

Response To Paul Hager

C.J.B. Macmillan
Florida State University

MINIMAL EDUCATIONAL VOCABULARIES

Imagine this: you call yourself a philosopher of education, or at least one interested in problems and issues of education from a philosophical perspective; along comes some character saying, "Everything you have done or would possibly do, is *void*. There's no way to connect talk (yours or others) to the world, for all there is is text and talk."

In response, should one provide more talk? Write more text? How could you connect with such commentators? I hesitate to call them critics, for a critic at least believes that you are doing something that has a reality, a set of criteria (however flexible or tentative) by which mutually to assess what you are doing. The critic shares some common ground with those attacked or praised. Here, it is not clear that there is any shared ground.

This, I believe, is the problem that bothers Paul Hager in his paper. These commentators contend that there is no way that philosophy -- or philosophy of education -- can be anything more than gas. Hager's concern seems to be one that should be shared by all of us who think of philosophy of education as a reasonable and morally significant way to spend our professional lives, for it is an attack on the very possibility of our activities.

It is part of the nature of being a philosopher of education to feel slightly nervous about the value of what we do; I remember James E. McClellan once saying, though, that if you cannot stand the cold, you ought to stay out of the ivory tower. At one level, I am tempted to write off Hager's nervousness to professional shivering. But there are serious issues here that should be responded to.

One response, as Hager notes, is to show that to *argue* the "anti-philosophy" position requires the use of philosophical criteria of some sort, or at least minimal philosophical argument. Insofar as this is right, the commentators get hung on their own petards, blown up by their own bombs. This is a satisfying answer for us logic choppers, but it is not particularly so for those not impressed by quasi-logical paradoxes. It sounds like what is being rejected.

Another response is just to continue buzzing along like my favorite insect the bumblebee. It has been shown by those who should know such things, I am told, that it is impossible for bumblebees to fly. Yet they do. Similarly, our commentators seem to show that philosophy is impossible, yet a lot of people continue doing it after a fashion. Of course, what counts as flying in philosophy may not be so easily discerned, and what the anti-philosophy philosophers are trying to argue is that we are not really flying. The bumblebee response is just to continue to do what we do and trust that it will prove valuable or at least interesting to people concerned with educational matters.

Hager is not satisfied -- quite -- with any of these approaches. In order to make sense of the situation, he proposes a schema for categorizing philosophical approaches:

	RATIONAL	FOUNDATIONAL	VIABLE?
--	----------	--------------	---------

I	R-F	Yes	Yes	No?
II	R-NF	Yes	No	Yes
III	NR-NF	No	No	?
IV	Soc/Crit	NA	NA	Yes, but ...

The first (rational-foundationalist), he says, "currently shows no signs of a resurgence" against the severe attacks that have been made against it. The second (rational, non-foundationalist), on the other hand is "more robust" but has been under attack from the non-rational, non-foundationalists and the social critics.

For his purposes, Hager seems to believe that the rational-non-foundational approach is viable and worth defending. Including as it does, Dewey, Wittgenstein, Quine, and perhaps Gadamer and Habermas, as well as (arguably) Russell, it has had a significant effect upon educational thinking.

It is tempting to quibble with Hager about this scheme; one should have doubts about pigeon-holing philosophers and then talking about the criteria that have been used to determine the holes as if those were what needed defense rather than the philosophers themselves. It is Wittgenstein or Popper who needs defense, or Russell, not a nameless rational-nonfoundationalist. In fact, to put these three together on the defensive against others suggests the dangers of such categories, given that they disagreed so heartily with one another about some of the very things that are supposed to hold them together in this pigeonhole. I will not quibble more than that, however. For there are other hives to be built here.

Part of what Hager wants to defend is the view that Russell should not be written off as a foundationalist in matters metaphysical and epistemological. I cannot really comment on this, for I am not half the Russell scholar that Hager is; I am willing to take his word on this while at the same time wondering why it is so important. Is what Russell said right? If it can be called "foundationalist" (and rational, of course), and it is right, then that should end the argument; if the flight-engineers disagree, let them show exactly why this is not flying. If they have shown this, then perhaps Russell is not worth defending.

But I find the idea of "minimal vocabularies" intriguing and worth following out a bit. Hager, after all, suggests that this would be a possible and fruitful approach to philosophy of education, one that might stand up against our commentators. But he does not show us what this might amount to in educational contexts or precisely why it should be so valuable.

Russell devotes a chapter of *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits*¹ to developing this as "a linguistic technique which is very useful in the analysis of scientific concepts" (p. 142). It is important to recognize that Russell's context is *science* and that the question that Russell is concerned with in this book (and in his life, I suspect) is

How comes it that human beings, whose contacts with the world are brief and personal and limited, are nevertheless able to know as much as they do know? Is the belief in our knowledge partly illusory? And, if not, what must we know otherwise than through the senses? (p. v, italics in the original)

In the introduction to the book, he continues:

The central purpose of this book is to examine the relation between individual experience and the general body of scientific knowledge. It is taken for granted that scientific knowledge, in its broad outlines, is to be accepted. (p. xi)

Given Russell's emphasis upon *scientific* knowledge, we might wonder whether education would be a context in which we would find minimal vocabularies useful -- at least there would have to be an

argument that education is significantly like the sciences. Russell is quite broad in his view of science, however; his first example is geography, whose minimum vocabulary for assigning latitude and longitude at first consists of "Greenwich," "the North Pole," and "west of", but Russell shows how to get rid of the relational "west of" to make the vocabulary even smaller.

But what is the point of this, beyond being a paradigm case of the use of Occam's razor? I suppose it is this: if we can show that all of the concepts in an area of concern to us can be defined "nominally" by appeal to only one or two observational or empirical terms (in education, perhaps, "teaching" and "learning?"), then we are in a position to be clearer about everything that we do in that area. Our theories are cut to the bone, and all else can be shown to be related in specific logical ways to that minimum. This would demonstrate a philosopher's ontological commitments at their barest minimum. We would be able to see how our activities, so labeled, are related to one another in sometimes surprising ways. And we would see fairly clearly how different philosophers disagree with one another; after all, if my minimum educational vocabulary consists of "teaching" and "learning" and yours of "transactions" and "facilitating," we may have found some important things to fight over, to say nothing of different approaches to educational policy.

Question: is this mere buzzing? Or do we have here a type of response that could perhaps show the commentators something? Are we claiming that the texts we are working with are more significant than what they are used to, or are at least significant in some way as yet unfurled to their proboscises?

But the proof is in the showing; I am not convinced yet of the value of the proposed program of minimizing vocabularies as a response to those anti-philosophical commentators on philosophy. If we really want to defend our activities as philosophers, we are going to have to show that we are really flying. In the meantime, we might just buzz along doing our best to gather philosophical nectar and use it to pollinate appropriate blossoms.

1. Bertrand Russell, *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1948). (Page references in the text are to this edition.)