

## Compulsory Schooling: Shifting the Focus on Particular Issues

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It is a privilege to respond to such an insightful essay as the one presented to us by Andrew Stables. I have, as will be evident, no disagreements with Stables's general argument, that is his critique of the all-too-easily held assumption that compulsory, formal schooling is an unquestionable social good, the more of which can be provided, the better. Nor do I question his search for criteria that might be employed to ascertain the best extent of schooling and under what conditions this might hold. The way Stables addresses this problem, however, is somewhat strange, as one finds the argument that I just mentioned both at the beginning of the essay and toward the end, but in the main, substantive part of the essay, I think Stables is doing something else, which does not directly add up to what he says he is arguing for. Starting from what he calls a fully semiotic perspective, Stables adopts the notion that all living has to be understood as an engagement with "sign[al]s," whether conscious or unconscious, and then applies this perspective to the four criteria he distinguished earlier, which are invoked to discuss compulsory schooling (he labels these criteria the moral, empowerment, economic, and equity cases). I have questions about how Stables deals with each of these.

Dealing with the "moral case," Stables argues that a fully semiotic account will move further from Plato and Aristotle than Michael Luntley does (who defined rationality in terms of "whatever we do that puts our lives in order"). There is neither a problem with following Stables's claim that "rationality is not a discrete function," nor with his point that "to respond rationally is merely to respond in a way considered rational."

But what exactly follows from the following passage?

While there remains a sense in which the child is less than the adult, or represents adult potential, the power of this explanation is significantly diluted. It is not so much that children can or do not rationalize but rather that their limited experience of the world renders their rationalizations more naïve than those of adults, in terms of both process and content; they are less adept at the form of life referred to as rationalizing.

For Stables, this characterization of the child begs a number of questions, such as whether compulsory schooling is the best preparation for life outside of school and whether the run of adults really are more rational in their decisions than children, as a result of attending school. Stables leaves this question open; he says instead that we need something else to ground a moral justification for schooling, that is, a justification different from the Aristotelian one. This point is fine, but what follows then? Without going further into this, however, he moves on to the empowerment case. Again, I would question some of his points here, such as his statement that certain kinds of socially validated knowledge and skills, though largely imparted in schools, could be imparted elsewhere. Yes, of course, but what follows from this? In other words, how should the following sorts of questions be answered: Are certain

kinds of socially validated knowledge and skills imparted elsewhere? What assurances do we have that they will be? In this context, Stables refers to the Wittgensteinian notion of “knowing how to go on” and claims that, from this perspective, compulsion is anti-educational (that is, compulsion is likely to reduce, rather than enhance, the capacity of schooling to teach). But this raises another question: Is one incapable of learning in contexts that are experienced as going against one’s will? I take it that Wittgenstein is on to something else with the notion of “knowing how to go on.”

Peter Winch addresses this issue when he refers to “what makes sense for us,” which will bring us quite naturally to the supposed superiority of adults. Wittgenstein says: “*Practice* gives the words their sense.”<sup>1</sup> The person who is part of a practice is by definition someone who knows how to go on (and does go on in a particular way) — denying the parenthetical point makes the concept of a practice empty. Now, if that is the case, relying on the concept of practice in order to claim the superiority of understanding (understood here as “knowledge of”) misses the point completely (as Stables undoubtedly would agree) — we should keep in mind that “interpretations themselves do not determine meaning”<sup>2</sup> and that “‘obeying a rule’ is a practice.”<sup>3</sup> The possible confusion here is the result of the two different concepts of understanding (that is, “knowledge of” and “knowing how to go on”). But we should not forget that a child has to become part of an already existent practice (that of the adults), and that for all kinds of reasons she may not be willing to go on in a particular way (as dictated by the practice of the adults). In a sense one could say that the child does not understand, but it would be clearer to argue, or at least to make the distinction that, though she may well understand the practice, she is not taking the particular route that this practice dictates, as for her that route does not make sense.<sup>4</sup> But what follows from there for compulsory education? Surely, first, that it is all about getting a child to understand the practice of the adults; and, second, that whether or not she is willing to follow this practice, something happens here in terms of learning. I do not understand why Stables has problems with this and thus argues that compulsion is anti-educational.

Let me develop the Wittgensteinian point I have just made with an example. The notion of being at the inside or outside of a practice is nicely captured by the contextual presuppositions of telling the following joke, once told to me by a Jew during a Bar Mitzvah, a Jewish ritual, which was performed in a synagogue. The joke goes as follows: God wanted to give a stone tablet (containing “advice” regarding how to lead one’s life in the form of ten commandments) to a group of people. God first offered the tablet to the Arabs, and they declined — you may recall the commandment prohibiting stealing. The French too expressed no interest in the tablet, given the commandments prohibiting adultery and false witness. So God turned to the Jews. One of them asked God how much the tablet would cost. When God answered, “Nothing,” the Jew said: “Well, then can I please have two of them?” The point I want to make is that you have to be a Jew to be “competent” to tell this joke and thus not reproachable for being a racist by expressing anti-Semitism or even xenophobia. It is striking to make such a joke about your own group (something the

Jews are famous for, as evidenced by Freud's writing about *der Witz*), but it is truly remarkable to tell such a joke during a religious ceremony, in a synagogue.

This brings me to the issue of entitlement. In the case of the anecdote, one has to be entitled to tell this joke, but, more generally, one has to be entitled to say what it means "to know how to go on." In the absence of fixed rules that determine what does and does not count as belonging to a practice, it is only she who is at the inside of a practice, on the basis of belonging to a particular group, who is entitled to decide about the application of a rule. This points toward a notion of being entitled as "being acknowledged," and thus to other notions, such as conversion and initiation, that make sense along these lines. Importantly, these notions are not in terms of knowledge, but rather in terms of doing, and being entitled to do so in the future. It goes without saying that at some time a practice will cease to exist, but until then, it is about seeing the point of a particular action as defined by the practice.<sup>5</sup>

What I am arguing is this: though I can go along with many of the questions Stables raises concerning the justification of compulsory schooling, the real point, which he scarcely addresses though mentions frequently, is of course about "more education," or the extent of schooling. Similar queries could be raised about what Stables calls the "economic case" (where he seems to ignore the distinction between the individual and the group) and the "equity case" (which seems to turn on his dubious conclusion that "learners never quite learn what teachers teach"). Even if one grants Stables the point that the moral justification for compulsory schooling remains unclear, that the empowerment and the economic cases are unproven, and that the equity case is unconvincing, his questions and doubts, rather than leading us to a radical questioning of compulsory schooling, really press us to put our efforts much more in the context of policy questions, taking up issues such as the length of schooling, the content of schooling, and so forth. And concerning these efforts, it is difficult, regretfully, to see how Stables's sophisticated criticisms are helpful.

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1. See Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963); and Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. Georg Henrik von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 85e (emphasis in original).

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen/Philosophical Investigations*, bilingual ed., eds. G.E.M. Anscombe, Rush Rhees, and Georg Henrik von Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), I.198.

3. *Ibid.*, I.202.

4. Compare Paul Smeyers, "What It Makes Sense to Say: Education, Philosophy, and Peter Winch on Social Science," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 40, no. 4 (2006): 463–485.

5. Compare also Winch's discussion of Lewis Carroll's *What the Tortoise Said to Achilles*, in Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 55ff.