engaging in the same type of learning; and cooperation between two learners of equal standing, so that in a problem-solving exercise, better solutions are forthcoming because there are two problem-solvers rather than one.

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<sup>12</sup> For example, Kress and Bezemer (2015).

<sup>13</sup> Plato formalised the Socratic elenctic method, presenting Socrates as a questioner of some prominent Athenian educators and citizens. In some of Plato's early dialogues, such as *Euthyphro* and *Ion*, Plato portrayed Socrates as using the method to interrogate the views of these interlocutors about ethical and epistemological matters.

Using a falsification or trial-and-error approach as one of these learning modes, the learner makes repeated attempts to solve particular problems, with these solutions being tested in real-life situations. If these solutions prove to be deficient, then the learner tries out different solutions until they are satisfied that they have found the correct one. In adopting a falsification approach, the learner is required to engage in a series of interrogative processes with regards to texts, people and objects in the environment, and to come up with solutions to problems.

Semiotic and semantic approaches focus on meaning-making and meaning-remaking by the learner that is implicit in any conceptual realist account of learning. There are a number of steps or action-sets that the learner goes through: contextualising, framing, theorising, retroduding, delimiting, explaining and reconceptualising. These semiotic processes mirror the approaches that empirical researchers should adopt but rarely do. Reconceptualising is an essential element in all types of learning; here, it constitutes the principal focus.

Another model of learning is reflection. There are three types of reflective practice: intensive action reflection, which is understood as tacit, implicit and occurring on a daily basis; reactive or reflective learning, involving immediate reflections on events that have already taken place; and deliberative reflection, involving the conscious management of thoughts and activity and the deliberate setting aside of time to ensure that judgements are based on a deep understanding of a particular issue.

Meta-cognitive and self-regulated learning refer to learners' awareness of their own knowledge, and their ability to understand, control and manipulate their own cognitive, skill-oriented, embodied and dispositional processes. They work by persuading learners to think about these auto-learning processes in more explicit ways, with the intention that they should be improved and developed. The principal idea at play here is that part of being an effective learner involves recognising, absorbing and perfecting the methods or strategies through which one learns.

There is also practice and repetition. Practice is the act of rehearsing a behaviour over and over again, or engaging in an activity again and again. This reinforces, enhances and deepens the learning associated with the behaviour or activity. Choosing between these models depends on the content and constitution of the learning object – the former is logically dependent on the latter. It also depends on the choice of learning theory that is made. These learning models have an important role to play (whichever one is chosen) in processes of learning, and they constitute elements of a pedagogic process.

## Curriculum as a series of experiences

In designing a curriculum, it is the experiences that learners actually have, as a consequence of being a part of a learning system, which are important. A student asleep at the back of the class may learn that the back of the class is a good place to avoid scrutiny. This may be the principal content of the lesson for that student. A child being bullied at school may learn that the world is a dangerous place, and that other people need to be avoided. In a mathematics classroom where teachers spend most of their time dealing with boys' problems, the lesson may be that mathematics is not for girls.<sup>14</sup> These hidden aspects of curriculum are valorised and implicated in pedagogic, curricular and evaluative processes, whether formal or informal, in any education system around the world.

As we suggested above, a particular way of conceptualising curriculum is as a series of experiences that learners undergo as part of a set of pedagogic processes. No matter how much governments and educational establishments attempt to control learners' interactions, taking account of the stratified nature of the world means that phenomena at one level often have their causes at other levels, some of which are not traceable empirically:

It is astonishing how little systematic study is devoted to the institutional 'anthropology' of schooling, given the complexity of its situatedness and its exposure to the changing social and economic climate: its relation to the family, to the economy, to religious institutions, even to the labour market is only vaguely understood. (Bruner, 2018: 33)

To invoke a stratified ontology is to examine a real situation, knowing that some aspects of it are not empirically accessible. What actually takes place is not all that could take place, and phenomena which are causally efficacious are not necessarily in plain sight. To give a simple example: no matter how well prepared a teacher is, no matter how well planned the schemes of work are, no matter how quiet and well-disciplined the pupils may appear to be, it is difficult to identify just how factors such as a child's past history and experiences, family circumstances, wider political pressures on schools due to teacher attrition, cuts in education budgets and the like, are operating. To understand the curriculum as a list of

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14 See Walkerdine (1998).

topics to be delivered cannot allow a clear picture of what the child has learnt. Only by considering curriculum as a series of experiences that the child and her teachers actually undergo, can we start to consider exactly what the child is learning, and only by assessing the degree of agency of that child in making changes to their environment can we start to work out the extent and quality of their learning.

A step further would be to consider not just what is actually going on, but the real situation. In critical realist terms, this means working out what potentials exist for something to happen (see [Chapter 8](#)). This comprises unactualised possibilities – what else might be possible, and what must change to bring it about? What are the factors and mechanisms that relate to the learning process, and what possibilities might there be to bring about change? What are the students actually doing and experiencing? What are the practices, habits and activities that students are engaged in, and what virtues, or otherwise, are being developed through such activities? What might the students do and experience if certain structural changes were to take place? How could such changes be brought about? Which social, physical and cultural structures need to change? To what extent can changes be implemented?

Applying the above ideas to learning approaches and education systems around the world requires us to consider the effects of regimes of marketisation and managerialism on teachers' work in schools, colleges and universities in relation to how these inhibit the possibilities of skilful pedagogical development. The OECD's<sup>15</sup> Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a mechanism through which the purposes of education are narrowed. This, Sellar and Lingard (2013: 465) claim, is leading to an 'economisation of education policy'. That such processes are increasingly influencing education policies is well documented in studies of education systems and curricula: in Brazil (by [Costin and Pontual, 2020](#)); in Australia (by [Sellar and Lingard, 2013](#)); in Peru (by [Saavedra and Gutierrez, 2020](#)); in India (by [Kamat, 2004](#)); and there are more. The mechanism at play here is the use of narrow marketisation strategies measured by empiricist markers at a global level. These have national consequences, which are to engage teachers in habitual activities that stem from a preoccupation with the monetisation of the education system. When economics becomes the sole focus of learning systems, marketisation dictates the type of values that predominate, and people develop particular virtues to serve these purposes. The activities that both teachers and

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15 The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

students increasingly carry out also shift the processes of morphogenesis, from changing the world, to survival, narrowing the opportunities that can be given to learners. These valorised approaches are enframed, as we argued in [Chapter 1](#), and this enframing therefore needs to be made explicit. And what this means is that our understandings of the world, and how we can construe the mind–world relationship, inevitably has an interpretivist or hermeneutical dimension (see [Chapter 4](#)).

## Interpretivist/hermeneutic approaches

One of the principal failings of science in a positivistic mode<sup>16</sup> is its lack of attention to issues of reflexivity, complexity and conceptual change. The reason for this is not hard to find. Positivism as an epistemology provides a powerful yet idealised model of scientific research which has shaped the pre-understandings of researchers and learners, even those not working in the natural sciences, and hence their portrayal of what they are doing when they do research, and who they are as researchers. These pre-understandings, and the consequent portrayals, are incongruent with the actual practices of research and understanding, which can be characterised as hermeneutic and interpretive. What we are committed to, then, is not so much a rejection of a positivist epistemology, but a two-pronged critique: of positivism's idealised and universal logic of scientific explanation, and of its notion that a one-to-one correspondence between what reality is and how it is represented can be achieved. This, we are contending, is an inappropriate model for us to follow, since, given the nature of the world we are trying to understand, we must recognise not only the complexity of our practice, but, more importantly, its location in culture and history.

In its hermeneutic and interpretive form, this approach has become a research tradition in its own right, powerfully shaping the doing of research in a qualitative mode. In this sense, it too has problematic elements. Historically, it has taken aim at the scientism to which positivism gives rise, the epistemological position that the natural sciences are a supra-historic, neutral enterprise, and the sole model of truth and truthful knowledge. Hans-George Gadamer (1989) disputed the powerfully held view that the natural sciences provide both the sole model of rationality

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<sup>16</sup> The success or otherwise of the scientific method depends on the constitution of the objects, object-relations or object-configurations that we are seeking to explain or to give an account of. The positivist mode is perhaps best expressed in the work of Auguste Comte (2009).

and the only way of determining the truth of the matter. For him, scientism makes imperialistic and unacceptable claims on behalf of the natural sciences and their methodology. He argued instead that truth is not captured by scientific method alone, and that the natural sciences do not provide the one single model of rationality. In the positing of a universalistic, abstract model of rationality, there is a forgetting of the conventional nature of reason (see [Chapter 3](#)), and its forging in specific historical practices and cultural settings, which means that it is itself in and part of an ongoing network of social beliefs, practices and discourses or ‘traditions’, rather than outside and separate.

One of the major criticisms that interpretivism has had to face is that any acknowledgement of the location of reason, and hence of science, in a ‘tradition’ immediately introduces an unacceptable subjectivity, thus destroying the objectivity of science. It is certainly the case that interpretivism disagrees with the positivist emphasis upon objectivity, and has sought to find a place for the subjective.<sup>17</sup> Yet it has also wished to remain within the broad scientific tradition, and to preserve the objectivity of research. Much of this debate revolves around what objectivity and subjectivity are taken to be. The disagreement is largely about the positivist emphasis on objectivism, or the direct realist metaphysic of a world existing independently of knowers, the separating of knowing subjects from objects. However, with interpretivism, it is not a matter of the world being whatever we want it to be – a position that could crudely be called ‘subjectivism’. It has sought, rather, to provide alternative yet epistemologically legitimate approaches to research and knowing; in other words, approaches that are still scientific but not positivistic and not captured by the representationalist metaphysic. Gadamer (1989) argued that, for example, knowledge cannot be objective in a positivist sense, but must necessarily include a subjective element. Understanding something is always prejudiced, in the sense that it is a process of requiring an initial projection that anticipates meaning and which orients the process. This initial projection, or pre-understanding, is part of the person’s situatedness; their location and standpoint in history, society and culture.

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17 As we suggested earlier in this chapter, it is possible to give six different meanings to the word ‘objective’, and thus, by inference, to the word ‘subjective’ (Wittgenstein’s [1953] phenomenal possibilities), namely, that it is external in some sense or another to the knower or learner, that it meets a set of truth conditions, that something is objective when the relevant knowers’ or learners’ traces such as values and interests are bracketed out, that it can be directly accessed through observation, that its mode of application to the world is correct, and that more than one knower can agree on its truthfulness (see [Scott and Scott, 2018](#)).

In interpretivism, research takes everyday experience and ordinary life as its subject matter, and asks how meaning is constructed and social interaction negotiated in social practices. Human action is inseparable from meaning, and experiences are classified and ordered through interpretive frames, through pre-understandings mediated by tradition. The task of research then becomes to work with, and to make sense of, the world, through the frames and pre-understandings of the researched, rather than the categories that we use in everyday life, and selectively in every learning episode.

The process of meaning-making and negotiation over meaning is always a practical matter for individuals, in the sense that it is located in their social practices. Situations are interpreted and, while these interpretations, looked at objectively, may be faulty or misleading, they reveal the shared and constructed nature of social reality; and this would have been missed had they been objective in a positivist sense. Positivism can, therefore be critiqued on the grounds that it fails to understand the multiplicity and complexity of the lifeworld of individuals. This lifeworld is instead reduced to an oppressive uniformity through the imposition of scientific categories. Given, then, that the field of study is the meaningful actions of individuals and the social construction of reality, the social sciences and the humanities must be distinct from the natural sciences, with different methods, different ways of explaining and different criteria about what constitutes valid knowledge. Explaining the social world involves understanding or making sense of it, and hence involves understanding the meanings that both construct and are constructed by interactive human behaviour. The goal of research and living becomes that of providing interpretations of human actions and social practices within the context of meaningful, culturally specific arrangements.

If all sense-seeking and sense-making is through culturally and historically located interpretive frames, then knowledge of subjects is perspective-bound and partial, that is, relative to these frameworks. Gadamer (1989) argued that it is impossible to separate out human interaction with the world from the historical and cultural context that defines our interpretive frame, since both the subject and the object of research are located in pre-understood worlds. In contrast to the representationalist metaphysic (see [Chapter 4](#)), there is no object-in-itself independent of a context of knowing and of the knowing and learning activities of subjects. Frames (or pre-understandings) constitute ‘the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience ... the conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us’ (Gadamer, 1989: 173).

Underlying Gadamer's (1989) argument is the notion of a universal hermeneutics where understanding precedes knowing and learning, where understanding always involves interpretation, and where interpretation is therefore universal. Interpretation is not, however, arbitrary (one possible sense of 'subjective'), but, as we have just noted, takes place through interpretive frames which are themselves located within the background of all our beliefs and practices.<sup>18</sup> One implication of this is that frames can never be fully and definitively specified, since any such specification would itself be an interpretation that must presuppose a background of assumptions, presuppositions, beliefs and practices. There is, therefore, no origin, no ultimate presence which can be an authorising centre. Such an origin can never be fully specified, and the background, or Gadamer's 'tradition', can never be something of which we can ever be fully aware. Even apparently simple actions, such as arm-raising, can only be understood in terms of an immersion in, and inseparability from, a background, and they are therefore never fully specifiable.

What is also implied is that no interpretation can ever be uniquely correct because this would presuppose that there is an interpretation which is authentic and originary. But there is no logo-centric presence, no bedrock 'fact of the matter' or empirical given, which could be appealed to as the court of last resort in deciding between different interpretations. This means that understanding is always circular because it is always already an interpretation. The consequence is that there can be no standardised method or algorithm or theory of meaning which can function as criteria that produce a uniquely correct interpretation, or definitively settle the validity of any one interpretation in conflict with others; and this is the reason why interpretations can never be objective in a positivist sense.

Furthermore, since social action is the outcome of knowledgeable and reflexive actors interacting with other knowledgeable and reflexive actors, explanations of social action must always remain indeterminate; in other words, no explanation is ever definitive, but always contains a capacity for resisting closure. In contrast, a positivist methodology always requires a closure. As we have seen, any understanding of human actions that purported to be a final and closed explanation would be necessarily incomplete. For example, if we were seeking to understand an action such as walking from one place to another purely in terms of physical

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18 This refers to Heidegger's (1962) notion of enframing (see [Chapter 1](#)).

movements, or even of the stated intentions of the actor, we would be missing out, in the name of closure, so much that was relevant to this action that our explanation would be impoverished and incomplete.

Thus indeterminacy is present because of the partiality of any particular interpretation, its meaning being dependent on something beyond itself in the background. At the same time, this background should not be seen as a reified object, since it can only be manifested through partial interpretations. For example, the meaning of a book is manifested through each of its chapters (the parts), yet each chapter's meaning depends on the meaning of the whole book. At the same time, there is also a background which comes into play: of practices of reading, of culture and history; for example, about what constitutes a 'book'. This background is meaningfully present, but also absent from the awareness of the reader. This determination of meaning in the interaction of part and whole against an unconscious background is the hermeneutic circle (see Gadamer, 2004). But it is important to note that the circular and perspectival qualities of interpretation which make it always partial and incomplete are not something extraneous, but its condition of possibility.

From this comes a conception of knowledge-formation as iterative and spiral, rather than as linear and cumulative, as portrayed in a positivist epistemology. As a social practice, research is itself a meaningful human action constructed through interpretive frames. Researchers, and indeed all of us, are in the sense-making business, so, unlike the situation in the natural sciences, in social research both researchers and research subjects are sense-makers and knowers. Research therefore involves interpreting the actions of those who are themselves interpreters. It is an interpretation of interpretations. But, of course, as we have seen, 'tradition' cannot here be construed purely in a narrow sense of a research tradition. In the light of this, therefore, the notion of the individual researcher standing outside the world in order to properly understand it seems highly questionable. Caught within the hermeneutic circle, it becomes impossible to adopt such a stance.

Any committed inquiry or learning interaction with the world has as its starting point the pre-understandings that people have of those objects, object-relations and object-configurations which they are researching or trying to understand, simply through the fact of sharing a world with them. Thus, the purpose which motivates and animates inquiry, the carving out of a field of study, and the emergence of criteria and standards by which scientific study is evaluated, are all dependent on the historical situatedness of scientific activity, and therefore on our pre-understandings. But this immediately brings us back to the problem of

objectivity touched on earlier. How can people, as interpreters or meaning producers, be objective about the meanings produced by those they are investigating or trying to understand? Furthermore, how can they themselves be objective in the sense of not falling into an arbitrary subjectivism? One answer to this problem has been that, although researchers must recognise their situatedness, they must also ‘bracket’, that is, temporarily suspend, their subjectivity and explanatory frames.

Yet this position is not altogether satisfactory, and an alternative suggested by Gadamer (1989) shows why. He argued that it is impossible to escape from our ‘pre-understandings’, even temporarily. But, at the same time, it is precisely through the interplay between our interpretive frames or pre-understandings and the elements of the actions we are trying to understand that knowledge is developed (and this, of course, allows learning to take place). In other words, our pre-understandings, far from being closed prejudices or biases (as they are thought of in a positivist epistemology), actually make one more open-minded, because in the process of interpretation and understanding, they are put at risk, tested and modified through the encounter with the object or objects that we are trying to understand through a learning process. So, rather than bracketing or suspending them, we should use them as the essential starting point for acquiring knowledge. To know, we must be aware of our pre-understandings, even though we cannot transcend them. At the same time, however, while they are an essential starting point, they need to be left open to modification in the course of our daily lives.

Since knowledge and learning always involve interpretation within historical and cultural contexts, truths are historical rather than abstract, contingent rather than determinate, although certain types of truths seem to transcend the historical and the particular.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, they are grasped not by eliminating subjectivity, but through the inter-subjective relationship between the knowing subject and the object to be known or learnt. Knowledge is not a matter of subject and object becoming identical, but of them entering into a necessary dialectical relationship. The questions that researchers ask arise from their experiences and concerns located in sociocultural traditions. What is involved, then, is a dialogue, or what Gadamer (1989: 37) calls a ‘fusion of horizons’, where knowledge is an unpredictable emergent, rather than a controlled, outcome. Here, an analogy between literary texts and social phenomena is relevant, since both are complex systems of meaningful elements that

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<sup>19</sup> See Scott (2021: Chapter 2).

are in need of interpretation. Thus, what is involved in understanding and learning is translation, empathy, dialogue, participant observation and 'thick' description.<sup>20</sup> As a hermeneutic inquiry, the task for research and for everyday learning becomes one of working out as many meanings as possible of a complex social life. So, if social phenomena can be read as and like texts, Gadamer (1989) argued that understanding a text is only partly a function of the historical situation of the interpreter, as there is also the subject matter itself, which must be given due weight. In the fusion of horizons, the term 'horizon' refers to our standpoint or situatedness (in time, place, culture, gender, ethnicity and the like), and to the standpoint or situatedness of that which we are trying to understand. The fusion results from an understanding which is grounded in both standpoints, neither of which can be bracketed out. We could say that a fusion of horizons occurs when authors and readers, both of whom are historically situated, create shared meanings. Because it is situated, every horizon is inevitably limited, but it is also open to connecting with other horizons (perspectives, standpoints). The resulting fusion is an enlargement or broadening of our own horizon, which leaves open the possibility for continual reinterpretation and different meanings, as horizons move and change. The fusion of horizons constitutes a standard of objectivity which can function as an alternative to the objectivity of a positivist-empiricist epistemology. It is the outcome of inter-subjective agreement where different and conflicting interpretations are played out and possibly harmonised. In the process of comparing and contrasting these various interpretations, a consensus can be achieved despite these differences, indeed, because of those differences.

Interpretive or hermeneutic understanding is a learning process involving dialogue between researchers and researched; a dialogue which is always ongoing and incomplete. The fact that both researchers and those being researched engage in interpretive practices means that social sciences and social research cannot help but be understood as dialogic, and implicated in a dialogue with their subject matter. In other words, they cannot help but be reflexive, although this is not to say that they always are. That they are not is largely due to the influence of positivism and technical-rationality. Theoretical knowledge is floated off into a context-free vacuum, the matter of knowledge is detached from its locating background, and researchers are cast as ideal knowing machines who can know the world only by being outside it, even though they still

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20 See Geertz (1973).

seek to master it. Interpretivism is a popular approach to research for educators, because in emphasising the social actor and her situatedness, it seems to offer a more fruitful and human way of doing research. Certainly, for those concerned with policymaking and looking for steers from research, notions of indeterminacy and necessary incompleteness are highly problematic. For radical educators, an interpretivist emphasis on understanding the world is secured at the expense of changing it. They would argue that interpretive approaches merely perpetuate positivism's hierarchy of knowers and doers, theory and practice, and, in so doing, serve to maintain the world as it is. Our contention in the last part of this chapter is that through language and action we can construct different but equally potent transgressive forms of learning and agency.

## Reflexive agency

There are many unexplored spaces for reflexive agency, if people were to break away from the dogma that there is no alternative to the situations in which they find themselves. (For examples of teacher-led morphogenesis, see [Sharar, 2016](#).) Many cultures and civilisations, in the past, have developed, upheld and fought for very different social values to be passed down to future generations – values that stem from the everyday lifestyles and practices of the local community.

In their 'constructive, coherent, responsible political critique' ([Elder-Vass, 2022](#): 1) of the dominant portrayal of human history in sociology and anthropology, Graeber and Wengrow ([2021](#)) give voice to sophisticated philosophical and social critiques by those who have experienced European imperialist adventures at first hand. The authors cite the first peoples of Canada, Australia, America and the Middle East who met the European colonialists and developed sophisticated critiques of the views and values of the latter. Overall, the values of European imperialists, whose own societies were steeped in hierarchical relationships of power and domination, were seen as being distorting, and hence problematic.

Graeber and Wengrow ([2021](#): 38) cite the views of the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia about the French colonialists:

you are always fighting and quarrelling among yourselves; we live peaceably. You are envious and are all the time slandering each other; you are thieves and deceivers; you are covetous, and are neither generous or kind; as for us, if we have a morsel of bread we share it with our neighbour.

The Mi'kmaq claimed that they were richer than the French, as they had ease, comfort and time, even though the French may have had more material possessions.

Another example comes from the notes made by Lahontan, a French aristocrat (Louis-Armand de Lom d'Arce), about his discussions with Kandiaronk, an intellectual and a statesman of the Wendat people in North America. According to Lahontan:

Those Native Americans who had been in France ... were continually teasing us with the faults and disorders they observed in our towns, as being occasioned by money. There's no point in trying to remonstrate with them about how useful the distinction of property is for the support of society: they make a joke of anything you say on that account. In short, they neither quarrel nor fight, nor slander one another; they scoff at arts and sciences, and laugh at the difference of ranks which is observed with us. They brand us for slaves, and call us miserable souls, whose life is not worth having, alleging that we degrade ourselves in subjecting ourselves to one man [the king] who possesses all the power, and is bound by no law but his own will. (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021: 52)

And further, when pushed to embrace European civilisation, Kandiaronk said:

Do you seriously imagine ... that I would be happy to live like one of the inhabitants of Paris, to take two hours every morning just to put on my shirt and make-up, to bow and scrape before every obnoxious galoot I meet on the street who happened to have been born with an inheritance? Do you really imagine I could carry a purse full of coins and not immediately hand them over to people who are hungry; that I would carry a sword but not immediately draw it on the first band of thugs I see rounding up the destitute to press them into naval service? (Graeber and Wengrow, 2021: 55)

New learning systems appear to be springing up as part of the rebuilding of societies devastated by fascism and war, such as women's educational activities in Rojava (Dirik, 2018). The embrace of participatory action research among communities building learning systems to collectively solve their problems after having lived under oppressive regimes across

Latin America is another promising movement (Keahey, 2021; Lomeli and Rappaport, 2018). These are not new ideas, but they may be a refreshing antidote to the stifling of virtues among learners and teachers.

## Learning

In this book, we (referring here to all its authors) have semantically explicated a range of key concepts that are relevant to the issue of learning (see Chapter 1).<sup>21</sup> These have been meta-concepts such as epistemology, phenomenology and existentialism (see Chapter 2), thinking and rationality (see Chapter 3), anti-representationalism (see Chapter 4), a *Bildungstheorie* (see Chapter 5), critical realism (see Chapter 6) and ethics (see Chapter 7), and meso-concepts such as divisions and differences (see Chapter 8), friendship (see Chapter 9), curriculum (see Chapter 10), ecology (see Chapter 11) and pedagogy (see Chapters 12, 13 and 14). Knowledge and learning, as meta-concepts, are positioned in various networks of meaning, principally, the antecedents of the concepts, their relations to other relevant concepts, and the way these concepts are used in the lifeworld.

A discourse, or discursive object-configuration, is a set of knowledge claims about the world joined together by a series of connectives and relations, which then offers in its totality an account of an object or objects in the world, and it may even act to create or form them. We can also say in this context that it is enframed by something or other. Furthermore, what needs to be said time and time again is that a discursive configuration can never be a simple determinant of identity, behaviour or action. Discourses are structured in a variety of ways, and both this meta-structuring and the form it takes are relative to time and place.<sup>22</sup> These meta-forms can be oppositional, so that an object or object-configuration is constituted in the discourse by its opposition to another object or object-configuration. Examples of these object-relations expressed dualistically<sup>23</sup> are one-to-one or one-to-many relations, strong or weak relations, vertical or horizontal relations, endogenous or exogenous relations, and dialectical or absenting relations and connections. Each of these object-relations is

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21 There are many others, but for reasons of space we were not able to include them in this book.

22 The philosophy espoused in this book (by most of the chapter authors) is not a discourse theory. It is a form of dispositional or conceptual realism, which argues for the existence of discursive as well as material configurations in the life course.

23 ... and as object-configurations.

expressed in terms of its potential to influence object-arrangements at a particular point in time. Learning as a key epistemic concept and site of knowledge development therefore has the potential to be oppositional to the status quo.

The recognition of a conceptual domain of time-oriented change in social phenomena means that generative mechanisms exist that underlie the occurrence of learning events. These generative mechanisms can be resistive, oppositional, adversarial, transgressive and the like, and, if they are, they comprise a state of affairs which is in opposition to another state of affairs. Examples of these mechanisms or apparatuses are: counter-conductings, emancipations, decolonisations, immanent critiques, textual readings, decategorisations, absentings, praxis(ings), transframings, reflections and textualisations. These are types of practical reasoning where the intention is to change a state of affairs in the world, although most mechanisms or apparatuses are morphostatic.

The argument that we have followed throughout this book (and to a greater or lesser extent in the various chapters) comprises a belief-commitment to the human disposition of reason-giving and justifying beliefs and actions through the giving of reasons, and to a triadic configuration of knowledge sites. There are three sites of knowledge: the world and its contents, the mediating arena between the contents of the world and objects in the mind (this is what we might want to call learning sites, which are also contentful), and the contents of the mind that allow us to make judgements, perceive the world and reflect on what we have perceived. In distinguishing between these three sites, we are suggesting that the relationship between knowledge and the world is mediated, and that, as a consequence, we can only see the world through a particular lens, or ideologically (see [Chapter 1](#)).<sup>24</sup> The contents of the world are therefore learnt and not just given, and this is what makes a critical or mediated realism possible and desirable. The critical element comprises a series of interventions in the relationship between mind(s) and world(s), and these are in the main praxical.<sup>25</sup>

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24 A favourite device of politicians and media commentators is to identify a discursive construction which is truthful (which they support) and a construction that is ideological and therefore not truthful (which their opponents support). This device is in general use in fact-based conversations, and it is reductionist in principle. Recently, a leading educationalist argued for evidence-based policies and not ideological ones. This is precisely what we are talking about here.

25 Some of these praxes are progressive and some are regressive.

## Praxes

The first of these mechanisms or apparatuses is an argument for a counter-conducting ethic and praxis of relationships with and between objects, relations, configurations and persons in the outside world (see Foucault, 1982). It acts as a counter and an opposition to prevailing discursive and material object-configurations. At learning sites and in everyday life, this involves refusals, resistances and struggles against power. These counter-conducts are ethical interventions, political refusals, voluntary insubordinations and practices of ‘reflective intractability’ (Foucault, 1997: 32). They involve a denaturalisation of the categories, and they fit with a notion of thought that prioritises as a praxis, as a way of opposing, the meanings that reside in categories as they are currently operating, and in the pedagogic practices that institutionalise and reproduce them (see Chapter 3).

A more direct form of resistance is a notion of *conscientização* or critical consciousness, and this is a central element in Paulo Freire’s (1970) theory of emancipation. The condition of life and society is oppressive, and people seek to reverse it, by replacing one set of conditions (these could be material or discursive) with another that is less oppressive. This requires a praxis of liberation, although we should understand such a praxis in a variety of ways, depending on the type of oppression that is encountered. For Paulo Freire, this praxis comprises a process of becoming aware of those social conditions in which people live their lives and, in particular, of the oppressive elements that constitute them. *Conscientização* involves the person in understanding and fully appreciating their own social, political, economic, gendered, classed and racialized enframings,<sup>26</sup> and how these play an important part in the shaping of their reality. The pedagogy involved is dialogic, and it deliberately avoids settings in which there are unequal relations between teachers and students. Freire also argued that the status quo, which he called a banking model of education,<sup>27</sup> was counterproductive and regressive. His concern was with intentionality and agency in the process of learning.

Another form of resistance works through decolonisations of knowledge. These decolonisations (that is, a discursive reconfiguration comprising discursive objects and discursive relations, which has the

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<sup>26</sup> And other types of enframings.

<sup>27</sup> A banking model of education refers to the metaphor of students as containers or vessels into which educators must pour in, or fill up with, knowledge.

potential to persist over time) take as their central opposition (it is not this or that) the perceived universality of Eurocentric knowledge systems. They seek to construct and legitimise alternative epistemologies and epistemological framings. The presumption is that knowledge systems, learning approaches, curricula, categories and the like are colonised, and need to be decolonised. The universality that is opposed to is replaced by a more apt and coherent sense of universality. Colonial forms of universality determine what can count as legitimate knowledge, and, in effect, exclude, marginalise and dehumanise those with different forms of knowledge, expertise and justification. The colonisation process, long or short, extensive or restricted, resulted in a repression of Indigenous forms of knowledge production, of meaning systems, of different symbolic universes, and of notions of Indigenous subjectivities and agencies.

Immanent critiques of discursive objects and discursive configurations offer a further perspective on political and epistemic forms of resistance (see [Chapter 1](#)). An immanent critique positions the critique within the object or configuration under consideration. Implicit within every discursive formation are: an account of a person, including their dynamic capacities and affordances, and the environments within which they are situated; an account of the relationship between a person and their environments; knowledge about understanding, learning and change, with regards to the person and the environments in which they are located; inferences from these accounts, and conclusions about appropriate representations, media for representations and learning environments. These interstices and positionings constitute a particular rendition of an object or an object-configuration, and those consequences of committing oneself to this discursive object. To adopt an immanent critical approach is to make a judgement – perhaps we can call it a critical judgement – not from any universal or external set of criteria, but from the person's or other object's own set of preferences.<sup>28</sup>

Another type of resistance is through reading the world as a text. The world, and this is shorthand for anything that might exist which is external to our minds, such as other people, hills, lakes, human activities before we were born, books that were written by people who were not alive when we were born, and thoughts that could not have entered our minds before they did, can be read, understood, appreciated and assimilated as ideological and historical texts. These texts can be read through their pre-texts, sub-texts and inter-texts, which operate beneath

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28 See Bhaskar (2011).

the text and which gives it its meaning – those epistemologies and traditions of knowledge which allow a particular reading. Texts refer to observations, evaluations, reflections, discursive and material objects, relational objects, configurational objects of various types, and persons.

Reading a text can be construed in a number of ways, principally either as a learning action in the world or as a conceptual activity in the mind. Several approaches to reading texts have been developed. The first of these is monosemic, and this means that a definitive reading can be made of a text. A second approach is also monosemic, but here the primary focus is on the intentions of the author. The text allows an unequivocal reading because that reading is consistent with these intentions. A third approach focuses on reading the text and its enframings. The text and the way in which it is read are enframed.<sup>29</sup> A text under this conception can be a life, an episode in a life, an experience in that life, a praxis, a book, a sign, a technology, a feeling or emotion, a framing and an enframing, and much more. Reading texts is a way of framing the learning process.

Counter-activities may also involve a subversion of the categories by and through which we live. Difference can be understood in several ways. There is the common use given to the term, where difference is understood as not being, or as being opposite to something else – words and signs only have meanings within other arrangements of words and signs, from which they differ. Another way we can understand the idea of difference is by conceptualising it as a particular arrangement or spacing, so that what we should be concerned about is the process that differentiates social elements from other social elements.<sup>30</sup> Processes of classifying and reclassifying change the nature of objects, object-relations and object-configurations. Indeed, all references to the world involve the identification, manipulation, transformation and reconstruction of the categories (these are learning episodes), and this allows the possibility of transgression and resistance.

Absenting is another mode of resistance. Roy Bhaskar (1998) criticised the meta-notion of ontological monovalence, which suggests that reality is only positive and present. He suggested that the positive, in this tradition, undermines the negative, so that change becomes impossible. By not including the negativity of reality, and by emphasising

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29 This is a word used by Martin Heidegger (1962), translated from the original German word, *Gestell*, to denote those social, geo-historical, temporal, epistemological, political and discursive frames within which our thoughts and utterances are ineluctably embedded.

30 See Derrida (1978; 1981; 1982).

positivity over negativity, reality can only be thought of as positive; for example, this implies that unequal relations do not exist, and process and change are not necessary. To correct this error, Bhaskar positioned as central to his work on dialectics, the concepts of absence, negativity and change, asserting that they have real causal effects in the world. So, while the notion of negativity was employed to indicate ‘nothingness’, that is, indeterminate absence, Bhaskar used instead the notion of determinate absence, in the sense that an entity can be absent in terms of not being there in a particular space or time moment, or because it has never existed, or due to its dissolution.

A praxical hermeneutics and critique comprises, in general terms, an opening up, a looking at, the ways in which our concerns have been portrayed and represented in the past, how we can develop new ways of thinking, and how those institutions and practices that are hostile to certain groups of people can be reorganised and reconstructed (see [Chapter 1](#)). Praxis is not just action, for this would render the concept as meaningless insofar as everything we do in the world would be a praxis. It involves some form of conversion of thought into action, or at least the construction of a particular thought or set of thoughts in such a way that certain actions inevitably flow from it and other actions are set aside. Praxis has four elements: practice on practice, practice on thought, practice on ourselves, and practice unfolding from thought.

Another form of resistance is trans-framing. Identities and identity formations operate at different levels, within different frames, and therefore in different ways.<sup>31</sup> These different frames can be categorised as: the sub-individual level, the autobiographical level, the ordinary level of living, the functional level, the structural level, the mega level of whole traditions and civilisations, and, finally, the cosmological level where the person’s immediate concerns are with the planet as a whole (see [Bhaskar, 2011](#); and see [Chapter 8](#)). At these different levels, then, different forms of identity and agency (which are the key to any theory of learning) are constructed, causing, in some cases, deep-seated dislocations and anomic frames of mind. However, framings can also be construed as onto-epistemologies. There are perhaps ten onto-epistemologies that might enable us to understand how we can access the world: atomic, associational, functional, causal, actual, linguistic, hermeneutic, structural, semantic and holistic (see [Chapter 1](#)). Deframing or

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31 The truth of something or other, as a consequence, is frame-specific, and this includes what many people construe as facts – see [Chapter 1](#).

trans-framing, as an act of resistance, is a movement upwards or downwards or sideways, but always a repositioning of the way we can see the world, as a learning endeavour.

Resistance can be understood as practice on ourselves, and this locates the source of practice in individual reflection. This internal conversation has three conditioning structures. The first is that it is a genuinely interior phenomenon, and this implies that a person has a private life. The second conditioning structure is that this sense of a person's subjectivity has a first-person ontology – it relates directly to a particular person. The third conditioning structure is that it possesses causal powers, in that material and discursive consequences could follow directly from particular internal conversations.

We also need to address the issue of textuality, both as a form of resistance and as the way we (the authors of this work – Ronald Barnett, Søren Bengtson, Robert Isaksen, Sandra Leaton Gray, Alex Moore, Jon Nixon, Henrik Rydenfelt, Tone Sævi, David Scott and Bushra Sharar) have positioned ourselves in this book.<sup>32</sup>

## Textualities

Throughout, we have used a variety of textualities (referentials, linearities, fragilities, corrigibilities, expressives, framings and relations), and we want to draw attention to some of them here. The first of these is the insertion of a large number of references to other chapters in the book, both backwards and forwards. This is designed to show that every concept we use has a referential structure, in that every conceptual (and thus semantic) activity is framed and then reframed in relation to the possibilities that inhere in the concept, and in a network of other concepts.

A second device that we have used here is more familiar. This is the linearity of the text, in which a series of truth claims are introduced and justified, connections and relations are established between them, and conclusions are then drawn. This can be contrasted with a hypertextual

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<sup>32</sup> This book is an edited book, and it therefore consists of a number of different authors writing from different perspectives, although they share some common features as writers. This chapter, the last in the book, has been written by the editor of the book and one of the other contributors, who have inevitably made some assumptions about sameness and difference. They have used the personal pronoun 'we' here to refer to the collection of authors in this book, although the authorship of this chapter rests with the editor of the work and this other contributor.

mode of writing, which has a non-linear structure. Our textuality in this book, then, is a more conventional type. We have set out an argument, or perhaps a series of arguments, and nothing more.

A third device concerns the fragility of the writing, and what we mean by this is the sense in which we as the authors have had to struggle throughout with finding the right words, sets of words, sentence constructions, paragraph arrangements, chapter formations and so forth that can approximately bridge the gap between this text and what it refers to outside of the text itself. The point we are making is that this is not a confession of inadequacy by us, but an acknowledgement that our words, word-sets, sentences, paragraphs and chapter divisions are never adequate or sufficient and cannot be so, given the task that is being attempted, although most writers addressing issues to do with learning are unaware of this.

A fourth device that we have used here is to discuss at all times, and in as many ways as we can, the issue of truthfulness. Are we correct in what we say? Are we producing truthful knowledge? If we want to criticise a position taken by someone else, or if we want to make a claim that this other position is insufficiently evidenced or superficially formulated or conceptually inadequate or logically deficient, then we can only do this by comparing it with a position which is evidenced or in depth or conceptually adequate or logically sufficient. In short, we need criteria about truthful knowledge in order to make a judgement about a position or approach. Indeed, it is impossible to think, write, argue for or utter anything without making a series of references to what we think might be the appropriate way of thinking, writing, arguing or uttering – a truth-verifying set of activities.

A fifth textual device is necessarily one that is imposed on us because we use a language. Indeed, we could do nothing else, except perhaps remain silent. What a language does is restrict meaning, enable some things to be said but not everything, and explain things and the relations between things in some ways and not in other ways. If we want to say anything that is correct or apt in a language, then we can only do this by accepting that language's limitations and enablements.<sup>33</sup> We are suggesting that languaged thought is irreducibly limited and constrained, and that thinking or experiencing or sensing, or even learning, can take place beyond and without language. However, this does not circumvent

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33 Wittgenstein (1961: 23) argued famously that: 'the limits of language are the limits of my world', thereby accepting a position that goes much further than the one we are suggesting here.

the idea that language cannot allow us every expression or picture of the world, even if we accept that expressing such a proposition or sentiment is being expressed in a language.

A final textual and methodological device that we (the book's authors) have used extensively in this book is to set a series of general arguments against other arguments developed by other people. The point is that this is what most philosophers and thinkers actually do, even if they do not always make it explicit. This leaves open the possibility that we could write a history, an archaeology and a genealogy of learning without such referencing, and, indeed, there must have been a time in which every thought was new or at least not related to what other people said. What you have just been reading is a text and a particular type of text. As a text, we have argued throughout that it is a signifying practice, and as a signifying practice, it has to question its own textuality and, indeed, the discursive contents that it is committing to.<sup>34</sup> We have tried to do this throughout this book.

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<sup>34</sup> As a text, it is of course multi-authored.

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This edited book, as you can see from its title, is about learning, or at least about the concept and practice of learning. The contributors to this volume are focusing on two meta-concepts, knowledge and learning, on the relationship between the two, and the way these can be framed in epistemic, social, political and economic terms. Knowledge and learning, as meta-concepts, are positioned in various networks or constellations of meaning, principally: the antecedents of the concepts, their relations to other relevant concepts, and the way the concepts are used in the lifeworld.

In this book the various authors explore a number of important concepts that are relevant to the idea of learning. These are meta-concepts such as epistemology, inferential role semantics, phenomenology, rationality, thinking, hermeneutics, critical realism and pragmatism, and meso-concepts such as probability, woman, training, assessment, education, system, race, friendship, *Bildung*, curriculum, ecology and pedagogy. Like David Scott's first volume of *On Learning*, this collection focusing on philosophy, concepts and practices is a response to empiricist and positivist conceptions of knowledge. It challenges detheorised and reductionist ideas of learning that have filtered through to the management of our schools, colleges and universities; over-simplified messages about learning, knowledge, curriculum and assessment; and fostered the denial that values are central to understanding how we live and how we should live – the normative dimension to social policy and social theorising. This book is also an attempt at a *Bildungstheorie*.

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