

The provenance of the forms of knowledge thesis

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to consider what is probably the most widely known of the writings of Paul Hirst, ‘Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge’. It examines the central concept of the ‘forms’ and goes on to explore the provenance of the ideas he develops in this paper, exposing diversity and some tension between these. At the end it offers some brief suggestions regarding the prospects for the idea of a liberal education today in the light of Hirst’s views.

KEYWORDS: forms of knowledge, Paul Hirst, liberal education, Platonism, Louis Arnaud Reid, Wittgenstein

A DISCLAIMER

At a fairly advanced point in ‘The Forms of Knowledge Re-visited’, Paul Hirst writes:

Although one of the fundamental purposes of the chapter ‘Liberal education and the nature of knowledge’ was an endeavour to characterise liberal education while rejecting the doctrines of metaphysical and epistemological realism with which it has been historically associated, I have not infrequently been taken to be asserting the existence of a series of absolute domains, having at least the status of Kantian a priori categories, if not that of categories of Platonic ‘forms’. My use of the terms ‘category’ and ‘form’ may give some superficial support to such a view, but superficial it is, and the terms in which I suggest the forms are to be distinguished carry no such implications. (Hirst 1974: 71)

The disclaimer in these lines is multifaceted, rejecting doctrines of metaphysical and epistemological realism, as well as absolute domains identified here with Kant’s a priori categories and Plato’s ‘forms’. Hirst had come to this position by way of

Received: July 24, 2022. Revised: January 27, 2023. Accepted: January 31, 2023

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his own liberation from doctrines of far more repressive kinds in his strict religious upbringing, and his liberation from them was achieved in part through his study of mathematics as an undergraduate at Trinity College, Cambridge.¹ The reason for beginning here is that this sets the scene, in significant respects, for his reception of some major influences on his work, specifically those of Michael Oakeshott and Ludwig Wittgenstein. In due course, and drawing on these influences, my discussion will enter into broader questions concerning the metaphysical and epistemological realism to which Hirst refers and curriculum knowledge. But first let me consider Hirst's own account of the development of his ideas in these respects.

In 'From Revelation and Faith to Reason and Agnosticism', Hirst describes how, through the years of grammar school and university, the 'seeds of serious philosophical questioning' were being sown in his mind (Hirst 2010: 160). A crucial role in this was played by his mathematics teacher, who conveyed 'something of his wonder and delight in the achievements of mathematics and of the enormous power of truths once established by mathematical proof' (p. 161); in the process Hirst became aware also of the important difference in the grounding of mathematical truths and of empirical scientific truths. Against this background, he became increasingly troubled by the seeming circularity of revealed religious truth, which had so completely governed the austere discipline of his home and childhood. Yet Christianity, accepted by so many of the world's greatest thinkers, seemed to be full of the 'most excellent practical moral teaching' (p. 161). He expected that his time at university would help him to resolve these matters.

He began reading Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* (1945) and *Problems of Philosophy* (1912), which provided the kind of stimulation he was looking for, as well as A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936), which challenged him to think carefully about the relation between meaning and truth. But while that book seemed so obviously right about meaning in the sciences, it appeared 'equally obviously mistaken in its attack on all religious claims as meaningless, and moral principles as mere expressions of emotion'. Hirst's reading of Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* (1949) and R. M. Hare's *The Language of Morals* (1952) offered some hope, strengthening his belief that there was an autonomy to 'distinct areas of understanding rooted in logically distinct conceptual schemes and related methods of verification' (Hirst 2010: 163). It was perhaps in the late 1950s, and thinking very much along these lines, that he first came into contact with the work of Wittgenstein, as a result of the encouragement of Louis Arnaud Reid, who, R. S. Peters writes, had 'discovered him' (1974: viii). Hirst himself writes:

Even Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, with its talk of 'forms of life' and 'language games', I read as supporting my view of logically distinct domains of knowledge and understanding. What I now wanted above all though was to find a satisfactory account of the verification of moral and religious propositions ... What was more, these were now not only issues of concern for me personally but clearly central to areas of my new professional work in seeking to clarify the nature of educational aims and practices. (Hirst 2010: 163–4)

¹ His family belonged to the strict Glanton Brethren subgroup of the fundamentalist Plymouth Brethren.

In reading Wittgenstein, Hirst identified three theses, and these he adapted for his own purposes. First, he took philosophy to involve a practice of ‘mapping carefully the concepts and their relationships embedded in our use of language, thus helping us to remove confusions and contradictions that distort our understanding’ (p. 164). Second, he understood those concepts to be found in the ‘rules for our use of words rather than any notion that they must be labels of objects of any kind, physical, mental, spiritual, or whatever’ (p. 164). And third, he found that the ‘private language argument’ showed the dependence of all understanding on the application of the concepts in public discourse. Thus, our knowledge of our own mind, as well as others’, could not be based solely on individual private experience. But he came to recognize the limitations, even the distortions, that such a reading entailed: ‘What I did not begin to take from Wittgenstein was that he was radically challenging my claim that all understanding is at least fundamentally propositional in character’ (p. 164).

Looking back, Hirst refers to much of what he was thinking in the 1950s and 1960s as clearly neo-Kantian in nature. When R. S. Peters moved to the Institute of Education, his similar orientation provided ‘critical confirmation’ of Hirst’s propositional approach, and Peters encouraged him to apply such an approach to fundamental issues in educational theory and practice (p. 165). Hirst will speak of a form of knowledge as comprising ‘statements ... testable against experience’ (1974: 33): a statement corresponds, if it is true, with what is the case. The more he wrestled with problems of morality and religious belief, however, the more dissatisfied he became with the ‘basic commitments to the propositional nature of all knowledge and understanding and to the Kantian justification of moral principles’. It is important also that he came to realize that his enthusiasm to make progress with these problems may have led him to misunderstand Wittgenstein: ‘I began to see too that my use of Wittgenstein’s later work to bolster up these views was at the expense of my getting to grips with his much more radical challenge to my positivistic presuppositions about meaning and truth’ (2010: 166). As is now well known, the later shift in his views, the recanting of substantial aspects of the Forms of Knowledge thesis, came in significant respects through his reading of the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, though he also acknowledges the influence of Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) and Jürgen Habermas’s *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971). These thinkers led him to appreciate far more fully the social construction of all knowledge and understanding: to rethink the role of reason in human life and morality; to recognize the significance of social practices in the determination of ourselves and our lives; and to gain a new perspective on how best to conceive the good life for each of us. He now saw the *reach* of such a conception of social practice—as extending from ‘simple common skills to patterns of eating and farming and industrial production, of pursuing knowledge and understanding, of creating family life and economic and political systems, and of medicine, music, the arts, and games of all kinds’ (2010: 168). With regard to religious claims, however, and in the absence

of any prospect of justification, he saw a position of scepticism or agnosticism as the only reasonable one to take.

In the light of Hirst's own reflections on this development (Hirst 1998), I want to begin, in what follows, by considering in particular his adoption of the word 'forms'. At one level, Hirst's disclaimer that the forms of which he is speaking are not to be understood in terms of Platonism can readily be accepted. He emphasizes the cultural genesis and development of the forms that he identifies; he denies any metaphysical status to the objectivity that they achieve. And probably there are not so many philosophers today who would accept Platonism in the form that has come down to us—that is, in the familiar systematic account synthesized from views that Socrates expresses. Hirst's adoption of the word 'forms' might be taken instead as the deliberate appropriation of a familiar philosophical term for new purposes, in a way that is original and memorable. I see no immediate problem with this. The careful reader should be able to avoid the misreading Hirst draws attention to. This is not, however, to overcome the problem. Hirst drastically underestimates the depth to which Platonism has penetrated Western thinking. This is not to posit the existence of ideal forms in the way that Socrates depicts; it is true that to the modern reader who comes fresh to that account, the whole idea can seem ludicrously far-fetched, at first sight at least. But the legacy of Platonism is more subtle in nature. It exerts a powerful influence through modern forms of Christianity in which the flux and contingency of the world we ordinarily live in is disparaged in favour of the ideal and the timeless. In commerce, it is played out powerfully in the images presented to us in advertising, which in some respects seem to provide a materialization of ideal forms. In wider secular contexts, it is powerfully present in ideas of the model, including blueprints and plans. Let me expand on this with an example.

Some years ago I was working in a college of further education,² and one of my colleagues, an intelligent and very decent man, was promoted to a senior management position. He was given overall responsibility for managing the curriculum (this was a very large institution), and as part of this he devised a grid system, which divided responsibility for students from responsibility for staff. This was before the time of electronic communication, so he drew all this up meticulously in an elaborate diagram covering several sheets of A1-size paper. When the plan was complete, he went out of his office and pinned it to the notice board. As far as he was concerned, his job was done. When later it was pointed out to him that things were not going quite as they should be, his response was that this was simply because people were failing to comply with the system. The point of the story is of course that, although he was a very conscientious person, he paid little attention to the gap between the plan and the practice, between the ideal model and what people actually did. One can have some sympathy for him, as he was certainly conscientious in

² Further education colleges offer post-compulsory, mostly non-advanced, and predominantly vocational courses, with substantial provision for 'second-chance' and continuing education. They are more or less the equivalent of the community colleges of North America. They are typically large institutions, and the variety of their courses and modes of attendance requires management on a scale and at a level of complexity greater than is the case with schools.

that part of the role that involved the making of the plan. In a sense his complaint was reasonable enough: a system is put in place, people do not follow the rules, and the whole thing falls apart—that is familiar enough. But there was something more behind this: he was lacking when it came to engaging with people and with contingency—that is, with what happens to happen and cannot be fully anticipated. He was, I would like to say, in the grip of the ideal, drawn in by its promise of setting things in order, an appeal that was at the same time reassuring and aesthetic. His way of thinking, although it is rather extreme, is something that most people are susceptible to in some degree, and it is easy to see how it resonates with, and surely in part derives from, aspects of Platonism.

Moreover, while my example is drawn from circumstances that pertained some forty years ago, it is evident that modelling and planning have come to assume still greater roles in the running of educational institutions. This trend has been hastened by the pervasive use of computing in educational administration and by changes in funding. It is incumbent on institutions and on individual teachers to generate plans not only at the micro-level of class teaching, assessment, and course management but also, on the grander scale, mission statements, business plans, and projections of development, including, in the university context especially, projections of long-term research plans. It has become a part of the education that students receive that they come to understand themselves in this way. Planning is a characteristic feature of the broader neoliberal culture within which educational institutions increasingly and almost inevitably style themselves. None of this is to deny that such institutions need to be managed in some way, but the prevailing culture is at some distance from encouraging the practical reason that Aristotle extolled, and inclined to draw its members into the regularities, and into what is in part the aesthetic appeal, of its protocols and stylistic proprieties. There is little in Hirst's writings that suggests that he anticipated or became fully aware of the deleterious effects of the performativity that characterizes contemporary education and the culture of neoliberalism.

This, then, helps to show the way that Hirst underestimates the extent of the absorption of Platonism in Western thinking. Perhaps, if he had been more alert to these difficulties, he might have chosen to avoid the key terms that prompt the mistaken attribution of Platonism to his position; but of course it must be acknowledged that, given that he was developing his central views in this respect in the 1960s, the problems I am describing were not widely evident at that time. With prescience or without, however, it can still be asked whether the connotations of the terms 'form' and 'category' can be merely of superficial significance in the way that Hirst asserts. I do not think the matter can end with the disclaimer. Certainly his explicit intention is to articulate a position (or series of positions) that is divested of the encumbrance of doctrines of metaphysical and epistemological realism, and his commitment to a more Wittgensteinian stance, understanding 'meaning as use', is made clear in his writings (see, for example, Hirst's 'Language and Thought', in [Hirst 1974](#)). I shall say more about Wittgenstein below. There is, however, already reason to ponder aspects of his work that pull against that commitment.

SOURCES OF GRAVITATION

Enthusiasm for ‘progressive education’ had gathered pace rapidly in the UK in the 1960s,³ and the publication of the Primary Memorandum in Scotland (1965) and the Plowden Report in England (1967) gave it official blessing. All this was welcomed enthusiastically by many teacher educators, amongst whom progressivism became a new orthodoxy.

It was partly—even substantially—in response to this minor revolution that R. S. Peters, Paul Hirst, and Robert Dearden set out what they characterized as a restatement of the idea of a liberal education. This was not a wholesale rejection of the new ideas, but the reaction did come with a certain animus.⁴ It was for good reason that progressivism had challenged some of the more harmful aspects of what had gone before: the filling of empty vessels with mindless facts, the authoritarian regime and harsh discipline, the blindness to individual difference and indifference to the experience of the child. But some of the key tenets that were becoming familiar surely stood in need of critical scrutiny. Ideas of creativity, imagination, play, happiness, the interests of the child, and above all growth had become sacrosanct in the new orthodoxy, yet they were rarely subjected to careful examination. The idea of the integrated day raised Rousseau-inspired questions about the way that knowledge was parcelled up in schools, in contrast to a child’s ordinary experience. While these reforms took effect most obviously at the level of the primary school, in secondary education also there were moves for change.⁵ The advent of the large (non-selective) comprehensive school⁶ offered the prospect of what was to become known as the ‘cafeteria curriculum’,⁷ raising questions and challenges not only about what subjects should be on the curriculum, especially with regard to questions of ‘relevance’ (another term that was to come under scrutiny), but also about the legitimacy of sticking to familiar subject divisions.

There might indeed be much to be said for some of the innovations motivated by these values, but they were typically less clearly thought through than they might have been, were often tinged with sentimentality, and—most significantly—were interpreted in terms of method rather than substance. Progressivism attended

³ Two government reports—the Primary Memorandum (1965) in Scotland and the Plowden Report (1967) in England and Wales—espoused major aspects of the child-centred thinking in education. Their ideas were welcomed enthusiastically by many teacher educators, amongst whom progressivism became a new orthodoxy.

⁴ Wholesale rejection and plenty of animus did come from those who upheld what they saw as traditional approaches to education. The most articulate expressions of such a view came in the so-called Black Papers, the most prominent of which were authored variously by Brian Cox, A. E. Dyson, and Rhodes Boyson.

⁵ That is, progressive education had its most obvious effects in elementary education (in the primary school and in early years education), but progressive ideas were also having their effect in secondary education (in the high school). For a valuable discussion and defence of progressive education, see John Darling’s *Child-Centred Education and its Critics* (1994). Darling does not, however, do justice to the idea of a liberal education, which he mostly deals with in terms of traditional education.

⁶ Crawley Comprehensive, Countesthorpe, and Stantonbury Comprehensive would be examples of such schools.

⁷ The ‘shopping-mall high school’ of the USA.

too much to the manner, insufficiently to the matter of education. Such was the abiding criticism made by Peters and his colleagues, and it was in attempting to redress this balance that they sought to characterize and reaffirm the substantive commitments of a liberal education. But what exactly did that mean?

It was important that the project was not one of installing a new theory but rather of distilling an idea of education that had classical roots, had taken shape over the course of the centuries, and had appeared in various incarnations. Two broad facets of this restatement can be identified. On the one hand, there was the commitment to the view that education requires initiation into those forms of enquiry and understanding that have been passed down through the ages. The intention was not to set out a parochial and ethnocentric conception of culture and to inculcate young people into this: it was rather to initiate them into the common human heritage.⁸ One high point in the expression of such a vision of education is found in Plato's *The Republic*, in the allegory of the Cave, where the emphasis is on a freeing of the mind from illusion and on coming to a just vision of truth and goodness. Another is to be found in the celebrated words of Matthew Arnold:

The whole scope of the essay is to recommend culture as the great help out of our present difficulties; culture being a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world; and through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically. (Arnold 1869: viii).

An important qualification is that these are to be taken as traditions of *critical* thought, understood as dynamic, evolving, and contested.

On the other hand, there was the commitment to liberalism in political terms and as more conventionally understood. In many respects this aspect of their work was in a stronger position to withstand the waves of reaction that their position provoked—not least in the shape of the criticism that their views, at least on curriculum content, were a veiled defence of the grammar-school curriculum and, hence, a shoring up of the status quo with its vested interests. The 'new' sociology of education—exemplified by Michael Young's *Knowledge and Control* (1971) and aligned with the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966)—contributed to this attack, and in many respects this chimed with new kinds of criticism of the divisions of social class and with egalitarianism. David Cooper's *Illusions of Equality* (1980), a book that in some degree kept together the two facets of a liberal education I am describing, provided a substantial defence. But with the burgeoning influence of monetarist economic policies and the dominance through the 1980s of Margaret Thatcher, the main currents of thinking flowed into concerns of this more political kind and, in keeping with what was to become neoliberalism, questions of

⁸ Mathematics and science provide clear examples of the commonality of this inheritance. In history or literary criticism, that commonality is less immediately apparent, for what constitutes the study in those subjects is likely to be shaped by culturally specific conditions. Nevertheless, such study is enhanced by attention to culturally diverse texts and by seeking, through this, a common repository of learning.

the good life and ethics were drawn by a concern, which began to pervade the culture as a whole, with notions of well-being.⁹

A robust element in this restatement of the idea of a liberal education was Kantianism, and this found expression especially in the idea of rational autonomy as a central aim of education, as articulated particularly by Dearden (see especially [Dearden 1972](#)). Dearden's initial point of reference in this landmark essay is Kant, but the broader frame of thinking is heavily influenced by John Stuart Mill, a philosopher fundamentally important to liberalism in its more familiar political sense in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Over the past fifty years, however, Mill's prominence has partly been displaced by the massive influence of John Rawls. His *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1972, postdates the major period in which this restatement of a liberal education was being worked out. But the book is widely understood to be the most influential work on anglo-analytical political philosophy these past fifty years, and its presence in the contemporary reworking of this second aspect of the idea of a liberal education is plain to see.

The development of this latter strand—for example, in the work of such authors as Eamonn Callan, Harry Brighouse, and Adam Swift—has, in some significant degree, lost touch with the former. This, in my view, is to the detriment of the idea of a liberal education. I do not question the importance of the questions these authors address, but the general trend has been towards preoccupation with access to educational opportunity rather than with the substance of education. Sometimes it seems that well-being is the almost ready-made answer to the question of the aims of education. In taking this direction, this strand of thought has also moved away from the questions that most preoccupied Hirst, which were epistemological and, ultimately, ethical in kind. He was not alone, and certainly Peters and Dearden shared many of his concerns, as is evident from the ethical substance of the broader project that the three authors developed together. Furthermore, that position proved in part to be something different, and something more than their official methodology would provide: they offered a vision of education. Although this had roots in argument, in epistemology and ethics, it expanded beyond this, imparting a sense of the nature of education that could not be reached by means of ratiocination alone. In so doing the methodological commitments that the authors espoused were complemented by the influence and style of thinkers from other backgrounds.

They were responding also to a more general cultural concern that had come to the fore in the late 1950s: the so-called 'two-cultures debate'. This was ignited by a lecture given in 1959 by the novelist C. P. Snow. Snow, who was by training a research scientist, wrote a series of novels under the title *Strangers and Brothers*, in which he drew attention to the 'dangerous divide' he saw emerging between the sciences, on the one hand, and the arts and humanities, on the other. Certainly this struck a chord with many a reader, but there were some forceful reactions, not least the caustic attack on Snow by F. R. Leavis in a lecture in 1962. The vehemence of

⁹ I take the prevailing idea of well-being to be somewhat different from Aristotle's *eudaimonia*, with which it is associated, and to be related to an economy of the identification of needs and desires and their satisfaction.

Leavis's attack no doubt helped to keep the debate in the public eye, and it has continued to figure in reflections on cultural divides, with periodic revivals of Snow's analysis.¹⁰ Snow's eye-catching illustration of the divide asserted that there were scientists who would struggle to read a novel of Charles Dickens, and literary intellectuals ignorant of the Second Law of Thermodynamics. The problem and so the solution, Snow asserted, was to be found in education. Hence, he was critical, for example, of the tendency towards early specialization that characterized secondary schooling in England. He also placed great faith in the extension of scientific education, not only as a means of change at home, but also as the path to economic prosperity and greater equality in the world as a whole. It was partly against this that Leavis's vituperation was aimed. It is interesting to reflect further on the effects of Snow's caricature of the problem: one can imagine scientist-readers feeling mildly embarrassed at not having read any Dickens (though not being in any doubt about what a Dickens novel was) and the literary intellectuals secretly scurrying to the encyclopaedia to find out what that Second Law said! The apparently even-handed wit of Snow's comparison obscures the extent of his own predilections—that is, his optimism about science. But how even are these deficiencies? I was one of those who once scurried to the encyclopaedia. More recently, having forgotten it all, I have simply needed to google. So it is refreshing to read of E. F. Schumacher's carefully pointed paraphrase: 'the Second Law, that heat cannot of itself pass from a colder to a hotter body, amounts, more vulgarly, to, "You cannot warm yourself on something which is colder than you." This—and Shakespeare!' I found this remark in Louis Arnaud Reid's recollections of the Two Cultures debate in his philosophical memoir, *Yesterday's Today* (2013: 138). Reid has so far been mentioned only in passing, and his views now need to come into the picture more prominently.

FORMS AND WAYS

In 1947 the Chair in Philosophy of Education at the Institute of Education was established, and Reid was appointed to the position. He held the post until 1962, when he was succeeded by Peters. In a recent paper on R. S. Peters and his legacy, John and Patricia White refer to the 'long and distinguished career' Reid had already had 'in general philosophy, focusing on epistemology and aesthetics, in which field he had become a leading figure' (2022: 2). Reid came to the philosophy of education with a commitment to changing it from a study of great past educators to 'sustained questioning and reasoning about educational aims and values and the activities of teaching' (White and White 2022: 2; Hirst 1998: 4). They go on to quote the somewhat barbed acknowledgement of Reid in Peters' inaugural lecture, where he describes Reid as 'sympathetic to the layman's view that the task of the philosopher is to provide some kind of synoptic directive for living', while casting

¹⁰ In the 1990s, Mary Midgley borrowed the terms of Snow's two-cultures analysis as a means to understanding the rising culture of managerialism, which she—wrongly in my view—saw as a reincarnation of the problem, while in the following decade influential essays reflecting on the debate were published by Furedi et al. (2009).

himself, by contrast, as ‘a very mundane fellow whose eyes are more likely to be fixed on the brass-tacks on or under the teacher’s desk than on the Form of the Good’ (White and White 2022: 2; Peters 1964: 8). The authors suggest in addition that Peters may also have side-lined both of Reid’s former colleagues, Klaus Neuberger and Leslie Perry, who in due course moved to professorial appointments at Warwick and King’s College London, respectively. Peters’ brass-tacks mission was to recreate the

philosophy of education on the basis of the philosophical approach of conceptual analysis which was becoming dominant in anglophone philosophy at the time. In his retirement, Reid found a greater welcome in the Institute’s Art Department than in the Philosophy Department. He taught there, and continued to write until his death at 90. (White and White 2022: 2)

How did this affect Hirst? During the time that he was working at Oxford University, from 1955, Hirst embarked on a PhD under the supervision of Reid, and Reid encouraged his move to a position at the Institute in 1960. Peters took up his position in 1962, and the significance of this for Hirst is beyond question. But Hirst’s words when he recalled this influence repay further attention: Peters’ ‘firm critical confirmation of my increasingly stridently propositional approach to all knowledge and understanding gave me the confidence to explore the implications of such a view for many fundamental issues in educational theory and practice’ (Hirst 2008: 118). The phrasing here indicates an element of self-criticism, sharpened no doubt with the benefit of hindsight: to a large extent it does seem to me an accurate characterization of some of the mainstays of Hirst’s position at that time, at least in the more forceful (though not necessarily the most convincing) moments of its expression. In the light of this, then, it is worth considering his background relationship to Reid.

Reid’s *Ways of Knowledge and Experience* (1961) sets out to resist any assumption that knowledge is reducible to or modelled by the reasoning of the sciences (with their characteristic methods of proof).¹¹ Three points in Reid’s account are particularly salient. First, he examines and compares knowledge in mathematics, in the arts, in religion, in the moral life, and in personal relationships. In the process he considers different kinds of justification and the diverse ways in which values inhere in these various kinds of knowledge. The title of his book refers to ‘ways’ and not ‘forms’, and apart from avoiding any Platonist connotations, the term serves to indicate something more dynamic and suggestive of the ongoing and sometimes uneven processes of enquiry. Second, he is at pains to stress the coupling of knowledge and experience. This is not to deny that these forms of enquiry depend upon public criteria but to point to the necessary complement of this in the experience of the knower or enquirer; this is an acknowledgement of subjectivity, a facet of knowledge that, in the earnest display of rigour in an account, is easily airbrushed from the scene. This involved, he argued, following Alfred North Whitehead, a reassertion of the relation of abstractions to concrete experience (p. 31). Here perhaps—in his frequent reference to ordinary experience and to the focusing of experience in response to works of art—we find his equivalent of Peters’ ‘brass tacks’. Third, his

¹¹ For further discussion, see my ‘Curiosity and Acquaintance: Ways of Knowing’ (2020a).

idea of the different aspects to knowing cuts across these several ‘ways’ for the following reasons. There is a tendency to treat propositional knowledge as the central, even the essential, form that knowledge takes. While this obviously raises questions about the relation between knowing-that and knowing-how, of the kind that Hirst found to be fruitfully explored in Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind* (and that has for good reason busied generations of epistemologists), it tends to obscure a further kind of knowing that might be thought of as acquaintance (or, as it is sometimes put, knowing with a direct object), as in familiarity with a person, place, work of art, and so on. (The sense of the expression here is quite different from the technical sense of knowledge-by-acquaintance developed by Bertrand Russell.)¹²

Where is Hirst in relation to this? The following year Reid published *Philosophy and Education* (1962), and Hirst is acknowledged for his help in checking the proofs. Reid several times sought Hirst as a reader for his manuscripts. Their connection extended over some twenty years, and for a short time at least they worked closely together. Hirst similarly acknowledged his debt to Reid.¹³ It is not hard to see some echo of Reid’s ‘ways’ in Hirst’s differentiation of knowledge, albeit that Hirst’s account finds its centre of gravity in a ‘stridently propositional approach’. Hence, the parallel resides, notwithstanding significant differences, primarily in the first aspect of knowledge that Reid identifies—the comparison of ways of knowing (in mathematics, the arts, religion, etc.), of the different kinds of justification, and of the diverse ways in which they embody value.¹⁴ It was Peters’ encouragement that gave weight especially to the centring of Hirst’s views in the propositional approach.

Hirst himself is explicit about the extent to which he had come under the sway of the logical positivism that was so widely influential in the 1940s and 1950s. Ayer’s *Language, Truth and Logic* had made its mark, and it had become required reading for generations of students. Moreover, Ayer himself had become a charismatic and highly influential figure on the scene, in philosophy and as a public intellectual too. At the same time, not only had Wittgenstein’s early work inspired the members of the Vienna Circle (probably for the wrong reasons): his later work was now being quickly absorbed without being properly digested, with the result that it came to be assimilated to the idea of conceptual analysis that was the lingua franca of the anglo-analytical philosophy of the time. This absorption was unsteadily mixed up with the ordinary language philosophy associated especially with J. L. Austin. Hirst’s own sense of the shortcomings of his adoption of ideas from Wittgenstein is an indication of what was at stake.

¹² In the Preface to *Knowledge and the Curriculum*, Hirst writes: ‘To Professor Louis Arnaud Reid and Professor Richard Peters I owe a particular debt for the encouragement and intellectual stimulus they have always provided’ (Hirst 1974: ix).

¹³ Peters himself makes this point: ‘Reid’s influence on Paul Hirst, whom he discovered, was considerable; for his celebrated “forms of knowledge” thesis was in part stimulated by an earlier book of Reid’s called *Ways of Knowledge and Experience*’ (Peters 1977: 477).

¹⁴ The general reluctance of epistemologists to engage much with the category of ‘knowledge by acquaintance’ perhaps relates to their finding the expression and the concept somewhat contrived. But it is worth remembering the rather loose range of the English verb ‘to know’, by contrast, for example, with the distinction in Romance languages inherited from the Latin terms *sapere* and *cognoscere*.

At the start I mentioned Peters' reference to Reid's 'discovery' of Wittgenstein, a remark that partly reflects the extraordinary and excessive veneration that was shown towards Wittgenstein in the 1940s and 1950s, even to the extent of mimicking his mannerisms and style of speech. But that judgement is also somewhat misleading in that Reid himself was not an unqualified admirer of Wittgenstein. Possibly this relates in part to his own sympathy with the ideas of Ernst Cassirer and Suzanne Langer, with whom he enjoyed some reciprocity of influence. The philosophical outlook they shared—with its emphasis on the difference between signs and symbols, and on the significance of the latter in the lives of human beings—did, however, put him a position that was more receptive to the insights of Wittgenstein's later writings. It was a part of Reid's endeavour throughout his career to work, like Wittgenstein, against the constraints on thought that logical positivism had imposed, and this extended into his working on education. In *Philosophy and Education* he writes:

[P]hilosophy once it starts has no stopping-place. Although the focus of attention in philosophy of education may be upon the foreground questions which arise out of the thought and practice of education itself, the treatment of these focal problems inevitably entails assumptions about knowledge, the nature of man, the status of moral and other values, the nature of the world, whether divinely ordained or otherwise ... [I]t cannot avoid looking into these larger questions from time to time ... and it is important for the student of education not to let himself be inhibited by arbitrary notices [saying] 'No Road' posted across ancient rights of way. (Reid 1962: 14)

The passage was pitted against the roadblock that had been provided so effectively by Ayer's 'demonstration' of the impossibility of metaphysics (Ayer 1934). Reid's view was that such a way of thinking could not itself fail to hold metaphysical assumptions—about human beings, things, time and space, reasons and causes, and language and the world. Metaphysics in this sense was unavoidable.

This claim of a blocking of thought, and denial of common experience, was pressed also, in Reid's *Ways of Understanding and Education* (1986), in a more extended criticism of Hirst's discussion of knowledge in art. In 'Literature and the Fine Arts as a Unique Form of Knowledge', Hirst makes it clear that he is not using the term 'knowledge' to refer to 'any form of conscious, occurrent experience'; moreover, he takes any putative category of 'knowledge by acquaintance' to be analysable in terms of knowledge-that, knowledge-how, and some non-knowledge component.¹⁵ Hirst is not interested in the character of personal experience but rather the 'content communicated in artistic expressions', and he seeks to affirm 'the legitimacy of talking here about knowledge of a propositional or statement kind' (Hirst 1974: 117–8). Reid resists particularly strongly Hirst's correlative claim that art objects must be identified and given a label in the process of this

¹⁵ Reid's castigation of philosophers 'bewitched' in this way surely sides with the common experience of practitioners. It reflects also the constriction that has been felt by teachers of art compelled to comply with standardized forms of assessment. While it would be wrong to blame Hirst for these problems, his insistent recourse to propositions and statements as the locus of meaning does not help.

analysis. In phrasing that overtly borrows from Wittgenstein, Reid writes: ‘No one but philosophers “bewitched” by a contemporary *idée fixe* arguing in the interests of a limited theory would argue that all is non-knowledge (or non-cognitive) till we have done the labelling’ (Reid 1986: 44).¹⁶ Against such a view, and drawing especially on the example of music, Reid demonstrates the irreducible role of knowledge by acquaintance and of occurrent experience in aesthetic knowledge and understanding.

LANGUAGE-GAMES

It was, nevertheless, part of Hirst’s endeavour, impressed though he was by logical positivism, to find ways beyond verificationism’s exclusion of matters of value and religious belief from rational justification. But in the picture that he developed in the 1960s, the status and character of propositions and the varying forms of knowledge were brought into clear focus in such a way that the *background* of the practices and activity in which those expressions might play their part was blurred, if it was not entirely lost from view.

There may be an initial plausibility to the idea that the forms of knowledge have some similarity to what Wittgenstein has in mind in speaking of language-games: the language-game is not merely a matter of words but connotes a coherent activity, with its distinctive grammatical autonomy. Furthermore, there is no hierarchy between language-games—hence, Wittgenstein’s epistemology, if that term is still appropriate, needs to be seen as pluralistic. But the picture that Hirst and Peters were working with was clearly intellectualistic and systematic in significant respects—qualities that pull sharply against the attention to the circumstances of our everyday lives that typify Wittgenstein’s later writings. The upshot of this misappropriation was a kind of metaphysical distortion. It was metaphysical in that it remained trapped within a version of the ‘intellectualist legend’, in Gilbert Ryle’s phrase, and quite failed to realize the radicality of Wittgenstein’s achievement (for criticism, see Marshall and Smeyers 1995). In particular it failed to understand the patient and critically important examination of the relations between subject and object that Wittgenstein undertakes. As with Austin, Wittgenstein is at pains to show what we do with words. The language-game has its foundation not in a logical principle: its grammar lies in what we do, and we do a great many things. That variety means that when Wittgenstein tries to explain what he means by ‘language-game’, he offers a non-systematic, uneven, and open-ended list. He begins in the voice of his interlocutor, but the two questions that are raised are quickly dispelled in the demonstration of the countless things we do with words:

But how many kinds of sentence are there? Say assertion, question and command? —There are countless kinds, countless different kinds of use of all the things we call ‘signs’, ‘words’, ‘sentences’. And this diversity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence and others become obsolete and get forgotten.

¹⁶ For further discussion of this passage in relation to Hirst, see Richard Smith’s ‘Forms of Knowledge and Forms of Philosophy’ in the present issue.

(We can get a *rough picture* of this from the changes in mathematics.)

The word 'language-game' is used here to emphasize the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.

Consider the variety of language-games in the following examples:

- Giving orders, and acting on them —
- Describing an object by its appearance, or its measurements —
- Constructing an object from a description (a drawing) —
- Reporting an event —
- Speculating about the event —
- Forming and testing a hypothesis —
- Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams —
- Making up a story and reading one —
- Acting in a play —
- Singing rounds —
- Guessing riddles —
- Cracking a joke; telling one —
- Solving a problem in applied arithmetic —
- Translating from one language into another —
- Requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying.

— It is interesting to compare the diversity of the tools of language and of the ways they are used, the diversity of kinds of word and sentence, with what logicians have said about the structure of language. (This includes the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.) (2009: §23)¹⁷

The concatenation of items in the last line of Wittgenstein's list gesture to the open-endedness, the overlaps, and the grammar of different moods that he has in mind. And this, of course, is not grammar in the familiar textbook sense, but grammar as a structuring of human lives and thought. The essence of meaning does not depend upon a proposition's correlation with a state of affairs, for 'Essence is expressed in grammar' (§371), and 'Grammar tells what kind of object anything is' (§373).

Thus, whether one speaks of forms of knowledge or of academic subjects as we ordinarily understand them, these are not on a par with what Wittgenstein means by language-games. Any subject would incorporate a diversity of language-games, probably including some that are listed above but extending through others in open-ended ways. Attention is being drawn to the diversity of the things we do, and this diversity would be there in anything we could call an academic subject. This diversity of activities might be said to feed into something larger that could be identified as a practice, perhaps in the sense that impressed Hirst in his later work. But crucial to Wittgenstein's account is the recurrent attention to the ways that a novice might come into the game, through being guided by initiates and through *learning how to go on*, in ways both imitative and novel, the meaningfulness of which will be circumscribed by their potential intelligibility to others. Language-games are not forms of knowledge though they are conditions of intelligibility and meaningfulness. Indeed,

¹⁷ Emphasis on breadth of coverage, if not comprehensiveness, is partly an inheritance of the idea developed in the fifteenth century of the 'Renaissance man' or *Uomo universale*. See also Hirst (1974: 24).

propositions could not have the prominence they do, on Wittgenstein's account, other than against this background of activity.

I am not sure how far Hirst travelled towards this recognition in his recanting of aspects of his earlier position. He tended to credit his change of view particularly to the influence of Alasdair MacIntyre. But MacIntyre's thought comes in at a rather different level, being concerned more with the dependence of meaningful belief and action on community and tradition, and on the embeddedness of reason in the practices community sustains. Wittgenstein's thought enters at what is perhaps a lower level, as is illustrated by his preoccupation with the coming into language of the young child. But these influences are not necessarily in conflict with one another. Moreover, they connect with germs of thought in Hirst that in some degree were there all along—as is seen especially in his acknowledgement of Michael Oakeshott.

THE CONVERSATION OF HUMANKIND

At the end of 'Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge', Hirst turns to the question of what initiation of the forms adds up to. How far are they collectively to be seen as comprehensive?¹⁸ How far do they constitute a whole? He emphasizes that the person who has had some kind of initiation into each of the forms must appreciate them for what they are in themselves and recognize their limitations. Entertaining the suggestion that this might amount to no more than the achievement of 'a series of discreet [*sic*] ways of understanding experience', he holds back from the opposing thought that they might come together in 'some quasi-aesthetic unity of the mind'; but this is not to suggest that the result is 'in any sense chaos' (Hirst 1974: 39). These last paragraphs of the paper reinforce the point that the forms are the products of histories of human enquiry, and precisely not Platonist ideal forms, and the cautious tone helps to resist any inflation of what is being claimed in the mind of an over-enthusiastic reader: what I mean is that it would be a mistake to take the achievement as the comprehensive coverage of a complete set, the collected components comprising a comprehensive unity. The extended quotation from Oakeshott's 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind' (1959) with which Hirst brings the paper to a close is introduced with a degree of reticence yet poignant affirmation. Here is the passage as Hirst quotes it:

As civilized human beings, we are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of ourselves. Of course there is argument and enquiry and information, but wherever these are profitable they are to be recognized as passages in this conversation, and perhaps they are not the most captivating of the passages ... Conversation is not an enterprise designed to yield an extrinsic profit, a contest where a winner gets a prize, nor is it an activity of exegesis; it is an unrehearsed intellectual adventure ... Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation in which we learn to recognize

¹⁸ Originally in Oakeshott (1962: 198–9).

the voices, to distinguish the proper occasions of utterance, and in which we acquire the intellectual and moral habits appropriate to conversation. And it is this conversation which, in the end, gives place and character to every human utterance. (Oakeshott, as quoted in [Hirst 1974](#): 39–40)¹⁹

These are profoundly moving words. They surely contributed to the impact of Hirst's paper, just as its success made familiar amongst subsequent generations theorizing about education the idea of 'the conversation of mankind'. But there are some puzzles about the quotation and Hirst's relation to it, and these warrant consideration. 'There are philosophers who assure us that all human utterance is in one mode' ([Oakeshott 1962](#): 197). This opening line of Oakeshott's paper, encapsulating an idea Oakeshott goes on to contest, provides what must have been a further source of attraction for Hirst's developing ideas. Yet the divisions Oakeshott elaborates are not merely fewer in number but of a different order than Hirst's. Practical activity is complemented by 'poetry' and 'science' as different 'voices'; 'history' and philosophy (p. 201) are mentioned as candidates for addition, but this is almost incidental, and the central focus of the account is plainly on the three key terms. When Oakeshott introduces the thought that the 'diverse idioms of utterance which make up current human intercourse have some meeting-place and compose a manifold of some sort', the manifold seems to parallel Hirst's conception of education as comprising its several forms. Oakeshott's specification of the meeting-place as an arena not of argument but precisely of conversation, however, opens in a direction slightly different from the emphasis on knowledge and justification in Hirst's account. And the ideas Oakeshott is advancing, though nowhere denying the public nature of criteria, are entirely without the inflection of verificationism in tests for truth. Moreover, while the terms in Hirst's favoured list seem straightforwardly descriptive, Oakeshott's 'poetry' and 'science', and even 'voice' itself, function more as terms of art. The sense they carry in his account is stipulated in a manner that is reasonably clear, yet this does not exempt them from coincidences of use of a non-technical kind and the range of connotations thereby raised. Hence, Oakeshott's writing is evocative and suggestive. 'Properly speaking', Oakeshott claims, the conversation in question 'is impossible in the absence of a diversity of voices' (p. 201). But it is the quality of this interaction that Oakeshott is most concerned to convey: 'In conversation, "facts" appear only to be resolved once more into the possibilities from which they were made ... Thoughts of different species take wing and play round one another, responding to each other's movements and provoking one another to fresh exertions' (p. 198). Such implications are surely felt in the power of Hirst's quotation from Oakeshott, and these are moving intimations of what enquiry within a subject can be like.

Yet there is a puzzle, is there not, about Hirst's rearrangement of the passage he quotes? It is extraordinary that the order of the three excerpts included in the quotation is different from their occurrence in Oakeshott's original paper. Is the sequence orchestrated to heighten the crescendo? The rhetorical flourish with which the argument is thereby drawn to a close is memorable, to be sure. It is intriguing then to see the manner in which Hirst's introduction of the passages is subtly hedged:

¹⁹ See the 'Recollections of Paul Hirst' in the *PESGB Newsletter 2000–2022* (pp. 50–63).

Perhaps the most suggestive picture of the outcome is that used by Professor Michael Oakeshott, though for him it has more literal truth than is here intended. In this the various forms of knowledge are seen as voices in a conversation, a conversation to which they each contribute in a distinctive way. If taken figuratively, his words express more succinctly than mine can precisely what it seems to me a liberal education is and what its outcome will be. (Hirst 1974: 39)

The contrast between the literal and the figurative (or metaphorical) is far from straightforward here, and, a second point, *if* Oakeshott is thinking of forms, these are not the same in kind as those identified by Hirst. To the considerable extent that the idea of voices in a conversation has power in this context, what credibility can be given to its being metaphorical but not literal? One might speak, with some affectation, of different items on a gourmet plate of food being in conversation, and this would be metaphorical. But how does the contrast apply here? It might be said that this is indeed an *extended* idea of conversation, including what is written and passed from generation to generation and across centuries, but what exactly is it that Hirst would object to in that? No doubt the spirit of Oakeshott's words does catch something of what Hirst wants to say about the forms of knowledge, but to see this as metaphorical suggests a reticence and desire for distancing from the powerful point that is otherwise being made. Yet—remembering that Hirst was a lover of opera—this closing quotation *is* the climactic aria bringing Hirst's paper to a close!

STATEMENT AND TESTAMENT

Many of those who contributed to the commemorations of Hirst remarked on his personal modesty, a quality to which they were clearly drawn.²⁰ It would be fair to connect this also with the conscientious discipline and restraint with which he conducted his busy life (see Patricia White, this issue). He is also remembered by many for the quality of his teaching, as well as for happy conversations enjoyed in his company. What shone through was not only the care and precision of his argument and expression, but also a kind of seriousness: this is definitely not to imply any lack of wit or humour, but rather to suggest his genuine engagement, that what he was talking about mattered to him.

Here again we find lines of connection to his early life. In 'From Faith to Reason' Hirst recalls how as a young man he had become quite well known among Glanton Brethren as a speaker (Hirst 2010: 165), and although by that time his faith had begun to waver, it is clear that his ability as a speaker was grounded in what had been conviction. Consider his own reflections on that time:

My father I sensed saw me as inevitably succumbing to the 'worldly' temptations of my academic life and career, but he said nothing, judging I am sure that this was now my own responsibility. He had done all that he felt proper in his witness to me of 'the truth.' My association with the Meetings was now growing very thin, and the overall sense of personal fulfillment I was now experiencing elsewhere was such that I no longer felt constrained by any of the teaching and moral and social values I had when young accepted without question. By the time I was invited back to Cambridge as professor of education and head of the department of education

²⁰ For a reflection on the contrasting ways in which testimony has emerged as a topic for epistemology and the significance of the ordinary use of the term, see my 'Lines of Testimony' (Standish 2020b).

in 1971 I was no longer able to accept either the moral or the religious teaching of the Glanton Brethren, even if I was still firmly committed to a propositional view of the nature of all justifiable moral beliefs and of any religious claims that must be taken seriously. Both commitments had been fundamental presuppositions within my earliest understanding, and were influencing me still as being foundational in my overall philosophical position on all epistemological and ethical questions and in my whole professional approach to educational aims and principles. (Hirst 2010: 165)

Once again, one feels Hirst's presence powerfully in these words, and the phrasing is weighted with moral seriousness in the best sense ('my own responsibility', 'his [father's] witness to me of "the truth"', 'firmly committed', 'that must be taken seriously'). Hirst retained his commitment to a propositional view of the nature of moral and religious beliefs, a commitment that survived his fading religious belief and continued to be foundational for his thinking about epistemology, ethics, and education itself. It is worth reiterating these points to try to show that the substance of his accounts of the forms of knowledge specifically, and of a liberal education more generally, did not lie only in the arguments he presented: they showed what counted for him, and so he was accounting for himself.

In Hirst's later work, in his partial recanting of his earlier position, the familiar modesty of approach was graced with candid self-criticism and at times with a wry touch of humour; a greater humility was apparent. The weakening of his commitment to the foundational importance of propositions, perhaps through some greater absorption of ideas of practice in MacIntyre, of conversation in Oakeshott, and of grammar in Wittgenstein, did not lessen the strength of his testimony to what he saw as the truth. Hirst might not have put it quite like this, but in a sense this was a shift from the preoccupation with statements and their correlation with states of affairs to the realization of the significance of the *grammar* of our lives and relationships and knowledge of the world. Statement, in anagram, becomes testament.

The happy coincidence of letters in these words relates to something other than coincidence in what Wittgenstein means by 'grammar'. The grammar of an expression lies in what we do. 'Grammar tells what kind of object anything is' (§373)—a remark to which Wittgenstein adds the parenthesis: '(Theology as grammar)'.²¹ Could it be that somehow, in the course of Hirst's transition from his early proposition-based conception of meaning towards what is suggested by the notion of practice in MacIntyre and grammar in Wittgenstein, he came to see his own upbringing in a slightly different way? Could it be that this led him to place less exacting emphasis on the truth or falsity of the beliefs he had been brought up to hold (that is, religion as a body of doctrine) and to acknowledge more fully the patterns of coherence, the ways of going on, sustained by his family's daily observance (that

²¹ A reviewer for this paper questioned what this sentence meant, especially regarding the phrase 'negatively derived'. I take it that the expression refers to the fact that the term 'liberal education' was often used quite loosely, as it still is. Its meaning was then 'negatively derived' in that it was understood, somewhat uncritically, to refer to education that was, in various ways, not restricted, whether over matters of teaching and learning or, especially, content. Hirst is plainly concerned to correct such assumptions and to advance a more positive and substantive account.

is, religion as a way of life)—severe and unforgiving though this, in many respects, was?

THE FUTURE OF THE IDEA OF A LIBERAL EDUCATION

I do not want to leave the matter there, however, as it would be an injustice to Hirst not to acknowledge the practical intent and different tone of his paper, which is established at the outset and sustained through much of the discussion. He writes:

The phrase 'liberal education' has today become something of a slogan which takes on different meanings according to its immediate context. It usually labels a form of education of which the author approves, but beyond that its meaning is often entirely negatively derived.²² Whatever else a liberal education is, it is not a vocational education, not an exclusively scientific education, or not a specialist education in any sense. The frequency with which the term is employed in this way certainly highlights the inadequacies of these other concepts and the need for a wider and, in the long run, more worthwhile form of education. But as long as the concept is merely negative in what it intimates, it has little more than debating value. Only when it is given explicit positive content can it be of use in the serious business of educational planning. It is my contention in this chapter that whatever vagaries there have been in the use of the term, it is the 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. (Hirst 1974: 23)

I share the commitment to the idea of a liberal education insofar as this implies the development of mind, as in Hirst's account, and initiation into worthwhile pursuits, in Peters'. But I press familiar criticisms along the lines that the account is over-intellectualized, that the distinction between the academic and the vocational is artificial, and that the position adopted is too hostile to specialization. The related inclination to speak of 'the concept of education', rather than 'a concept of education',²³ is a sign of the tendency to assume that a comprehensive account must be supplied. While this perhaps seems cogent with young children, it tends to fall short of recognition of the ways that education can figure in a person's life in important transformative manner without any synoptic reach.

In principle a liberal education should be available to all, but it is rash to assume that, in its familiar Hirstian forms, it is appropriate to everyone. Some people may not take to or have the ability to pursue 'intellectual pursuits', but they may find worthwhile activities in other aspects of life, some with open possibilities of further knowledge, understanding, and refinement, as with craft activities and their modern equivalents. The significant picture guiding this is that found in the allegory of the Cave, where this is taken to suggest not a one-way upward journey towards the contemplation of truth and goodness but a faltering struggle out of complacency and delusion. The struggle is never won once-and-for-all; one slides back and must

²² See the views of Rush Rhees (Lloyd 2020).

²³ In fact, Reid had already established the broad lines of thought in this book in his early work, including in 'Education and the Map of Knowledge', the first paper in the first issue of the *British Journal of Educational Studies* (Reid 1952).

struggle again. But it may take just one thing to turn someone's head from their tranquillized state, that thing may seem specialized or eccentric, but that change can alter their outlook on life as a whole. Of course, they may become narrow-minded geeks, but not uncommonly this singular experience can stimulate a wider curiosity and desire for understanding.

It is difficult to see how this can happen without the learner being drawn in to what is studied, without their genuine absorption, and this itself is unlikely to come at the start. But this shifts the logic of the curriculum away from the coherence of the knowledge programme per se and onto the experience of the learner, their coming to know: this is, however, a turning beyond their introspection or complacent self-absorption and towards what is worth studying, towards content. It is a turning beyond the self (see Standish 1992). It seems clear that the assessment regimes of today, like the cultures or neoliberalism they reflect, militate against this aspect of education: they encourage teaching-to-the-test and instrumentalize study to the achievement of grades. The key point here is that we are unlikely to reaffirm or retrieve what matters most in a liberal education simply by reasserting the forms of knowledge: we need an understanding of educational experience.

The best accounts of liberal education provide this, and it is intimated at times in the forms of knowledge thesis. What I am talking about is not a matter of 'promoting pupils' "growth", satisfying their "needs" or following their "interests" ', as Hirst puts it (1974: 12), but concerned instead with what it is to draw them into forms and practices of knowledge and understanding in a manner that takes seriously their experience of these things. Not to do this leaves a theorization of educational categories that may be amenable to policy-makers, curriculum planners, and designers of assessment but that, in so doing, obscures what matters most in a liberal education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Suzy Harris and Nicholas Reid, as well as the Editors of this Special Issue, David Bridges and Patricia White, for helpful suggestions.

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