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Teaching, Readiness to Learn, and Cultural Context: A Response To *Teachers of My Youth*

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In his moving memoir, *Teachers of My Youth*, Israel Scheffler describes some of the impulses that gave rise to this effort. Noting his sense of indebtedness to his teachers, he says:

> To write about at least some of my teachers would, I thought, constitute a sort of repayment, albeit metaphorical. I would be describing their work and influence, and so responding to their teaching -- a benefit recognized by all teachers. I might, in addition, extend the range of their voices beyond their own circles of natural contact…In any case, I would, in attempting this memoir, be able to revisit them once again in memory and -- aside from all thought of self-integration or requital of benefit, derive renewed benefit for myself here and now, from their company, reliving their lessons but at the same time taking on the new challenge of reflecting on these lessons and attempting a mature assessment.[1]

What follows the introduction from which this quotation comes is a detailed and vivid description of Professor Scheffler's teachers and the educational experiences they made possible on his way to adulthood. Since he encountered most of the teachers he describes in Jewish educational settings, the book also offers a rich account of the character of Jewish education in America in a number of its characteristic settings.

In the course of his education, Scheffler encountered a rich variety of teachers, characterized by very different motivations, aims, methods, and interaction-styles. The cast of characters includes Dr. Kaplan, who bludgeoned his way through the students' apologetic defenses; Mr. Leidekker, whose emphasis on memorizing long texts initially frustrated, but eventually won the deep appreciation of Scheffler; Miss Brown, who ordered the overly-talkative Israel to write "I will not talk in class" five hundred times and thereby spawned a small cottage industry in the Scheffler household organized around the writing of these sentences; the utterly indifferent but pedagogically ingenious Mr. G., who seemed to stimulate more learning than many of his more committed colleagues; Professor Koyre, whose virtuoso feats of interpretation overpowered his thoroughly boring, monotonous pedagogy; and Rabbi Shufenthal, whose embodiment of logic, respect for persons, and the conviction that study is a duty and a privilege, deeply impressed Scheffler.

More remarkable than the range of teachers Scheffler experienced (chances are, our own teachers were quite as diverse) is Scheffler's uncanny ability to recall them so vividly after more than a half century. Even more remarkable, however, is that he seems to have been able to learn so many significant things from almost all of them -- even those who might have struck us as lazy, boring, or brutal and insensitive. Indeed, in some instances it was the teacher who, by most people's standards, seemed the less engaged, sensitive or skilled as a pedagogue, who was the more effective. Certainly one of the morals of this book is that we should not assume any straight-forward relationship between teacher-quality as ordinarily understood and effectiveness.

Does this call for revising our understanding of what counts as "good teaching?" Perhaps it does to some extent, and in fact Scheffler seems to intimate as much in lauding the methods of certain of his teachers whose approaches might, by some contemporary standards, be viewed as not PC (that is, pedagogically correct). There is, however, another hypothesis to be considered in trying to account for Scheffler's ability to learn so much even from teachers who might strike many of us as problematic: namely, that this was a boy whose readiness to learn -- a readiness that goes well

beyond mere openness to learning to encompass a powerful and insistent eagerness to learn -- was so strong that even powerful obstacles proved surmountable.

Assuming the latter to be the case, where does this kind of readiness to learn come from? Though native pre-dispositions may be important contributors, Scheffler's own account points us in another direction. He writes:

> The work of the teachers I have recounted here could never have been effective without the supporting religious culture of Jewish families and the pervasive presence of Jewish communities and institutions for which Jewish learning had the highest metaphysical status, intrinsic value, the character of religious worship, as well as the reliability to serve as practical guide in all spheres of life.[2]

Though Scheffler's emphasis on the cultural underpinnings of his formal Jewish education is to the point, the fact that many contemporaries of his who grew up in the same general Jewish culture reacted very negatively to the education offered them by the kinds of teachers and institutions he describes, leads one to wonder whether it was the second of the two extra-school elements he has pointed to -- namely, the family -- that proved of decisive importance in establishing Scheffler's readiness to learn. To be sure, he himself does not suggest that his family is significantly different from the families of his peers; but as one reads the book, it is hard to escape the view that Scheffler was the beneficiary of a particularly propitious familial environment suffused with a profound respect for serious learning and much more. *Teachers of My Youth* begins with a vivid and very moving characterization of his parents -- of the kinds of people they were and of their influence on him. He writes: "Seriousness about ultimates, skepticism about everything else, and a striving to see the other's point of view -- these tendencies are philosophical virtues which I associate with my mother's attitudes."[3] And of his father he writes:

> [H]is was the voice of sanity and moderation; he was the one we naturally turned to, to arbitrate differences or to give sound advice….His questions were sequential, detailed and probing, motivated not by idle curiosity or nosiness but by the wish to understand the other.[4]

Scheffler acknowledges proudly and with gratitude that such parental attitudes and dispositions had a profound impact on the development of his own character and outlook; and surely those of us who have benefited from his wisdom can see in his parents an important source, not only for his passion for learning, but also for various other admirable qualities of heart and mind that he quietly embodies.

Aside from being of biographical interest, these matters are of more general significance. There has been a tendency among some philosophers -- notably Richard Peters in a well-known essay on educational processes -- to distinguish between education and the kind of "picking things up" that goes on through immersion in the day-to-day life of a family or community of a certain sort.[5] But if we consider the case of Scheffler's own development, it is arguable that the major intellectual and moral virtues that define him as an educated person may well have arisen in the home through the kinds of informal processes which, on the Peters account, do not count as fully educational. While it may be of value to distinguish such informal processes from learnings that emerge from the deliberate efforts of teachers to nurture certain abilities or ways of thinking, it seems odd, if not wrong-headed, to conceptualize education in such a way that the processes that give rise to the hallmark characteristics of an educated person must themselves be taken as beyond the purview of education.

Scheffler's acknowledgment of the dependence of formal education on supportive cultural and familial conditions that surround the child and the school might lead one to believe that he shares the view of some educational theorists that educational institutions are essentially and inevitably mirrors of the culture at large. This, however, is by no means his view. Noting that "Jewish teachers of today cannot, by and large, rely on a religious family culture, nor on an authoritative Jewish community," Scheffler suggests, in tones reminiscent of Dewey's optimistic statement that "we may produce in

schools a projection in type of the society we should like to realize,"[6] that is, education has the potential to take or point us beyond the problematic status quo. He writes:

> It is commonly said that education is a reflection of its society. Contemporary Jewish education has the task of creating the very society of which it should be the reflection. Not only must it interpret the received texts, it needs to interpret the very conditions of its role, assess the new situation and invent unprecedented methods for meeting it.[7]

Success in this effort depends largely, he suggests, on philosophical thinking aimed at developing compelling reconceptualizations of American Jewish life which overcome the divisions in the American Jewish soul between Jewish and general outlooks.[8] Assuming the emergence of such a reconceptualization or synthesis around which education might be organized, I confess to a measure of uneasiness concerning Scheffler's position. In particular, if I have correctly interpreted him to hold that educational institutions require the active support of the families and communities they serve, how will such support be forthcoming if the school is educating towards a social ideal that goes well beyond attitudes and understandings found in the presentday family and community? I would welcome clarification of this matter.

In any event, Scheffler notes that philosophy has yet to provide the Jewish community and Jewish education with compelling visions of Jewish existence which overcome existing bifurcations. But he denies that this situation undercuts the possibility of meaningful education. Under conditions of doubt and uncertainty he suggests that the school can still play a powerful and important role by transforming itself into a place in which students feel safe voicing and exploring their uncertainties under the guidance of a philosophically sophisticated educator who both welcomes their questions and engages with them in addressing them. His suggestion that schools turn themselves into places in which some of our deepest perplexities can be explored in an honest and thoughtful way reflects characteristics of Scheffler's that permeate his interactions and his work: his belief in an uncompromising intellectual honesty and his confidence in the power of careful, candid reflection to carry us to more adequate understandings, convictions, and practices.

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1. Israel Scheffler, *Teachers of My Youth* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 6.

2. Ibid., 173.

3. Ibid., 22.

4. Ibid., 23.

5. Richard Peters, "What is an Educational Process," in *The Concept of Education*, ed. Richard Peters (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 11-12.

6. John Dewey, *Democracy And Education* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1916), 370.

7. Scheffler, *Teachers of My Youth*, 173.

8. I use the plural "reconceptualizations" to indicate Scheffler's commitment to pluralism and his belief that a variety of meaningful syntheses may be discovered.

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