# The centrality of well-being

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## Beginnings

It probably all started with my father. He came from a respectable working-class family in the East End of London, won a scholarship to a grammar school in the First World War, and left it at 16 to work in a commercial firm. Two things stand out. First, listening with him to the Brains Trust around the end of the Second World War and sharing some of his intellectual excitement, if not his grasp of the arguments, as the philosopher C.E.M. Joad and his co-discussants unpicked the latest theory of the nature of time or wrestled with the justification of democracy. And second, during the general election campaign of 1945, his going out at night to paint 'Vote Labour' slogans on the local roads.

I find it hard to say, more specifically, when I first became interested in philosophy of education. There are signs, perhaps, in the left-wing, existentialist sentiments of the journals I began writing in embarrassing mid-Victorian prose from the age of nineteen. Five years later, in 1959, my essay about my first teaching practice as a trainee history teacher contained comments like 'Am I sure that the subject I am teaching them is essential to their development? …What habits and attitudes is it fostering? …What are thinking, habits, attitudes, emotions, instincts, feelings? The words come up in my self criticism, but are left quite undefined.'

Roger Wilson, Professor of Education at Bristol University in my training year, told me in a frank but kindly way that my ideas were promising but half-baked. He suggested that if I taught in London, I should get in touch with a good friend of his – and fellow-Quaker – called Richard Peters, who had just launched a joint BA degree in Philosophy and Psychology at Birkbeck College, London University.This was – and still is – a college for mature students studying part-time in the evening.

I met Peters – who a few years earlier had been a colleague of Joad's at Birkbeck – and signed up for his new degree while teaching history and French in a secondary

school in east London. Philosophy and philosophical psychology became absorbing in their own right. The interest in getting clear about fundamental matters, which in an uninformed way had been part of my psyche for years, now became all-enthralling.

I shifted to teaching liberal studies part-time in technical colleges so as to give me more time for philosophy. In the final year of my degree, 1965, my contract at Battersea College of Advanced Technology was not renewed for the next academic year and I was out of a job. Peters, now at the Institute of Education, was building up his team of philosophers of education and I applied successfully to join it.

So I came into the discipline by chance. I might well have found myself instead applying fruitlessly for posts in epistemology, or, if professionally luckier, researching some technical issue in the philosophy of action. Who knows what might have been?

My first published papers in philosophy of education were on indoctrination and on teaching creativity. The initiative for these came not from myself but from Richard Peters. His project at the time was a comprehensive investigation of central educational concepts and he enlisted several of us in this task.

Gradually, I began to work on things that came more from the heart. Big, sprawling things like the shaping of a fairer society, in which personal freedom was a central value. Like other young people welcoming in a new era of socialism after thirteen years of Conservative power, I was eager for radical change. Education was key to this. This thought had been present in the solitary wrestlings of my journal entries. Now it had behind it not only seven years' teaching experience, but also a training in philosophy. This helped to give it stiffening.

The Labour government of 1964 favoured comprehensive education. This in my view needed a common curriculum. Until that time, academic schooling was only for an élite selected for grammar schools partly by intelligence tests. The rest had something more intellectually denuded, more fitting for a life of manual work.

I explored the idea of a defensible common curriculum first in a number of articles in the weekly *New Society* and spelt it out at book length in *Towards a Compulsory Curriculum* (TCC) (1973).

In one way this last was an attempt to define my own position vis-a-vis those of Richard Peters and my other colleagues Paul Hirst and Robert Dearden. Like all of

them, I was in favour of an intellectually demanding curriculum, based not on conventional subject divisions but on logically distinctive areas of understanding. Unlike all of them, I did not find this basis in Hirst's 'forms of knowledge' theory, but in what seemed to me at the time a radically new departure (…but which now looks more like a variation on the Hirstian theme).

I also thought there should be a state imposed curriculum in place of the autonomy that schools then had. If the tradition of socially divided curricula was to go, its replacement had to be centrally enforced.

This was one of the themes in the book that persisted into later writings. Another had more to do with philosophy. My journal philosophisings had obsessed about how best to live, individually and communally. When I began my philosophy degree, I took it for granted that it would help me sort things out. What else could a degree in philosophy be for? By the end of the course, philosophy of life had receded in my priorities and interrelated fascinations of metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of language had come to the fore. But gradually, after the degree was over, the ethical interest won through again.

**Personal well-being and personal autonomy**

My first philosophy teacher at Birkbeck had been Richard Peters. He taught me – inspirationally – history of ethics and philosophy of mind. He spoke to my confusions, since he, too, was fascinated by ideas of what human beings are and how they should live. Around the time he left Birkbeck for the Institute of Education, in 1962, he co-published an article with A P Griffiths called 'The autonomy of prudence' (Griffiths and Peters 1962). This created little stir, but was of great interest to me. Most writings in ethics at that time were about morality. The latter was patently a relevant topic for anyone, like myself, interested in how we should live. But morality was only half the story. However decently I (or anyone else) lived, I still faced choices about what I was to do. Taking a moral framework for granted, what was a fulfilling life *for me* (or anyone)?

Although Mill, Sidgwick and Moore had written on this, Griffiths and Peters's paper was the only contemporary treatment of it I knew. A little later, in 1966, Peters developed its central, Kantian, idea in an educational direction in his celebrated chapter of *The Ethics of Education* on 'worthwhile activities'. Although the Kantian argument did not seem to me to work, I considered the topic itself –

personal fulfilment – to be pivotal in justifying the school curriculum. TCC was the first of many shots – continuing to this day – at spelling out the nature of personal well-being and showing how curriculum activities can promote it.

I have just talked about *justifying* the school curriculum. Looking back from 2007, this seems an odd word to use. It is as though the academic curriculum is in some sense a fixture and reasons have to be given for showing why it is right that it be a fixture. This reflects how many of us in our field thought about education in those days. We took for granted that moving away from a divided educational system to a comprehensive one meant giving ordinary, non-grammar, children the academic schooling from which they had been excluded. The philosophical task, so it seemed to us, was to provide a valid rationale for such a programme.

After 1973 I became less interested in this justificatory project and more in getting at the fundamental aims on which a defensible common education could be based – without pre-commitment to the kind of curricular vehicles which might best further them. *The Aims of Education Restated* (AER) shows where I was at in 1982. In TCC I had bracketed off moral aims of education so as to concentrate on those to do with the good of the pupil. In AER I felt readier to take both on board and to deal with their interrelationships. Economic aims, and their links with the two aims mentioned, also came into the picture.

My views on interconnexions between personal well-being and morality had meanwhile been deepened by a co-authored book with a historian of education colleague on the educational ideas and influence of T.H.Green and other British Hegelians, called *Philosophers as Educational Reformers* (White 1979). Acquaintance with Hegel, aroused by Charles Taylor's *Hegel* of 1975, further distanced me from Peters's Kantian approach to ethics. It helped me eventually to locate myself within a broadly Aristotelian tradition. This deepened during the 1980s, especially after the publication of MacIntyre's *After Virtue* in 1981.

Meanwhile my treatment of the good of the pupil in AER still had to depend largely on my own resources. Soon after I wrote it, in 1986, two seminal works on personal well-being were published: Joseph Raz's *The Morality of Freedom* (see especially chs 12 and 14); and James Griffin's *Well-being*. I incorporated insights from them in my 1990 book *Education and the Good Life* (EGL), but in AER, as in TCC, I was still making what seemed to me later the mistake of writing personal autonomy into personal well-being. This came out in my account of the good of the pupil in terms of 'post-reflective-desire-satisfaction'. In other words, those of one's experiences and activities contribute to one's flourishing which, having

reviewed all major possibilities, one chooses to pursue for their own sake. This assumes that the chooser is an autonomous person, able to reflect on a wide range of possible ends. But it overlooks the point made by Raz, that people can flourish or fail to flourish not only in liberal societies like our own, where autonomy is a central value, but also in societies where one's major goals are laid down for one by custom or authority.

In EGL, as in AER and TCC, while still advocating the promotion of the pupil's personal autonomy, I was also still arguing that personal well-being is a subjective matter in the sense that it depends on the desires of the individual. All attempts I had seen to show that it is something objective, culminating in Richard Peters's theory of worthwhile activities, had seemed to me flawed. This was not only of academic interest, since it raised the possibility, if not the likelihood, of pupils' being brought up, misguidedly, to believe that certain activities, the pursuit of intellectual activities, for instance, are intrinsically valuable for any human being and so for themselves.

The main shift in my thinking on personal well-being since 1990 has been to question *both* the individualistic-subjectivist *and* the objectivist approaches in favour of a largely culturally-dependent (but not culturally relativist) account. For instance, enjoying Mozart's music can contribute to one's well-being. This value is independent of any individual's desires, but not of human desires more generally. It is a value dependent on a certain culture – it did not exist before the eighteenth century. At the same time listening to Mozart is still a worthwhile activity, even though the princely culture that produced it has long since faded away: the value is not relative to that culture. For more on this see White 2005, ch12; 2007b. Joseph Raz's more recent writings like *Engaging Reason* (1999) and *The Practice of Value* (2003) have been a main inspiration here.

I have also been interested in exploring possible specific components of well-being, always with applications to educational aims in mind. The place of knowledge in education and in well-being is discussed in TCC chs 2,3,6, AER ch2, EGL ch7. In all my writings on the subject, I have pressed the cause of altruism in various forms as an obviously desirable educational aim, but is it a necessary feature of the personally fulfilling life and so already covered in aims to do with the pupil's own well-being? Can there be a flourishing life without art or aesthetic experience? In a secular world, do we need for our flourishing some awareness of a cosmic framework to our lives? What is the place of work in the good life? What room is there for patriotism? For recognition? Essays on nearly all these themes can be found in my *The Curriculum and the Child* (2005 chs 9-13). A book length

treatment of work and well-being is my *Education and the End of Work* (1997). My interest in art and aesthetic experience is indebted to Ray Elliott, who taught me ethics and aesthetics at Birkbeck and later became a colleague in Richard Peters's department. Ray was the profoundest philosopher I have known and the one most catholic in his sympathies. His insights into the subject and his critical assessments of my own work have been a valuable, and often chastening, part of my philosophical development.

**Philosophical policy critique**

A few years after I had joined Richard Peters' unit in 1965, I remember Richard telling me of a conversation he had had with Brian Simon, the leading historian of education of the time and left-wing champion of the new comprehensive school system. 'I see you have a sport in your department, Richard', Simon is reported to have said, referring to myself.

What he had in mind were my political interests. They came out in my views about the control of the school curriculum. I first floated the idea of a shift from professional to political control in an article in *New Society* in 1969. This was during Harold Wilson's Labour government. The state had to step in to ensure a decent – academically demanding – curriculum for all.

TCC spelt out this notion further. Throughout the 1970s I continued refining the arguments for state curriculum control, also taking advantage of my history degree to find out why state control over most schools' curricula was *abandoned* in the 1920s (White 2005, ch.5). I was pleased in 1976 when the Callaghan Labour government embraced the idea that the school curriculum was no longer to be a 'secret garden' in which only professionals could wander. But I was a little less delighted when Labour lost power to Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and her administration intensified the pressure for political control.

There is an irony here. The National Curriculum created under Thatcher in 1988 extended the curriculum of the grammar school to the whole state school population, from five to sixteen. No problem then, of working class children being sold short by being chained to low-status programmes. Did not the National Curriculum realise the vision I had had since the 1960s?

Far from it. My views on what the government could legitimately impose had become sharpened over the years. By the 1980s it was clear to me, influenced as I was by the work of Patricia White, that the central argument for a shift to political control went back to the nature of democracy. Teachers have no more right than any other section of the citizenry to determine what the aims of education should be. Since this topic is closely bound up with what kind of society is desirable, it is a political matter on which all of us should in principle have an equal voice. Where teachers *should* have privileged powers is in determining how aims are best realised in the specific circumstances in which they work, ie in more detailed curriculum planning and pedagogy. Only they are in a position to know what works best here. (White 2005, chs 6,7).

The trouble with the 1988 National Curriculum was that the government got things precisely the wrong way round. It laid down in great specificity a curriculum and assessment arrangements based on traditional grammar school subjects, but said next to nothing about what this whole complex system was *for*. It ignored its own legitimate remit as a democratic authority and vastly encroached on that of teachers. Much of what I have written on the topic since that time – beginning with EGL in 1990 – has revolved, in different ways, around this constitutional blemish.

By 1988, as I said above, I had become less interested in the components of the timetabled curriculum and more in a defensible set of aims. If children were being sold short, it was not because they were not getting an academic curriculum, but because, on the contrary, they *were* getting an academic curriculum when no valid reasons had been given why this was desirable. It was imposed in 1988, it seems, out of respect for tradition alone, but there was no guarantee that what might or might not have been appropriate for a small minority of middle-class children in the mid-nineteenth century was suitable for children from every background living in the twenty-first.

Since the early 1990s I have been increasingly involved in working with UK policy-making bodies on the idea of an aims-based school curriculum, one, that is, which sees traditional school subjects as just one kind of vehicle among many possible ones for realising well-thought-out aims. In 1991 I co-authored *A National Curriculum for All* for the left-wing think tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR). The appearance in 1999 of the first official set of national aims in the country's history alongside the National Curriculum subjects led to work with the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) on how far there was a good match between the new aims and the detailed statutory requirements in these

subjects. As I showed in my edited collection *Rethinking the School Curriculum* (2004a: chs 1,2,14), for most subjects there was a gross mismatch. This is scarcely surprising, since the National Curriculum subjects predated the aims and already had their own internal *modi vivendi,* orientated for the most part towards specialist expertise in their own area, rather than towards wider purposes. Mathematics, for instance, is widely assumed to be a subject of central importance in the curriculum, but its credentials as regards its more abstract elements are open to question (White 2005, ch 16). I have discussed more recent government moves towards an aims-based curriculum in *What schools are for and why* (2007a).

This last publication is an IMPACT booklet. IMPACT is a topical policy-focussed series produced by the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain. I was its first editor, in 1999-2000, and responsible for its first half dozen or so publications – on hot topics ranging from assessment to performance-related pay for teachers. I have always enjoyed this kind of work. In the 1980s I contributed to many of the Bedford Way Papers published by the Institute of Education, producing philosophical critiques of current policies on the school curriculum, headteacher training, teacher education, and education in a pluralist society. In the 1990s, in other policy-related Institute publications, I critiqued arts education in schools, the teaching of history, the school effectiveness movement, mathematics in the curriculum, and the future of the national curriculum.

I have always seen work in our discipline as stretching on a gamut between abstract investigations in general philosophy at one end and, at the other, issues of the day requiring conceptual clarification or the unearthing of assumptions. In my own case, I have constantly shifted back and forth along my personal gamut, now exploring in an academic journal the meta-ethics of personal well-being, and now, in a newspaper article, degutting the British government's campaign for 'personalised learning' or its Gifted and Talented Strategy. I have always wanted philosophy of education to cut ice. As a branch of applied philosophy, it is a handmaiden to the education service just as medical ethics is to the health service. Both applied fields can occupy this role while observing a proper philosophical rigour and objectivity. Spending one's time as a philosopher of education reading papers at exotically-located international conferences on the scarcely-educationally-relevant ideas of the latest cult philosopher seems to me professional corruption.

**Philosophy of mind and philosophical psychology**

Richard Peters was also my first teacher of philosophy of mind. I remember those early weeks at Birkbeck in Autumn 1960, struggling with Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*. Whether Richard's quakerism was a factor or not, he taught partly by silence. He would throw us a question like 'What is consciousness, then?' and sit patiently puffing on his pipe for the several minutes (it seemed) for some brave participant – never me – to limp out an answer.

David Hamlyn, Richard's colleague at Birkbeck, deepened and broadened my understanding of philosophy of mind. I came to see connexions with central issues in epistemology and metaphysics previously unknown to me. Both men were also among pioneers in the new field of the philosophy of psychology, which draws on philosophy of mind to explore the soundness of theories in psychology. While Peters was fascinated by the whole history of psychology from Plato to Freud and Skinner, Hamlyn's particular interests were in the psychology of perception, behaviorism and, a little later, Piaget's developmentalism. It was partly through his work on Piaget that Hamlyn also became a major contributor to philosophy of education. In very many ways he was also a major influence on my own work in particular.

Politics, as often, also came into the picture. In the 1960s the 11+ exam was still standardly used for secondary school selection and opposed by campaigners for comprehensive education. Since intelligence testing was a key part of the 11+, I focused on the concept of intelligence most closely associated with it. I located what seemed a critical weakness. Written into it was the assumption that we each have our own individually differing ceilings of intellectual ability beyond which we cannot progress. It was this assumption that provided a rationale for 11+ selection. I argued that it is neither verifiable nor falsifiable, thus placing it, following Popper, outside the realm of science (White 2005, ch1).

Although I had taught courses on philosophy of mind throughout my career, I did not write much on the topic before the millennium apart from a paper on the education of the emotions presenting an alternative account to Richard Peters's more austere, Kantian, interpretation (White 2005, ch2). In *The Child's Mind* in 2002 I expanded and updated in a more popular form my lecture material on philosophy of mind applied to education.

By that time, too, Howard Gardner's theory of 'multiple intelligences' had become enormously influential in school reform. I wrote a critical monograph on it in 1998 called *Do Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Add Up?,* following this up with a fuller critique in White 2006b. I agreed with Gardner in rejecting the centrality of the logico-linguistic intelligence traditionally associated with the IQ, but found no sound basis for his more many-sided categorisation.

I knew that the traditional view of intelligence found in Cyril Burt went back to the eugenic ideas of Francis Galton. But I had no idea what its earlier history was. This led me into a historical exploration of the origins of intelligence testing in *Intelligence, Destiny and Education* (2006a). Here I tested out the hypothesis that, since, as I discovered, virtually all the pioneers of intelligence testing in Britain and in the USA were from Dissenting or Puritan stock, some of these origins may lie in the early thought world of radical Protestantism. Linking my two interests, intelligence and the school curriculum, I also argued in the book that the traditional academic curriculum may well have roots in the same soil.

**Christian legacies**

Religion has become more salient in my interests in the last few years. This has nothing to do with death being not far round the corner. Religious ideas are the mystifications I've always thought them to be. For this, too, I should thank my father for first setting me on the sceptical path.

I have become increasingly aware of the continuing and often unnoticed influence of Christian ideas from Britain's past on today's largely secular society. Sometimes, as in the present Thatcher-to-Blair period of our politics, there have been overt attempts to shore up a decaying creed via Christian-biased legislation about the content of religious education and via the encouragement of faith schools and faith-based academies. Some of my recent writings (eg. White 2004b) have questioned whether we need religious education as a separate subject; suggested that it should avoid ethical recommendations about how we should live; and pressed for religious assumptions, eg about the existence of God, not to be taken for granted but to be openly and fairly discussed.

The less noticeable residues of Christian belief are intellectually more fascinating. I have explored these, as I have said, as they affect contemporary views about the mind of the learner, and about the school curriculum. They come into my book on

the centrality of work in our society and in related attitudes inculcated into school children. The work ethic we owe to the puritan-dissenting strand of our history is still powerful (White 1997, ch1). They come, too, into the way we conventionally think about how we should live and about how this matter should be taken up in schools. There has been a tendency to over-moralise the topic and at the same time to separate personal fulfilment too discretely off from moral obligations and to play it down (White 1990, ch 3). I see this tendency as a legacy of an age when mortal life was based on our duties towards God and personal fulfilment, if it existed for any of us at all, could only be in the life hereafter. Bernard Williams's work, not least his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, and Nietzsche's writings such as *The Genealogy of Morals* have helped to open my eyes on these issues. They have helped me to understand the dominance of moral philosophy in British ethical writings in the earlier part of my career and the lack of interest in personal well-being. I have mentioned this above.

**Conclusion**

So much for the past. What of future plans? It will be good to go back to personal well-being and explore it in more depth. As in the past, theoretical enquiry may occasionally have to yield to practical involvement and I may find myself caught up in philosophical policy critique. Beyond this, I have nothing more specific in mind. I prefer things to be open in this way. It's part of what I understand by a flourishing life. For me, that is. Not everyone will want it.

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