EDUCATION WITHOUT THEORY

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ABSTRACT: *This paper proceeds through four stages. First, it provides an account of the origins and evolution of the concept of educational theory. Second, it uses this historical narrative to show how what we now call 'educational theory' is deeply rooted in the foundationalist discourse of late nineteenth and early twentieth century modernity. Third, it outlines and defends a postfoundationalist critique of the foundationalist epistemological assumptions on which our understanding of educational theory has been erected. Finally, it argues that the only conclusion to draw from this postfoundationalist critique is that educational theory has run its course and should now be brought to a dignified end.*

Keywords: educational theory, foundationalism, post foundationalism

Is it not in the nature of things that practice should fall short of the truth of theory? What do you think? (Plato, The Republic, 1955, pp. 232–233)

1. INTRODUCTION

When we engage in educational debate it may seem that we are arguing about our fundamental beliefs, whereas what is really fundamental are the beliefs that make the debate possible and that are not therefore in dispute at all. The particular debate I have in mind is the philosophical debate that has been going on for the last 100 years or so about the nature and purpose of educational theory. It is a debate that has absorbed a great deal of intellectual energy, provoked many lively exchanges and generated intense disagreements about what educational theory is, what it is for and what it tries to achieve. But of course these disagreements are only rationally debatable in so far as contributors to the debate have already tacitly agreed that there is a distinctive enterprise called 'educational theory' that makes an important contribution to educational policy and practice. In the absence of such a belief, any debate about what educational theory

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is and how it contributes to the development of policy and practice would quickly disintegrate and come to an end.

But would not a refusal to accept this belief be simply perverse? Has not educational theory's claim to make a unique contribution to educational practice been around for so long that it should now be accepted as a piece of plain common sense? That all participants to the educational theory debate make this claim cannot be denied. But what I am going to suggest is that it is an unsupportable claim based on a mistaken and outmoded understanding of what educational theory is and what it can do. For what I am going to argue is that educational theory is simply an expression of a widely felt need to ground our beliefs and actions in knowledge that derives from some authoritative, external and independent source. Although this need cannot be denied, I am nevertheless going to argue that no such authoritative, external and independent source exists and hence that educational theory is nothing other than the name we give to the various futile attempts that have been made over the last hundred years to stand outside our educational practices in order to explain and justify them. And what I am going to propose on the basis of this argument is that the time has now come to admit that we cannot occupy a position outside practice and that we should now bring the whole educational theory enterprise to a dignified end.[1]

Since my argument is not with some particular version of educational theory but with educational theory as such, it clearly cannot be made from within the confines of the debate whose terms of reference it challenges and denies. In what follows, therefore, I will resist the impulse to regard 'educational theory' as a disembodied concept whose meaning has so far proved to be elusive and treat it instead as a cultural invention of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that can only be adequately understood by reference to the highly specific historical background against which it originated and evolved. One reason for doing this is to make the point that the concept of educational theory has a history and can only be made intelligible in the light of that history. But the main reason is that it enables me to construct a schematic account of the historical evolution of the educational theory debate which reveals it to be an integral part of an intellectual project whose internal incoherences were to ensure its eventual failure. Looked at from this historical perspective, contemporary participants to the educational theory debate will no longer appear as contributors to some timeless philosophical argument about how educational theory is to be conducted and understood but as the unconscious inheritors of a flawed intellectual project whose faulty presuppositions were to ensure its eventual and inevitable demise.

2. A Schematic History of the Educational Theory Debate

Up to the end of the nineteenth century, 'educational theory' did not exist. There were, of course, a number of canonical texts – Plato's *Republic* and Rousseau's *Emile* are just two – whose authors are now commonly referred to as 'educational theorists'. But in writing the *Republic* and *Emile* neither Plato nor Rousseau saw themselves as contributing to that twentieth-century academic specialism we now call 'educational theory'. Instead they saw themselves as participating in those political controversies and intellectual debates that provided the historical background and the argumentative context within which their philosophical writings were originally produced. To selectively extract from these writings a variety of passages that are now regarded as 'relevant' to education and to call the results 'Plato's Educational Theory' or 'Rousseau's Educational Theory' is thus nothing less than an act of gross historical misrepresentation.

What is lost by this kind of ahistorical thinking is any adequate understanding of the intellectual climate in which what we call 'educational theory' emerged and of the specific educational concerns it sought to resolve. What in particular is lost is any appreciation of how our contemporary understanding of educational theory has its historical roots in that late nineteenth-century period which marked the high point of what we now retrospectively characterise as 'modernity' – the 'age of reason' that came into being in the aftermath of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Amongst the many beliefs that modernity legitimised and underwrote was the general conviction that social progress depended on making our social practices and institutions less dependent on custom, habit, dogma and tradition and more firmly based on knowledge that met universal standards of objectivity and conformed to impersonal criteria of rationality and truth. The name given to the kind of knowledge that met these exacting standards was, of course, 'theory'.

In an intellectual culture that displayed such an unbridled faith in the power of theoretical knowledge to transform social life, it was only to be expected that educational reformers would begin to express concerns about the conspicuous absence of 'theory' from teacher education. At that time, teachers were trained according to the 'pupil-teacher method': an apprenticeship system in which novice teachers learned how to teach under the supervision of an experienced teacher (Tibble, 1966). What they learned in this way was a range of teaching skills and a body of practical knowledge that derived from a mixture of tradition, maxims, dogma and rules of thumb. In 1884, dissatisfaction with this approach to the education

of teachers was expressed by the educational reformer, R.H. Quick, in the following words, 'I say boldly that what English Schoolmasters now stand in need of is *theory*; and further that the universities have special advantages for meeting this need' (quoted in Tibble, 1966, pp. 4–5).

As Quick's view carried the day and teacher education began to move into universities, so courses in educational theory begin to proliferate. Almost immediately these courses took on a recognisable pattern such that 'educational theory' could be almost exclusively defined in terms of certain historically influential philosophical texts and a large ancillary literature explaining their central 'educational doctrines' (e.g. Rusk, 1918). In 1928, Sir John Adams explained why 'educational theory' had emerged in this way.

> When education as such began to be recognised as a subject in University curricula, it was only natural that lecturers in education should look out through world literature for great names wherewith to adorn their lists of prescribed readings. Quite naturally, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were seized upon at the very start and a good deal of ingenuity was show in bringing out educational principles from their work. (Adams, 1928, p. 32)

But although, in its first institutionalised form, educational theory was essentially philosophical in character, this did not prevent the emergence of a debate whose agenda was structured around two fundamental questions with which we remain all too familiar: 'What is the epistemological basis of educational theory?' and 'How does educational theory relate to educational practice?' Both of these questions were to be temporarily answered by the publication, in 1928, of Sir John Adams' seminal text *The Evolution of Educational Theory*: a book that was 'to serve as a prototype for this aspect of education both in Britain and America' (Rusk, 1961, p. 61). Adams' response to the question of educational theory's epistemological basis was to insist that 'at the stage that has now been reached in the evolution of educational theory it is necessary to see it as part of the more general evolution of the various schools of philosophical thought' (Adams, 1928, p. 32). And his response to the question of how theory related to practice was to argue that 'in the ultimate resort, sound theory must justify itself by successful practice, while successful practice will always be found to be based on sound theory' (ibid., pp. 4–7).

For much of the first half of the twentieth century, Adams' answers to the two core questions of the educational theory debate provided the basis on which educational theory developed and

evolved. But by the mid-twentieth century it became increasingly apparent that this consensus was being undermined by changes to the academic culture caused by the emergence of those powerful epistemological doctrines collectively known as logical positivism. In 1957 there duly appeared an account of educational theory in which positivist doctrines were fully accepted and endorsed: D.J. O'Connor's *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (O'Connor, 1957). In this, O'Connor invoked the central tenets of logical positivism to argue that 'the standards and criteria used to determine what is to count as a genuine theory in science can and should be used to judge the value of the various (and often conflicting) theories that are put forward by writers of education' (ibid., p. 76). Was this revealed was that 'the word "theory" as it is used in educational contexts is generally a courtesy title. It is justified only when we are applying well established experimental findings in psychology and sociology to the practice of education' (ibid., p. 78).

The main conclusion O'Connor drew from his argument was that, in the positivistic academic culture of the mid-twentieth century, educational theory could only acquire intellectual legitimacy by abandoning its concern with philosophical theories and reconstructing itself as an applied science (O'Connor, 1973). It is thus hardly surprising that many educational philosophers resisted this conclusion and argued instead that educational theory could only achieve its practical purpose if the pivotal role of philosophy was preserved. The main advocate of this view was Paul Hirst who, like O'Connor, accepted the need to redefine educational theory in the light of 'modern analytic philosophy' (Hirst, 1963, 1966, 1973). He also accepted that 'conceiving educational theory as essentially philosophical in character involves seriously underestimating the importance of other forms of knowledge' (Hirst, 1966, p. 41). But despite these areas of agreement, Hirst nevertheless insisted that O'Connor's view of educational theory as exclusively scientific was 'too restrictive' and conspicuously failed to recognise that 'educational theory' is a species of 'practical theory' which draws on a range of academic disciplines – including philosophy – 'to formulate rational educational principles that can determine what ought to be done in educational activities' (ibid., p. 53).

As Hirst's argument began to dominate the debate, so purely philosophical approaches to educational theory began to be dismantled and replaced by a range of academic disciplines, most notably the philosophy, psychology, sociology and history 'of education' (Tibble, 1966). By the end of the 1960s, University departments of education had been re-organised, new professional identities created and new

journals and learned societies established, all displaying total allegiance to the view that 'educational theory' was nothing other than the application to education of these four 'foundation disciplines'. However, by the 1980s the initial enthusiasm for this 'foundations' approach began to be tempered by growing concerns about its relevance to educational practice. Also, as the philosophical inadequacies of positivism became increasingly obvious, so post-positivistic forms of theorising began to emerge that suggested ways of conceptualising educational theory in which the theoretical and practical weakness of the foundations approach could be overcome.

There thus appeared a number of post-positivist contributions to the educational theory debate (Carr, 1980, 1986; Elliott, 1987; Hirst, 1983; Pring, 1977) that were not only severely critical of the 'foundation disciplines' approach but also outlined a view of educational theory based on an analysis of the concept of 'practice' rather than the concept of 'theory'. The philosophical arguments and insights appropriated for this purpose included Ryle's distinction between 'knowing how' and 'knowing that' (Ryle, 1949); Gadamer's reconstruction of the Aristotelian concept of 'practice' (Gadamer, 1967, 1980); Polanyi's theory of 'tacit' knowledge (Polanyi, 1958, 1966); Oakeshott's notion of 'practical knowledge' (Oakeshott, 1962, 1972); and Habermas' account of practical reasoning (Habermas, 1972, 1974). Although the ways in which these intellectual resources were deployed were not always the same, the collective outcome was the emergence of a philosophical rationale for the interpretation of educational theory as a species of 'practical' or 'personal' theory which emerged through a process of 'self-reflective inquiry' in which educational practitioners reflectively exposed and critically examined the theories implicit in their own everyday practice.

As this idea began to receive widespread assent, so the debate began to focus on a number of questions about how this 'reflective practitioner' view of educational theory could be given practical expression. The most influential answers to these questions were provided by the seminal work of Lawrence Stenhouse and, in particular, by his claim that the process whereby educational practitioners reflectively recover and critically assess their own 'tacit theories' was, in essence, a research process in which the development of educational theory and the development of educational practice were inextricably linked (Stenhouse, 1975). Stenhouse's ideas were further developed and reinforced by Donald Schön's account of the 'epistemology of practice' and his compelling account of how, through the process of 'reflection-on-action', practitioners engage in a research process in which their 'theories-in-use' are made explicit, critically reformulated

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and tested through further actions (Schön, 1983, 1987). The research methods and procedures developed to give practical expression to this view of educational theory were the methods and procedures of Action Research (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Elliott, 1991).

Although this schematic history of the twentieth-century educational theory debate is inadequate and incomplete, it is nevertheless sufficient to allow aspects of the debate that have remained invisible from within the debate to become more transparent. For example, what now clearly emerges are some of the assumptions governing the way in which the question 'what is educational theory?' has been debated and discussed. These assumptions take as given that theory is everything that practice is not: that whatever else it is, educational theory is abstract rather than concrete, general rather than particular, context-free rather than context-dependent. In other words, what is now clear is how the educational theory debate has always been predicated on the assumption that, however conceived, educational theory is not itself a practice that has its source in history and culture and always stands apart from the practice it aspires to affect.

With historical hindsight, it is now also transparently obvious that although prevailing views about the epistemological foundations of educational theory have changed from philosophy to science, then to a collection of academic disciplines and finally to practitioners' own 'theories-in-use', the logically prior assumption that a practical activity like education is, or should be, based on *some* kind of 'theory' has never been seriously debated or discussed. What is also apparent is how the arguments used to vindicate these different views of educational theory's epistemological foundations were always intimately related to, and reinforced by, the particular intellectual climate in which the debate occurred. Thus while the different arguments that have dominated the twentieth-century educational theory debate may, to their particular protagonists, have been widely regarded as compelling and conclusive, it is now obvious that these arguments were being advanced at a time in which what was to count as a compelling and conclusive argument was itself always being shaped by historically specific changes to the academic culture in which the educational theory debate was embedded. Moreover, the fact that these arguments did not occur in an historical vacuum, should not conceal the extent to which the questions they addressed also have their origins in a historical period that furnished the intellectual and cultural conditions which allowed these questions to be authentically expressed. Abstracted from this historical context and transposed to a context in which these intellectual and cultural conditions are no longer present, questions like 'What is

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the epistemological source of educational theory?' and 'How does educational theory relate to educational practice?' may no longer need to be answered because they may no longer need to be asked.

3. Educational Theory: a Foundationalist Project

So far I have suggested that the aspiration to create a body of practically relevant educational theory is a late nineteenth and early twentieth century project of modernity and it is only in the light of the epistemological assumptions of modernity that we can adequately understand the key episodes in the twentieth-century educational theory debate. What in particular I have tried to show is that it is only by continuing to display a tacit allegiance to these assumptions that contemporary educational theorists can continue to regard the point and purpose of the educational theory project as self-evident and the educational theory debate can continue to be coherently pursued.

These epistemological assumptions are, of course, those sustaining that general philosophical discourse now commonly referred to as 'foundationalism'. Strictly speaking, foundationalism does not refer to any particular argument or theory but to the general belief that the only way that we can adequately justify our beliefs – the only way we can show that they are rational and true – is to show how they rest on some basic beliefs – or 'foundations' – that do not themselves stand in need of justification because they are, in some sense, 'indubitable', 'self-evident' or otherwise necessarily true. Put somewhat more formally, foundationalism is a belief about epistemic justification which holds that a belief is justified if, and only if, it is a self-justifying foundational belief or can be shown to be ultimately based on, or derived from, a foundational belief (Audi, 2003).

Foundationalism has a long and illustrious history. In part, it is a legacy of Plato's image of a high order domain of transcendent, universal 'forms' which could be used to correct the inadequacies and imperfections of ordinary beliefs. In the subsequent history of philosophy, foundationalism has had both rationalist and empiricist versions and candidates for the status of foundational beliefs have included logical or mathematical truths, 'innate ideas', 'the truths of reason' and 'sensory experience'. But what was to play a crucial role in shaping the academic culture of nineteenth and twentieth century modernity was Immanuel Kant's attempt to provide the philosophical foundations for universal principles of rational justification that are independent of particular historical, social or cultural circumstances and that are grounded in the capacity of enlightened human reason to achieve objectivity and truth.

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In the late nineteenth century, it was this Enlightenment aspiration to formulate universal standards of rationality that informed the ways in which modern social and political theorists were to define their intellectual ambitions and conduct their academic debates. Henceforth, the principal purpose of their intellectual projects would be to bring the methods and procedures of rational justification into critical confrontation with the practices and institutions of all spheres of social and political life. Similarly, academic debate would be conducted in accordance with universal principles of rational argument that were undeniable to all rational persons and therefore immune to the irrational influences of rhetorical persuasion or political power. In the age of Enlightenment, reason would replace authority and the conduct and organisation of social life would be based on knowledge that was demonstrably rational and true. In the age of Enlightenment, the role of the intellectual would be 'to speak truth to power'.

Thus it turns out that the educational theory project was essentially a foundationalist project inspired by Enlightenment values and ideals and rooted in the epistemological assumptions of late nineteenth and early twentieth century modernity. As such, it was predicated on the assumption that educational institutions and practices should be governed by theoretical knowledge that rests on rational foundations that are invariable across contexts and cultures, stand apart from all partisan or political concerns and thus provide an external reference point from which the rationality of educational beliefs and practices can be independently adjudicated and assessed. Understood in this way, the overriding purpose of the educational theory project was to accomplish two related tasks. The first was essentially philosophical: to identify epistemological foundations for educational theory that would enable educational practice to be erected on rational principles that are more objective and rational than mere belief of unexamined practice. The second was essentially practical: to replace the contextually dependent, subjective beliefs of practitioners with the context-free, objective knowledge generated by theory. It was only when educational practitioners acted on the basis of such knowledge that their practice would be governed by universal rational principles that apply always and everywhere, rather than on their local and parochial practical beliefs.

Once it is acknowledged that our present concept of educational theory is deeply embedded in the foundationalist discourse of modernity, some obvious questions begin to emerge. Has the historical period in which foundationalist beliefs could be unconsciously assumed now come to an end? Do the cultural and intellectual

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conditions that have sustained the educational theory debate no longer exist? Should our failure to provide conclusive answers to the core questions posed in the educational theory debate no longer be seen as something to do with our inability to construct rationally compelling arguments and everything to do with the foundationalist assumptions internal to the debate itself? Since these are questions about the validity of the foundationalist discourse through which the educational theory debate is conducted, they clearly cannot be explicitly formulated and addressed as part of the debate itself. They can only be addressed by employing a mode of discourse that, by allowing the epistemological assumptions of foundationalism to be put to the question, allows the possibility of denying what educational theory promises to achieve. The name usually given to this discourse is postfoundationalism.

4. EDUCATIONAL THEORY: A POSTFOUNDATIONALIST CRITIQUE

'Postfoundationalism' refers to a mode of philosophical discourse which acknowledges that the irreversible changes to the ways in which we now understand and relate to the ideas and beliefs of modernity have been so profound that forms of theorising that continue to rely on foundationalist assumptions are no longer acceptable when we try to make sense of the contemporary world. Moreover, postfoundationalism is not a transient intellectual fashion that can easily be dismissed as 'some kind of radical abrogation of intellectual responsibility' (Blake *et al.*, 1998, p. 25). On the contrary, postfoundationalist ideas have been articulated from within a range of philosophical traditions as diverse as Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy (Wittgenstein, 1953); German hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1980; Heidegger, 1962); American neopragmatism (Putnam, 1975, 1981; Quine, 1964; Rorty, 1979, 1982); French poststructuralism (Derrida, 1978; Lyotard, 1984) and neomarxist critical theory (Habermas, 1972, 1974). Similarly, postfoundationalism is now firmly embedded in a variety of academic disciplines that include: anthropology (Geertz, 1977); literary theory (Eagleton, 2003; Fish, 1989); history (White, 1987); the social sciences (Foucault, 1974); and the philosophy and history of science (Kuhn, 1962). The way in which postfoundationalist thinking is articulated within these philosophical traditions and academic disciplines varies. But what they all have in common is the shared conviction that the time has now come to abandon the search for epistemological foundations that can guarantee the truth of theoretical knowledge. Hence the familiar postfoundationist slogans – there are 'no unmediated facts', 'no

neutral observation language', 'no telling it as it is', 'no view from nowhere', 'no escaping politics' – are all intended to convey and reinforce postfoundationalism's central claim: 'that there are no foundations of knowledge, no grounds exterior to ourselves that guarantee the truth of our factual claims' (Blake *et al.*, 1998, p. 21).

These postfoundationalist slogans are underwritten by a range of philosophical arguments that collectively show how any idea that we can occupy a position outside of history and culture is a myth – that we are always interpretively situated within, and constrained by, the particular discourses learned and acquired in becoming a participant in a historical culture. Since there is no way for us to stand outside such discourses – since our sense of who and what we are is always shaped by the particular discourses circulating in our own historical context – it follows that there can be no privileged epistemological position that will enable us to transcend the particularities of our culture and traditions. It follows from this that knowledge is never disinterested or independent but is always situated within a historically contingent mode of discourse beyond which it is impossible to stand. To believe otherwise is, in Richard Rorty's words, simply a futile attempt 'to step outside our skins and compare ourselves with something absolute … to escape from the finitude of one's time and place, the "merely conventional" and contingent aspects of one's life' (Rorty, 1982, p. 6).

Although postfoundationalist arguments are as varied as they are numerous, their overall purpose is always the same: to demonstrate the impossibility of ever achieving what foundationalism promises by showing that all the candidates for the privileged status of epistemological foundations that have been invoked in order to acquire knowledge that escapes the distorting influence of history, tradition and practice, are always themselves the product of history, tradition and practice. As Stanley Fish puts it, what postfoundationalism teaches is:

> … that questions of fact, truth, correctness, validity and clarity can neither be posed nor answered in reference to some extra contextual, a historical, non situational reality, or rule or law, or value; rather anti-foundationalism asserts that all these matters are intelligible and debatable only within the precincts of the contexts or situations or paradigms or communities that given them their local and changeable shape … Entities like the world, language and the self can still be named; and value judgements having to do with validity and accuracy… can still be made. But in every case these entities and values, along with the procedures by which they

are identified and marshalled, will be inextricable from the social and historical circumstances in which they do their work. In short, the very essentials that are in foundationalist discourse opposed to the local, the historical, the contingent, the variable and the rhetorical, turn out to be irreducibly dependent on, and indeed functions of, the local, the historical, the contingent, the variable and the rhetorical. (Fish, 1989, pp. 344–345)

But if, as Fish insists, 'foundationalist theory is implicated in everything it claims to transcend' (ibid., p. 345), then it turns out that, far from being a special activity that is conducted from outside of practice, educational theory is itself a historically formed practice inextricable from the local and parochial contexts within which it is produced and always embedded in, and dependent on, the kind of contingent norms, values and beliefs that it claims to examine and assess in the practice of others. From a postfoundationalist perspective, the reasons why educational theory has failed to achieve its stated goals is not because formulating universal theoretical generalisations about education is a complex goal that is difficult to achieve but an impossible goal that can never be achieved. It can never be achieved because, far from being 'universal' or 'general' such theoretical generalisations are always abstractions from the malleable world of practice and thus always shaped by the very features of practice – its particularity and contingency – educational theory claims to transcend. From a postfoundationalist perspective, educational theory's aspiration to govern practice from the neutral perspective of an abiding general rationality is a futile aspiration because the norms, rules and conventions governing its own practice are themselves local rather than general, contextual rather than abstract and derive from educational theory's own contingent history. From this perspective, educational theory cannot *inform* practice because it is itself a *form* of practice. Educational theorists cannot abstract themselves from the contingent norms, values and beliefs inherent in this practice since it is only within them that educational theorising can take place.[2]

The most obvious response to this postfoundationalist critique would to recognise that the educational theory project is a self-defeating foundationalist project which should now be abandoned. But this has not been the common response and educational theorists who accept the central tenets of postfoundationalism have instead responded by trying to reconstruct the educational theory project so that it is no longer based on the foundationalist assumptions that played such a crucial role in its initial formulation. The task of articulating this kind of postfoundationalist version of educational theory

has recently been undertaken with some clarity by Richard Pring in his book *Philosophy and Educational Research* (Pring, 2000).

Pring conducts this task by first endorsing the postfoundationalist argument that there are no unmediated facts and no neutral observations. 'Facts,' he writes, 'are not the sort of thing one observes independently of a particular way of describing the world … what we observe depends on the concepts and beliefs we bring to these observations' (op. cit., pp. 74–76). The second stage of his argument is to confirm the postfoundationalist insight that every educational practice, like every observation, presupposes a framework of values and beliefs. As he puts it, 'practice is partly defined in terms of the intentions, beliefs and values of teachers and the beliefs and values built into the institutional and social context within which teachers perceive their task' (op. cit., p. 126). The conclusion he draws from this is that every practice is underwritten by some theory: 'no practice stands outside a theoretical framework … that is a framework of interconnected beliefs' (op. cit., p. 127). And the conclusion Pring draws from this conclusion is that the purpose of educational theory is to enable practitioners to reflectively expose their tacit theory in order to critically examine the theoretical assumptions underlying their practice. Thus he writes:

> Theory refers to the articulation of the framework of beliefs and understandings which are embedded in … practice … Such a theoretical position is what we bring to our observations of the world and our interpretations of those observations …, and when articulated … it is open to critical scrutiny. To examine practice requires articulating these beliefs and understandings and exposing them to criticism. Such a critique could be pursued in the light of evidence or conceptual clarification. In other words, one is committed in being 'practical' to theoretical assumptions of some sort; and one is committed in accounting for one's practice to some degree of theoretical activity. (op. cit., p. 129)

A preliminary question to ask about Pring's argument is what is to be lost and what is to be gained by characterising the practitioner's 'framework of beliefs and understandings' as a theory? What is clearly lost is any meaningful distinction between beliefs and theories and hence between the countless mundane beliefs that necessarily underwrite the most routinely and unselfconsciously undertaken practices and those more general and abstract educational beliefs that some, but by no means all, educational practitioners may self-consciously wish to describe as their 'educational theory'. Clearly it is possible to offer a stipulative definition of the notion of 'theory'

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so as to include the former as well as the latter. But just as clearly, the consequence of so doing is to make the notion of theory trivial by making it another name for ordinary everyday practical beliefs.

To treat practitioners' beliefs as synonymous with their 'theoretical assumptions' not only renders the notion of theory vacuous; it also misrepresents postfoundationalism. For although the insight that 'every practice is defined in terms of the intentions and beliefs of the teacher' is certainly a postfoundationalist insight, this does not mean that 'one is committed in being practical to theoretical assumptions of some sort' (op. cit., p. 129). What practitioners are committed to is not a theory but a set of beliefs and, in reflecting upon these beliefs, what they are making explicit is not their theoretical assumptions but that cluster of related beliefs which provide them with their interpretive understanding of their practice and the context within which their practice takes place. In 'articulating' their beliefs in this way, practitioners are neither engaging in 'theoretical activity' nor articulating their 'theoretical position'. What they are articulating are the beliefs that underwrite their practice not their allegiance to some theory.

But, even if we are persuaded by Pring's argument to label the activity of critically reflection a 'theoretical activity', difficulties still arise. Far from being a neutral activity that can be undertaken from some impartial standpoint, 'critical reflection' is itself always conducted within a set of assumptions, beliefs and practices – in Pring's case concerning what is to count as 'evidence' and what constitutes the appropriate methods and procedures of 'conceptual clarification' – that are peculiar to some particular and hence partial understanding of what the activity of 'critical reflection' involves. So although it is undoubtedly true that there is a difference between those 'reflective practitioners' who critically examine their practices 'on the basis of evidence and conceptual clarification' and those who practice in a more or less routine and uncritical way, this is not a difference between practitioners whose practices are no longer constrained by contextually embedded and uncritically held beliefs and practitioners whose practices still remain so constrained. Nor are practitioners who critically assess their practice 'in the light of evidence and conceptual clarification' acting in an impartial or disinterested way. They are simply adopting a perspective on their practice that is constrained by an unreflectively and uncritically held set of assumptions and beliefs which constitute a partial, particular, and therefore always contestable, understanding of what 'being reflective' or being 'self-critical' mean.

Pring's postfoundationalist version of educational theory is not unique and similar examples can readily be adduced (Carr, 1995;

Hirst, 1983). What they all have in common is a pattern of reasoning that begins by accepting the postfoundationalist insight that there can be no perspective that is independent of any contextually dependent interpretive standpoint, but ends up by re-inventing the foundationalist view of educational theory it claims to replace. What postfoundationalism implies is that 'reflective practice', 'critique', 'critical reflection', 'practical theorising' and the rest are no less than 'theoretical justification', the names for activities that can be performed only from within – and never from outside – the assumptions and beliefs that form the taken-for-granted background against which these 'theoretical activities' acquire their particular shape and, therefore, the names for activities that are themselves always embedded in, and never independent of, the kind of contextually embedded values and beliefs they seek to reflectively recover and critically assess. What postfoundationalism teaches is that any critical perspective we have on some of our practices will always be grounded in other of our practices; that our assumptions and beliefs cannot be made the object of our 'practical theorising' because they provide the indispensable precondition to our 'practical theorising'; that however it is construed, 'educational theory' can never enable us to occupy a position outside our practical beliefs because beliefs constitute the necessary context within which educational theory takes place. As Stanley Fish puts it, 'Beliefs are not what you think *about* but what you think *with* and it is only in the space provided by their articulation that … the activity of theorising goes on' (Fish, 1989, p. 326).

What this means is that *any* version of educational theory that claims to enable us to acquire some kind of independent theoretical justification for our educational beliefs and practices can only get started if the first lesson of postfoundationalism is ignored. What postfoundationalism teaches is that no such justification is, or ever will be, available and that we should now recognise that the justification of educational beliefs and the rational evaluation of educational practice are only intelligible in terms of the norms and standards that constitute the rational acts of those who understand themselves – and are understood by others – to be competent members of the community of educational practitioners. Thus the only lesson to be learned from postfoundationalism is that those who were engaged in the twentieth-century educational theory debate have been climbing a ladder that we are now in a position to throw away. And, if this is so, then all that now remains to be done is to accept, without regret or nostalgia, that the educational theory project has run its course and that the time has now come for us to bring it to a dignified end.

5. Education without Theory?

For reasons that are entirely understandable, this is a conclusion that most educational theorists will want to reject and those who do not dismiss it out of hand will probably regard it as hopelessly misguided and confused. If my argument does manage to elicit any kind of response, this will almost certainly take the form of a series of counter-attacks in which a number of familiar arguments thought fatal to my postfoundationalist position will be invoked. If only because it offers an opportunity for me to further clarify and defend my position, it may be useful to anticipate and reply to three of the more predictable objections that my argument is likely to attract.

One objection to my argument will undoubtedly involve demonstrating how postfoundationalism relies on a self-refuting relativism. Typically, this objection starts by asking whether the postfoundationalist claim that there is no objective truth is itself to be regarded as objectively true or as relative to a particular historical culture. If the former, then postfoundationalism, by exempting itself from its own insight, is thereby contradicting the very position it proclaims. But if it is not – if, that is the postfoundationalist doctrine is itself relative to time and place – then there are no rational grounds for accepting it as true. Harvey Siegel has used just this kind of argument to dismiss the criticisms of postfoundationalism made by some 'postmodernist' philosophers.

> … criticisms of foundationalism … face huge difficulties as they appear to presuppose what they want to reject. For example, … [the] postmodernist wants to reject the possibility of objective knowledge but apparently regards it as an objective fact about the world that a subjects knowledge of that world is always pre-interpreted and that knowledge is therefore never objective … Similarly, the postmodernist insistence that there is no privileged position that enables philosophers to transcend the particularities of their own cultures and traditions seems itself an attempt to speak from just such a position, since it seems to be making an assertion concerning all philosophers and cultures. (Siegel, 1998, p. 30)

But of course postfoundationalism is not an epistemological thesis that 'rejects the possibility of objective knowledge' but an explanatory thesis about how objective knowledge emerges. What postfoundationlism rejects is that mode of discourse which simply assumes that the only way to demonstrate the possibility of objective knowledge – and hence the only way to avoid the spectre of 'relativism'– is to show that it derives from some independent transcontextual source. What

postfoundationalism asserts is that no such source has ever been shown to exist, that claims to have discovered some such 'foundations' are themselves always culturally and historically embedded and thus have always been vulnerable to refutation on the basis on forms of argument and types of evidence that are themselves relative to different historical and cultural contexts. Postfoundationalism does not exclude itself from such critical refutation and thus does not exclude the possibility that it may itself, at some future time, be critically repudiated on the basis of other forms of argument and evidence and replaced by some yet to be developed 'post-postfoundationalist' discourse. Postfoundationalism can, therefore, without contradiction, include its own thesis within its own scope. The only appropriate response to Siegel's criticism is simply to point out that since it is a criticism that can only be made from within a mode of discourse that presupposes that knowledge must be either 'objective' or 'relative', it is a criticism that presupposes, and is only intelligible within, the kind of foundationalist discourse that postfoundationalism repudiates and rejects (Bernstein, 1983).

A second predictable counter-argument to my thesis will involve showing how it is simply a matter of historical record that educational theory has, on many occasions, provided the theoretical basis for educational policy and practice. To this end, numerous examples will be cited – for example the practical influence of Burt's psychometric theory of intelligence in the 1920s and 30s and of Piaget's theory of cognitive development in the 1970s – all of which constitute a powerful empirical refutation of my thesis that education is never grounded in educational theory.

But to claim that education is never grounded in educational theory is not to deny that educational theory ever has any practical influence but to insist that this has nothing to do with its claim to provide education with a theoretical rationale. Educational theories can indeed have very real practical influence but this is no different from the kind of influence that is exercised by *any* discursive practice that has been appropriated as an instrument of rhetorical persuasion. The practical influence of educational theory thus has nothing to do with its meeting criteria of objectivity, rationality and truth and everything to do with the rhetorical role that this mode of discourse is able to play in a particular educational context at a particular historical moment.

My claim then, is that questions about educational theory's practical role will depend entirely on the extent to which, in the rhetorical structures endemic to a particular educational community, there is a direct and institutionalised connection between the production of

educational theories and the processes through which educational policies are formulated and practical educational decisions are made. In an educational community in which it is generally believed that educational theory is relevant to the formation of educational policy or the improvement of practice – that is in a community in which theory has acquired status, legitimacy and respect – educational theory will be practically influential in the sense that employing its vocabulary and appealing to its 'findings' will be regarded as useful components of a rhetorical and political strategy for presenting and vindicating some educational point of view. But in an educational community in which theoretical discourse cannot, or will not, fulfil these rhetorical and political purposes – when, that is, it no longer has any polemical currency – educational theory may well be subjected to a 'discourse of derision' (Ball, 1990) and dismissed as nothing other than ideology and propaganda. In both cases the practical influence of educational theory will have been determined by local and contingent factors and will vary according to shifting configurations of political expediency, dominant interest and vested power. In both cases, the practical role played by educational theory will have been 'political' and 'rhetorical' not 'theoretical'.

The way in which educational theory performs this essentially rhetorical and political function can be illustrated by considering the influence of Cyril Burt's psychometric theory of intelligence on the selective system of British secondary education in the first half of the twentieth century. It is indisputable that this mode of theoretical discourse permeated and infected the language of education to such an extent that its central concepts – 'intelligence', 'IQ', 'academic ability', 'educability' – became normative for educational policy and unreflectively asserted in everyday educational practice. But if my argument is correct, the extent to which this theoretical discourse penetrated the discourse of education does not show that psychometric theory provided the 'theoretical rationale' for educational policy and practice. All it shows is how, in the particular circumstances of the time, it became virtually impossible for educational policy makers and practitioners to avoid employing the discourse of psychometrics when articulating and making intelligible their educational practices and beliefs. What it shows is that the extent to which an educational theory informs or transforms educational policy and practice is the extent to which its vocabulary has taken hold in the educational community and hence the extent that its way of understanding educational realities is no longer seen as 'theoretical' but as an extension of that community's practical common sense.

My argument then is that practical significance is not something that educational theories intrinsically have but something that happens to some educational theories but not others; that questions about the impact, relevance, or influence of educational theory are not philosophical questions about theory's unique epistemological status, but specific, empirical questions that can only be answered by detailed historical inquiries aimed at uncovering the local and contingent factors – historical circumstances, political climate institutional needs, economic and cultural conditions – that alone can explain why some educational theories were practically influential and why others were of no practical consequence at all. What such inquiries will always acknowledge is that the influence of educational theory on educational practice can take a number of different forms all of which can be shown to have their source in human history and none of which validate theory's claim to influence practice from a position outside history.

Perhaps the most strident attack on my argument will come from those who insist that abandoning educational theory would mean that education could no longer be based on a principled rationality and would simply revert to a state of pre-theoretical ignorance in which policy and practice were governed by the dictates of political ideology, prevailing fashion and subjective beliefs. On this view, to abandon educational theory would be to deprive education of any concern with objectivity, rationality and truth and thus produce a climate in which policy and practice would no longer be subject to any rational constraints.

But this prophecy would only follow if my argument for abandoning educational theory was also an argument for abandoning all rational constraints. However, my argument is not that rational constraints should be removed but that their epistemic authority is never epistemological and theoretical but always practical and contextual. Moreover, my case for abandoning educational theory is not only that it cannot produce theoretical knowledge that can rationally constrain educational policy and practice but also that educational policy and practice are always and already rationally constrained by the social practices of rational justification that are intrinsic to the discourse of the educational community within which practitioners act. What my argument is intended to demonstrate is that educational practitioners cannot abstract themselves from this contextual setting and therefore always are, and could never be other than, rationally constrained by the epistemic norms and standards intrinsic to their shared discourse and practice.

6. Conclusion

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, educational theory has taken many different forms. But what has never changed is the fundamental assumption that, by occupying an independent and neutral position outside the field of educational practice, educational theory can act as an arbiter for assessing the rationality of educational beliefs and practices. Thus the prevailing image of educational theory remains that of something that informs practice without itself being a form of practice, as something that releases educational practice from its dependence on contingent norms and constraints without itself being dependent on contingent norms and constraints, as something that can infuse educational practice with the rationality it so patently lacks. This image is displayed in educational theory's portrayal of itself as a unique source of rationally vindicated educational knowledge. And it is continually being reinforced by educational theory's claim to be the custodian of the intellectual virtues of objectivity, validity and truth.

One of my purposes has been to show how this image derives from the culture of modernity in which the twentieth-century educational theory project was initially formulated. Another has been to show how the foundationalist discourse endemic to this culture continues to set the terms of the contemporary educational theory debate. But my main aim has been to argue that this foundationalist discourse has now been superseded by a postfoundationalist discourse in which forms of theorising that continue to depend on foundationalist assumptions are deprived of any intellectual credibility. And the general thesis I have pursued on the basis of this argument is that the aspiration to create a body of educational theory that can inform and guide educational practice was, and still remains, an essentially foundationalist project that no longer has any place in the postfoundationalist culture in which we now live.

My strategy for pursuing this thesis has been to elaborate the consequences for educational theory of some of the principal insights of postfoundationlist thought: that we are all interpretively situated; that educational theory is always the product of the educational theorist's own interpretive assumptions; that educational theory is just one more discursive practice; that educational theory does not cause educational change but may be appropriated in the cause of educational change. The conclusion I have drawn from these insights is that educational theory's aspiration to escape the world of practice in order to justify it from without is futile, that practical justification is the only kind there is, that we should stop searching

for 'theoretical justifications' for educational practice and finally concede that there are no epistemological foundations that enable us to determine whether what educational practitioners believe to be true really is true.

The argument I have employed in support of this conclusion is itself an essentially theoretical argument that I have constructed in accordance with the norms and standards of rationality that constrain the practice of educational theorising. But the fact that I have denied that these constraints are, or ever could be, rooted in some epistemological foundations – the fact that I now understand myself to be interpretively situated – neither frees me from these constraints nor releases me from my particular situation. Nor does my insistence that the epistemic status of the norms and standards of rationality governing the practice of educational theory is always contingent and contextual do anything to discredit their validity. To draw this conclusion from my argument would be to assume the possibility of identifying some independent criteria against which the rational validity of these norms and standards could be justified and assessed. But of course to assume this would be to resurrect the very foundationalist assumption that my postfoundationalist critique of educational theory has sought to repudiate and reject.

Should the educational theory project now be abandoned? Although I have argued that it should, I have carefully resisted any suggestion that this is a recommendation that is 'justified by' or 'follows from' my argument. For me to claim this would be to exempt my theoretical argument from its own insight – to attribute 'practical implications' to the theoretical argument that educational theory does not have 'practical implications'. But although my argument cannot provide a theoretical justification for abandoning the educational theory project, this does not negate the possibility of it having the kind of practical influence that any theoretical discourse may have as a mode of rhetorical persuasion. Whether or not my argument will have any significance for the future of educational theory is therefore a contingent question depending entirely on whether I have been successful in persuading educational theorists to take it seriously. I hope that I have.

7. Notes

1. Although this may be regarded as a somewhat novel proposal, 'against theory' arguments are well known in academic disciplines such as literary studies (Mitchell, 1985) and sociology (Mouzelis, 1995). Some of the implications of these 'anti-theory' arguments for educational research have been discussed by Thomas (1997, 2002).

2. For a discussion of the significance of postfoundationalism for the philosophy of education in particular, see Van Goor *et al.* (2004).

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