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FROM FEMALE ANATOMY TO CIVIC VIRTUES

First came the passion for education. I was brought up in a terrace house in a working class district of Bristol by a father who was a motor mechanic and a mother who was a shop assistant. We had coal fires, gas lighting, no bathroom, an outside toilet and three books: *The Illustrated Family Doctor*, by a General Practitioner, *The New Illustrated Universal Reference Book* and *The New English Dictionary.* Apart from a writing pad, most often used for writing notes to school, it had no writing paper. Going first to a state primary school and then, after passing the 11+ examination, to a state secondary school gave me interests and enthusiasms which transported me into a new existence. No question then about my future career. If a state education system could do this, I wanted to be part of it.

After a degree in German, I trained as a teacher. From the first day teaching was a joy. My classes were relatively small and as the only German teacher in the school I was teaching at all levels. I enjoyed the enthusiasm of the eager language learners and the intellectual challenge of discussing Kafka, Schiller, Hölderlin and Heine with students preparing for university entrance examinations and only a few years younger than myself.

But then a small cloud appeared over this Eden which was to put me on the path to work in philosophy of education. More accurately, it was not a cloud but the female upper arm. In the girls' school in the country town where I

was working, the new headteacher announced in the summer of 1960 that staff must wear frocks with sleeves that covered the upper arm at least to the elbow. What was the problem? The reason given was that the female upper arm was the ugliest part of the female anatomy and must be covered. This was one of a number of rules delivered ex cathedra. (Another was that girls should stand in assembly hands by their sides with palms facing inwards. Palms facing outwards indicated mental illness.) This latest rule had a life-changing effect on me. It led me to think about the institution of the school, the basis of the headteacher's authority, the legitimate area of the school's control over its students and staff, the state's control over schools.

Learning and teaching philosophy of education

When in 1962 I asked Roger Wilson, the professor of education at Bristol, where I had done my teacher training, the best place to pursue these questions, he suggested the University of London's Institute of Education where a new professor, Richard Peters, had just been appointed. This man was going to bring the kind of depth and rigour into educational studies I was seeking. Reading educational theory books in preparation for the course, I began to wonder if Roger Wilson was right. They seemed either to specialise in a kind of refined preachy woolliness or to give accounts of what the Great Philosophers had said about education. Would the Diploma in Philosophy and Sociology of Education I was about to embark on really be that different? It certainly was. I entered a different world. Richard Peters often said he aimed to replace mush with mesh. For me this is just what he did. His courses went beyond the standard ethics and political philosophy courses then taught in university philosophy departments. Starting with the traditional discussions of intuitionism, emotivism, utilitarianism, he located

this material intellectually in relation to his own developing position on the appropriate ethical and social framework for education. This he later set out in *Ethics and Education*. In parallel courses, and in lively interaction with the class, Paul Hirst forged a conception of the place of philosophy in educational studies, and developed an epistemologically based foundation for curriculum development (Hirst 1965a, b). This was the soon to be hotly contested forms of knowledge theory, which much later still underwent a radical reassessment by its author (Hirst, 1993). I was by now head of a German department in a London school and studying at the Institute in the evenings. It was exhilarating to be in Peters' and Hirst's classes as each step of the arguments they were developing came under challenge, often by one or other of them as they sat in on each others' classes. Views which withstood this intense scrutiny would provide, I thought, the framework I was seeking for my school practice. This would not be some invincible structure to last for my whole teaching career, but a rationally revisable one. For this, as Hirst and Peters stressed, clarity was essential. It was praise indeed when Richard Peters said to me that the best thing about my seminar paper was that it was so clear he could see exactly where it was wrong.

Two significant influences came from the US. With Kingsley Price's *Education and Philosophical Thought* I discovered that treatment of historical philosophers' views on education need not take the form of 'stories'. Their views could be deftly analysed and assessed. Jane Roland Martin's paper 'On the Reduction of "Knowing That" to "Knowing How" ' intrigued me. I pored over it for hours. Aside from the content, it was important to me that here was a *woman* doing this kind of forensic analysis which actually had a real bearing on education. In Britain in the early 1960s,

as far as I was aware there were no women working analytically in philosophy of education. While the US influences came from writings, a third influence, from the UK, depended very much on personal contact. An important counterpoint for me to the 'London line', as it later came to be called, was Peter Winch's courses in ethics and epistemology at Birkbeck College. I was lucky enough to be in a class with half a dozen other students with the man who had just written *The Idea of a Social Science*. Even more significant for me, though, than Peter Winch's challenging of the idea of an ethics like Peters' based on principles, was being in his classes and experiencing his deeply serious attitude to ethics and his tenacity in argument. Often a whole class would be spent on one point as he dealt with the objections of a single student.

Looking at my work in school from these new perspectives helped me to get the intellectual grasp on the aims and content of education I had been wanting. But I was not the only one persuaded of the benefit of philosophical understanding for teachers in schools. With the aim of achieving a wholly graduate teaching profession in Britain, the government established the Bachelor of Education degree. This included the disciplines seen as foundational in educational studies – sociology, philosophy, psychology and history. Peters now had the task of providing courses in philosophy of education to equip college teachers to teach the new BEd degree. As well as a special government-funded one year Diploma course, he had developed, with Paul Hirst, an MA in Philosophy of Education. Students took a core seminar in philosophy of education and two 30 week courses chosen from a number of options, including ethics, epistemology and metaphysics, political philosophy and philosophy of mind. For this

Peters needed to expand his teaching team and I was invited to join the staff. At the time I was in Year 1 of a joint Sociology and Philosophy of Education MA programme. I was torn because I enjoyed my work in my East End school and was about to become deputy head. On the other hand the idea of joining this dynamic staff which promised to contribute substantially to the theoretical foundation I felt any education system needed was too attractive an opportunity to pass up. I joined the Institute staff in 1965.

With Stanley Benn, Peters had recently written *Social Principles and the Democratic State* and his MA Political Philosophy course was in part based on the topics of the book and in part dealt with the great classical political philosophers, Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke and Mill. When I finished my MA Richard Peters decided that I should take over this course whilst he taught the educational courses.

Given that the course could not be exhaustive in its coverage, in selecting topics I was keen to make it political philosophy relevant to the concerns of those working in education. This was not easy. Political philosophy had been pronounced dead in the 1950s and even in 1962 the editors of the Second Series of *Philosophy, Politics and Society* could not yet 'proclaim the resurrection [of political philosophy] unreservedly and with enthusiasm' (Laslett and Runciman, 1964, pvii). The great flowering of late twentieth century work in the subject was only just beginning.

I decided that the course should focus on issues and problems of democratic theory. The first part of the course drew relevantly on the classics of political

philosophy to this end, whilst the second part tackled the issues and problems head on. As the work of political philosophers like Barry, Rawls, Nozick and Dworkin began to emerge in papers and chapters, so it began to figure in the course. Soon the course began to cover topics like rights, civil disobedience, political violence, positive discrimination, the public interest, fraternity as a political value. Rawls' idea of justice as fairness was discussed and dissected several years before its appearance in book form. This was to the surprise of some colleagues who wondered why I was not focussing on 'mainstream' notions of justice and equality. The 'dirty hands problem' turned out to be surprisingly relevant to educational policy making. Walter Feinberg, a visiting scholar at the Institute at the time, sat in on some of these classes in the mid-1970s and we would continue the discussion as we walked to Goodge Street tube station, putting and countering arguments until we got on our separate trains.

The public interest and political education

The first fruit of the grafting of my educational questions on to my developing understanding in political philosophy was a paper on 'Education, Democracy and the Public Interest.' It sprang from a general scepticism at the time about whether in a large pluralistic democracy there *could* be any policies in the public interest. Construing this as a policy which benefits every member of a given public under the description 'member of the public', I argued that there could be at least one such policy in a democracy, namely an appropriate political education. Paul Hirst, arguing persuasively for a broad education in all the forms of knowledge, had suggested that insofar as one was pursuing a liberal education the criterion for choosing particular content in the various forms would be the extent to which any

given content exemplified that form (Hirst, 1965b, p133-4). If one had political education in mind, however, I argued, one would choose those items (for instance, statistics in mathematics, parts of sociology in social science) which would help children to understand the democratic society in which they were growing up. Political education would in this way be pegging the forms of knowledge to the actual context of schooling. I did not anticipate that this concern with political education in a democracy would be the focus of my work for the next 40 years or so.

Through the 1970s I continued to write papers connecting work in political theory to questions of political education and citizenship. Broadly speaking, I argued that political education should begin in the first school and that teacher education should take this into account by preparing all teachers for their responsibilities. I attempted to counter possible fears about indoctrination and, whilst sketching out a plan for the long-term, made suggestions about how we might proceed from where we were. But since the Great Education Debate of 1976-7 in the UK came and went with scarcely a mention of political education, it was hardly surprising that my academic papers did nothing to raise its profile. It was heartening at least that in 1974 Bernard Crick, then Professor of Politics at Birkbeck College, was also arguing the case for political education and forging with colleagues *A Programme for Political Education* based around the idea of political literacy. (published in 1978 with related papers as *Political Education and Political Literacy*). Broadly in agreement with its emphasis on conceptual development, John White and I produced a constructive critique. We felt that in its first formulation the *Programme* had remediable defects – amongst other things little attention to the aims of political education and economic

understanding, and a rather individualistic slant. But the lively academic debate notwithstanding, the time for citizenship education as a serious contender for a place in school was still a long way off.

In retrospect, although frustrating at the time, the lack of interest in political education had some advantages because I continued throughout the 1970s to plough my own furrow and follow ideas where they led. This culminated in *Beyond Domination: An Essay in the Political Philosophy of Education* in 1983. This had grown out of my ten years of teaching political philosophy and set out from the assumption that any discussion of education had to be placed in a political context. If that was a democratic context, then that would have an effect on the organisation and content of education, which would itself be subject to continuing democratic debate, discussion and revision. The first chapters set out basic democratic principles and explored in some detail the kind of institutions needed to realise these, not least democracy in the workplace – another topic whose time had not yet come! It concluded with three chapters on: political education, the case for an appropriate training for headteachers – my early pre-occupation with arbitrary power was still with me – and a consideration of parents' educational rights and duties. The idea of questioning parents' rights over their children's education seemed almost eccentric at the time, something which only some out of touch educational theorist would think worth discussing. But that was soon to change.

Policy critique

During the 1980s I began to contribute, in academic papers as well as publications accessible to a wider public, to the informed critique of the

Conservative government policies mounted by philosophers and other colleagues. These contributions grew out of my developing views about what a civic education in a democracy required. In my contribution to *Lessons Before Midnight*, a pamphlet which called for public education about nuclear issues, I argued that there were compelling reasons why a political education in school should directly tackle these. The argument, drawing on the writings of philosophers like Bernard Williams and Stanley Benn, countered charges that this would inevitably involve indoctrination and/ or unnecessarily frightening children who would not be likely to understand the issues anyway (charges more fully critiqued in White 1988). It claimed that it was both possible and desirable.

Another pamphlet, *The Quality Controllers,* drew attention to the government's impoverished notion of 'quality' in its plans to improve the quality of teacher education. In our paper John White and I attacked what we saw as the re-tread conception of in-service work implicit in the government's plans. (In those days a cheap alternative to buying new tyres for your car was to have them remoulded, in effect the tread replaced.) As against this, as well as offering teachers courses to hone their skills, we argued that in-service education could help them take a broader view of their work. We listed as examples seven areas of beliefs – epistemological, social, psychological, political, ethical, metaphysical, educational – where teachers might have taken-for-granted assumptions that could benefit from critical examination. For this kind of fundamental reflection, we argued, teachers needed time. Keeping teachers hard at work at the chalk face with no time for reflection was no way to ensure quality in education in a democracy.

Once again these were ideas whose time had not yet come – and, 20 years later, have not yet come in UK government circles.

'Parents' Rights, Homosexuality and Education' was an attack on a Conservative government policy which sought to make sure that homosexuality was not 'promoted' in school. The paper drew on Michael Ruse's work in refuting the view that sexual orientation could be swayed by teaching, because evidence suggested it was given, not chosen. Further, it claimed that civic education in a democracy should be concerned about the flourishing of *all* citizens, including gay citizens, and not least gay students in school. This paper was part of a continuing commentary on the nature and place of parents' rights over the education of their children – an issue now firmly in the educational spotlight. It was followed by 'Parental Choice and Education for Citizenship'. This highlighted some of the problems in being a good parent and a good citizen in a society in which the right of parents to determine their children's education was coming to be regarded as a key element in the access to schools.

Civic virtues

Beyond Domination and the policy papers I wrote in the 1980s focussed on the values and the institutions needed for national government and in the workplace, including the educational workplace, to make a society more democratic. Connectedly, the political education I argued for was concerned to promote greater understanding of this conception of democracy. But this and the related notion of democratic education, I came to realise, lacked a crucially important element, namely the array of dispositions needed to *be* a democratic citizen. Without the disposition to work the democratic

institutions in the right spirit, ineptitude at best, corruption at worst, was inevitable. The kind of dispositions democratic citizens needed had to be identified and discussed. Dispositions relating to social justice, autonomy and tolerance are virtually definitive of democracy and had been much worked over in political philosophy. I turned my attention to others – hope and confidence, self-respect, self-esteem, courage, honesty, trust, decency, and later being prepared to give people a hearing, and gratitude (White, 1996b,1998b). The thing about these dispositions, I discovered, was that the relevant personal virtues could not simply be translated into the public sphere. In this arena they acquired a particular democratic aspect, as *Civic Virtues and Public Schooling* (1996a) tries to show. For this reason the school, as a public institution outside the family, is well suited to foster these democratic dispositions. To do so requires careful attention to teacher attitudes in the classroom and to the structure of the school.

As I worked on civic virtues, I benefited enormously from conversations with Ray Elliott, a retired colleague, known for his original and perceptive work in aesthetics, ethics and philosophy of education. The paper on "Self-Knowledge and Education,' which he contributed to the collection I edited on *Personal and Social Education,* is an immediately accessible introduction to his work. It draws on subtle interpretations of philosophical (Nietzsche, Hegel, D W Hamlyn) and literary sources to offer profound insights to the teacher in the primary and secondary classroom.

Showcasing the subject

For a few years after 1996 my work on the virtues slowed almost to a standstill, because a publisher with the idea for a collection of published

work in philosophy of education from about 1950 onwards invited me to be one of the editors. So with Paul Hirst as co-editor I began reading a phenomenal amount of work from all parts of the globe. From this we eventually selected the items which filled the four volumes of *Philosophy of Education: Major Themes in the Analytic Tradition*. It was particularly gratifying to make accessible important work – six papers from Ray Elliott, for instance – which was not easily available. Considering how best to organise it as a resource for scholars in philosophy of education as well as other disciplines alerted the editors to those areas, like the political aspects of education, where there was a wealth of material as well as to others, like Volume II 'Education and Human Being,' where in recent years there had been little activity. Would the gaps inspire new work?

Back to the virtues

Returning to work on civic virtues I was aware that following recent ethnic conflicts around the world there were calls for political forgiveness. Indeed Archbishop Tutu had written a book with the title *No Future Without Forgiveness*. Should the encouragement of political forgiveness, in certain contexts at least, be part of civic education? To tackle this question, I needed to look at the notion of personal forgiveness. The more I read of the vast philosophical literature on this, the more I puzzled over the question of whether there was a need for this practice. It seemed to me to involve at least two assumptions that I found ethically questionable: that there is a hierarchical relationship between victim and offender such that offenders were beyond the pale, and also that it was appropriate for offenders to spend ethical energy on seeking forgiveness: was this not self-indulgent? The idea of a duty of forgiveness perhaps made sense if you were within a Christian

or some other religious framework, but could it be a duty for non-believers? I attempted to argue for more differentiated attitudes to wrong-doing amongst which forgiveness was an optional possibility.

Turning to political forgiveness, it seemed to me that even a most carefully argued case for its possibility and desirability (Govier, 2002) failed to show either. Whatever the case in the personal context, in the political arena the notion made far too many unwarranted assumptions and, I argued, should be abandoned. It was not, as often presented, a matter of either forgiveness or revenge. There was a whole panoply of other possibilities for reconciliation between previously warring groups. These latter should have a place in civic education.

If political forgiveness was then to drop out of the civic education agenda, perhaps virtues connected with investing should come on to it. I had always been concerned with the need for attention to economic matters in civic education and an understanding of exercises of power in its overt and covert aspects. In *Educating Investors: an exploration in virtue ethics* I argued an active investigation of investing would take in both.

'Live' philosophy

This account of my writings and people who have influenced me presents a misleading picture in one way. It suggests that texts have been my exclusive inspiration. That is far from the case. For me the most exhilarating form of philosophy is the 'live' version. It has been a huge privilege over the years to sit in on classes given by Miles Burnyeat, David Hamlyn, Ted Honderich, John Passmore and attend lectures/seminars by some of the many

philosophers who have passed through London. Given my interests, Alasdair MacIntyre, Susan Mendus, Mary Midgley, Martha Nussbaum, Bernard Williams are notable amongst these.

I talked earlier about ploughing my own furrow when there was little interest in civic education. In recent years that has changed. In my work I have been greatly heartened and encouraged by the knowledge that two other people in our field – until recently in two different continents from me – are pursuing the very philosophical aspects of civic education which seize my imagination. Eamonn Callan and Penny Enslin produce incisive, insightful, enviably interesting work. The opportunity for a 'live' exchange with them is a huge intellectual treat.

Research supervision has also always been a joy – from my first doctoral student, Robin Barrow, to my current ones. Professionally, there is nothing so exciting for me as settling down to a session of argument and counter-argument where the thesis-writer and I are seeing how far this argument can be pushed or precisely why it won't do. I am keen to see what turns on it and why it matters for a certain conception of education or some particular educational policy.

Work in progress

My current project is a philosophical investigation of the recently introduced citizenship tests in Britain for those wishing to become British citizens. My interest is in seeing what assumptions they are making about citizenship and how far those are compatible with the values and practices of a democratic society.

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