

## R.S. PETERS' TRANSCENDENTAL JUSTIFICATION OF EDUCATION

The purpose of this brief article is to explain and evaluate R.S. Peters' transcendental justification of education. In *Ethics and Education* Peters first attempts to justify his concept of 'education'. Subsequently, in his paper "The Justification of Education", he still works with a narrower conception of 'education' developed in *Ethics and Education*. This is the view that I will be considering here. I am aware that Peters has been receptive to criticism, and in his later writings somewhat modified his concept of education, widening its scope, and shifting its earlier emphases. But on the whole, his views remain with his original thesis on education, so that discussion of the points made in my article remain open.

In the first part of the essay I will deal with Peters' concept of education and his "transcendental argument." In the next I will attempt a critical evaluation of the transcendental justification of education.

### I

The two notions of 'initiation' and 'worthwhileness' are crucial to R.S. Peters' concept of education. A person is initiated into a 'a family of processes' which, if successfully engaged upon, leads to the accomplishment of 'being educated'. The 'educated man' is the outcome of the educational process.

Peters gives three criteria to distinguish education from other processes. 'Education' implies the intentional transmission of worthwhile activities to those who become committed to it. To 'be educated', implies that not only should one care about what is 'worth-while', but one must also possess relevant knowledge and understanding. Such knowledge must not be narrowly specialized, but must involve a depth and breadth of knowledge and understanding. Again, 'education' indicates that a person's outlook is transformed by what he/she knows. To 'be educated' therefore, is to develop a 'broad cognitive perspective'.<sup>1</sup> This is precisely why Peters says that "to be educated is not to have arrived at a destination; it is to travel with a different view".<sup>2</sup>

Peters' transcendental justification of education is a non-instrumental one. To show that 'education' is intrinsically worthwhile an instrumental justification seems inadequate. Therefore, a transcendental argument must be mounted to justify the 'initiation' into 'worthwhile' activities. Here Peters utilizes a Kantian-type of transcendental argument. A transcendental argument is one which is derived from pre-

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<sup>1</sup>. R.S. Peters, *Ethics and Education*, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. (1966) p. 45.

<sup>2</sup>. R.S. Peters, *The Philosophy of Education*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 20.

suppositions.<sup>3</sup> Peters refers to this non-instrumental justification of 'worthwhile activities' as the "motivational linch-pin.... of the ethical system here defended."<sup>4</sup> "A worthwhile activity" is an activity worth pursuing for its own sake i.e., it is intrinsically worthwhile in a way that games and simple pleasures are not. The curriculum of a school or university may be operated with a principle of options which encourage the individual to choose according to his/her ability, aptitude, or interest. The choice is between a range of activities which are considered worth passing on. This is why theoretical activities, such as science, mathematics, history, literature, philosophy, and the like, are on a curriculum, and not bingo, billiards or bridge.<sup>5</sup>

Peters' concern here is to establish two main points. First, though curriculum activities may be valued for what is instrumental in them, they are essentially valued for their intrinsic worth. Second, on account of their intrinsic worth people ought to be 'initiated' into them.<sup>6</sup>

At first, Peters tries to justify theoretical activities by enumerating certain naturalistic arguments in terms of 'wants' and 'pleasures'. However, he contends that such arguments could also relate to games such as chess, billiards and bridge. As science, mathematics, history and literature are "manifestly different" from such games, these relevant differences call for further arguments to justify their pursuit. Peters further contends, that theoretical activities such as science, mathematics, history, literature are 'serious' pursuits. First, they have a wide-ranging cognitive content which distinguishes them from games. Second, they illuminate other areas of life, and contribute much to the quality of life. Third, they are concerned with one way or other with truth.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, it is important to note that Peters' views have undergone a noticeable change in later writings. In "Ambiguities in Liberal Education and the Problem of its Content," he accepts the value of certain kinds of knowledge and understanding in the ends to which they are directed.<sup>8</sup> In "Democratic Values and Educational Aims", Peters identifies the role of practical knowledge in education that is not a part of training for a particular job.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>. J.P. White, *Towards a Compulsory Curriculum*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (1973) p. 10.

<sup>4</sup>. R.S. Peters, *Ethics and Education*, p. 165.

<sup>5</sup>. *op.cit.*, p. 144.

<sup>6</sup>. *op.cit.*, p. 144-145.

<sup>7</sup>. R.S. Peters, *The Philosophy of Education*, p. 257-258.

<sup>8</sup>. R.S. Peters, *Education and the Education of Teachers*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul (1977) p. 51.

<sup>9</sup>. R.S. Peters, *Essays on Educators*, London: George Allen & Unwin (1981) p. 44.

II

Peters' transcendental argument comes in when a person inquires why theoretical activities are more valuable than games. Peters claims that a person who asks the question "Why do this rather than that?" "must already have a serious concern for truth built into his consciousness". To ask the question "Why do this rather than that?" seriously is therefore... to be committed to those inquiries which are defined by their serious concern with those aspects of reality which give context to the question which he is asking."<sup>10</sup>

Peters contends that some sort of commitment to theoretical activities is presupposed to a serious asking of the question, "Why do this rather than that?" He argues that presupposed to asking this question, the person will come to see that he/she must value the pursuits of science, literature, history rather than others, "as there are characteristics intrinsic to activities themselves which constitute reasons for pursuing them."<sup>11</sup> But, Griffiths has pointed out to Peters that this is an instrumental argument, and consequently did not show the intrinsic value of theoretical activities. Peters tries to meet this objection by arguing, that asking the question truthfully, and answering it truthfully, presupposes a value in theoretical activities.<sup>12</sup>

It is noteworthy that Peters' transcendental argument is put forward to give sufficient reasons for a person once educated, to continue to devote himself/herself to activities constitutive of education. Hence, Peters attempts to show that an understanding, and commitment to an activity are endorsed by giving a truthful answer to the transcendental question.

Now, if a justification is sought for doing science or philosophy rather than games, it is necessary to give good reasons for doing one instead of the other. One may accept Peters' claim that understanding an activity entails some sort of commitment to it. It is true, that one cannot pursue scientific research if one fails to understand the concepts and principles in science, and their inter-relatedness. A person's interest in scientific research will open up new avenues for experimentation. Every experiment in some sequential order may bring the person closer to some scientific truth. The possession of such a disposition, and the involvement in scientific activities will no doubt entail a commitment to it.

However, it does not necessarily follow from this, that understanding an activity, and a commitment to such an activity, will always necessarily entail the pursuit of this activity. For instance, X is committed to Y, and X understands Y, but it does not

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<sup>10</sup>. R.S. Peters, *Ethics and Education*, p. 164.

<sup>11</sup>. *op.cit.*, p. 154.

<sup>12</sup>. A.N. Beck, "Does Ethics and Education Rest on a Mistake," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol. III, p. 3.

necessarily follow from this, that X will always pursue Y. Perhaps a person who understands science and mathematics may even give them up to do photography. But, I would not include the dedicated scientist, a university don or a doctor in this category. J.P. White argues, that it is not altogether impossible to understand what science is, and give it up for big-game hunting or anything else. White is correct when he states that even if it is true that understanding brings with it some commitment to certain activities, it is only true as a matter of fact, and not necessarily so.<sup>13</sup> Clearly, understanding an activity, and a commitment to such an activity will evoke a life-long interest only in some individuals. It does not necessarily apply to every person who has studied theoretical subjects at the school or college level. For most people vocational pursuits may figure more prominently than intellectual pursuits at a later stage.

Again, in order to justify the worthwhileness of curriculum activities, Peters spells out the connection between knowledge and truth. He argues, that the concern for truth is relevant to justify the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. The pursuit of truth involves virtues such as truthfulness, clarity, non-arbitrariness, impartiality, a sense of relevance, consistency, and a respect for evidence.<sup>14</sup>

In this sense, Peters' claim can be considered to be true in relation to the serious inquirer, who asks the question "Why do this rather than that?" A person who has a serious concern for truth, and who takes the question of theoretical activities seriously, will be committed to the rational pursuit of truth. Peters may say that one must give reasons for pursuing science, mathematics or history rather than bingo or billiards. It is true, that a person who is perceiving and reasoning is not imagining. Asking a question seriously, and giving a reason-governed answer presupposes its value. If one asks the question "why do science or history rather than bingo or billiards?" one has to give reasons. Obviously, Peters would say that both science and history have an intrinsic value that is not shared by bingo or billiards. On the other hand, if one asks the question "Why do bingo rather than billiards?" one cannot give a reasoned-governed answer, as both activities according to Peters, do not have 'inbuilt standards of excellence.'<sup>15</sup> Therefore, I think the transcendental argument seems to bring in a justification of theoretical activities only to the serious inquirer.

Furthermore, one must explore the possibility whether asking the question "Why do science or history rather than bingo?" seriously, and answering it truthfully, would sound like an instrumental argument even for the serious inquirer. It can be argued, that a person intends to study science for an extrinsic or vocational purpose. Probably Peters would question, whether any individual would pursue astronomy, astro-physics or botany for purely instrumental reasons. Presumably, the answer would be in the negative sense.

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<sup>13</sup>. J.P. White, *op.cit.*, p. 13 - 14.

<sup>14</sup>. R.S. Peters, *The Philosophy of Education*, p. 252.

<sup>15</sup>. R.S. Peters, *Ethics and Education*, p. 155.

Therefore, one could conclude that the transcendental justification of education is restricted only to the serious inquirer who will pursue knowledge for its own sake.

Barrow argues that the person who seriously asks the question "Why do this rather than that?" takes the question of curriculum content seriously, and is committed to the truth. This will not show, says Barrow, that we have a right to be committed or we ought to value them. Still less would it show that others who do not feel inclined to pursue the truth, and respect rational justification ought to share our values.<sup>16</sup> I think Barrow is correct when he says that Peters argument contains some truth only in relation to those who are committed to the pursuit of truth, but such values need not necessarily entail universal application. The concept of education is not a determinate concept as Peters envisages it to be, as in his earlier writings. The transcendental argument brings in a justification for a particular form of human life. The answer we derive from the justificatory question may even be different according to the nature of the social set up, and the time within which the question is posed. The conception of a desirable life will necessarily undergo revision from time to time. For instance, in a developing country the primary consideration would be the development of literacy and the expansion of primary education. 'Knowing how' will count more important than 'knowing that' at a particular stage of development. As such, Peters transcendental justification has only a limited use. P.S. Wilson has also accused Peters of trying to impose his ethical valuations on others, where it is not necessary to do so.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, Downie, Loudfoot and Telfer contend that one problem which concerns the transcendental argument is its *ad hominem* nature. They quite rightly think that the transcendental argument applies only to those who already ask the question, "Why do this rather than that?" Peters is aware of this limitation, but as argued by Downie et al, Peters fails to see how serious a limitation it is. The seriousness of the limitation is brought into focus, when one considers that it is easy and common for people to avoid raising the question at all.<sup>18</sup>

I think this is a serious flaw in Peters' transcendental argument. I doubt whether Peters could provide a satisfactory counter argument to this. According to Peters, one could presuppose values implicit in any activity, only if the question is asked. No justification could be sought for an unasked question. Peters however, may say in the

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<sup>16</sup>. Robin Barrow, *Commonsense and the Curriculum*, Connecticut: Linnet Books, 1976, p. 41.

<sup>17</sup>. P.S. Wilson, "In Defence of Bingo," *The British Journal of Educational Studies* Vol. XV. 1, February (1967) p. 27.

<sup>18</sup>. R.S. Downie, E.M. Loudfoot, E. Telfer, *Education and Personal Relationships*, London: Methuen and Co. Ltd. (1974) p. 46.

Socratic tradition that "an unexamined life is not worth living".<sup>19</sup> Indeed, Peters himself admits that "it is not surprising.....how many people are strangers to this attitude (a non-instrumental and a disinterested one). Most people do things because of their station in life and its duties. Their considerations are largely the outcome of habit, social pressure, sympathy and attraction towards what is immediately pleasurable".<sup>20</sup> Thus, it is evident, that the transcendental justification of education does not apply to those who do not ask the justificatory question. This I believe, is a serious flaw in Peters' argument, as one could even ignore the question. I doubt whether Peters even considered this possibility.

The possibility that a sceptic who may ask the question "Why pursue science? Why not bingo?" must also be considered. Peters may say that he is an unreflective person, and not committed to the pursuit of truth. One cannot conclude that the sceptic is giving an untruthful answer when he/she opts to pursue bingo, rather than science or history or the like. White thinks that the commitment to truth here would be in a 'weaker' sense than expected.<sup>21</sup> Peters too states, that "no reason has yet been provided to show that the pursuit of science or art is any more worthwhile than playing golf or bingo". However, he concludes that "it is the former rather than the latter type of activities which feature on the curriculum of schools and universities"<sup>22</sup> Even though the sceptic gives a sort of true answer in his/her own way, it would not be acceptable to Peters. He would say that the sceptic has not acquainted himself/herself with the distinguishing features of the different activities in question. Moreover, I think that Peters is not concerned with the unreflective sceptic.

In "The Justification of Education" Peters refers to 'the value of justification' which calls for the importance of rationality in human life. This is connected to the transcendental justification of education, as the justificatory answer must be based on truth and rationality. Kleinig thinks that the transcendental argument does not tell us why education is justified except in the sense that it is necessary to answer justificatory questions. The argument in itself says Kleinig is hollow, unless it displays the importance of rationality in human life.<sup>23</sup> Peters' arguments for the value of justification is to meet certain objections which may be raised about ascribing value to this concern for what is true.

According to Peters, man is a rational being, and the demand for justification is

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<sup>19</sup>. R.S. Peters, *The Philosophy of Education*, p. 255.

<sup>20</sup>. R.S. Peters, *Ethics and Education*, p. 154.

<sup>21</sup>. J.P. White, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup>. R.S. Peters, *Ethics and Education*, p. 157.

<sup>23</sup>. J. Kleinig, *Philosophical Issues in Education*, London: Croom Helm (1982) p. 87.

immanent in human life.<sup>24</sup> Justification is the rational assessment of one's beliefs and actions. Peters is not making a justification for simply any kind of knowledge. His concern is with certain forms of knowledge and understanding which he thinks are relevant to the rational assessment of beliefs, feelings and conduct.

Elliott contends that the demand to seek truth is not written into human life, as human life is intelligible without reference to it, and we do not expect everyone to seek truth without limit or consider him in the least irrational if he does not.<sup>25</sup> I agree with Elliott that we do not expect everyone to seek truth without limit. But I have my reservations when he says that human life is intelligible without reference to it, as rationality is one factor which distinguishes human beings from animals. It is plausible to infer that some people live according to the 'demands of reason', and they raise questions about their activities, and what is good for them. Most people do have a concern for what is true or false. But, it does not logically follow from this, that all individuals on all occasions, 'assess, revise, and follow rules dictated by reason'. I doubt whether reason is *wholly* dominant in either education or social life, as feelings and emotions also influence human behaviour. Peters however, has made a point to counter claims which polarize reason and feeling, and says that one can be passionate about reason.<sup>26</sup> Brand Blanshard has also referred to what is known as the "rational temper".<sup>27</sup>

As stated earlier, Peters' transcendental justification is based on the values of reason. Elliott makes an interesting point, when he says there are certain vital values, which are fundamental as values of reason and pleasure. The vital value which Elliott identifies is intellectual vitality, especially enquiry. According to Elliott, "this demand is felt by a human being, for as full and vigorous as an exercise of its powers as possible. The vital demand is not only to live keenly and powerfully in the life of the senses, but also in the life of personal activity, and the life of practical concern".<sup>28</sup> In his reply to Elliott, Peters say that the aspect of power can be ascribed to anything one does, and it is not specifically connected with learning.<sup>29</sup> Even if vital values are connected to

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<sup>24</sup>. R.S. Peters, *Philosophy of Education*. p. 253 - 254.

<sup>25</sup>. R.K. Elliott, "Education and Justification," *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain*, Vol. XI, July (1977) p. 18.

<sup>26</sup>. C. Bailey, *Beyond the Present and the Particular*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (1984) p. 154.

<sup>27</sup>. *op.cit.*, p. 155.

<sup>28</sup>. R.K. Elliott, *op.cit.*, p. 12 - 13.

<sup>29</sup>. R.S. Peters, "Education and Justification," - A reply to R.K. Elliott, *Proceedings of Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain*, Vol. XI, July, 1977, p. 30.

learning in some general way, Peters could be found fault with for ignoring such values.

Since the transcendental justification of education mainly shows the value of some kind of knowledge, it also implies that Peters is defending a specific concept of education. (The case for breadth of knowledge has not been included here) Both O'Hear<sup>30</sup> and Adelstein<sup>31</sup> maintains that Peters is defending a specific concept of education. Bailey too argues that it is not education that needs justification, but only a specific concept of education.<sup>32</sup> However, in *Educational Theory and its Foundation Disciplines*, Peters admits that his concept of education is a specific one. He accepts the fact, that he was trying to extract too much from a concept of education which is indeterminate than he used to think.<sup>33</sup>

The arguments presented so far indicate that Peters has not succeeded in providing a satisfactory transcendental justification of education, as conceived by him. The most he has accomplished is to show that reasonable people, who have a serious desire to acquire knowledge, will be committed to theoretical activities. This limited justification brought about by the transcendental argument does not seem to cover his concept of the 'educated person'. This conclusion could be justified by Peters' own statement made more recently in *Educational Theory and its Foundation Disciplines*. Here, Peters admits that he "tried but failed to give a convincing transcendental justification of 'worthwhile activities', such as science and agriculture as distinct from bingo." In spite of these shortcomings, he thinks that the basic thesis that a democratic way of life based on discussion and the use of practical reason, which presupposes the principles of impartiality, respect for a person's freedom and consideration of interests, are still defensible.<sup>34</sup> I do not have any reservations on the latter point made by Peters.

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<sup>30</sup>. A.O'Hear, *Education, Society and Human Nature*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (1981) p. 38.

<sup>31</sup>. M. Smith, *The Underground and Education*, London: Methuen and Co. Ltd. (1977) p. 30.

<sup>32</sup>. C. Bailey, *op.cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>33</sup>. R.S. Peters, "Philosophy of Education," ed., P.H. Hirst, *Educational Theory and its Foundation Disciplines*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul (1983) p. 37.

<sup>34</sup>. *op.cit.*, p. 37.