

THE FORUM

A SECTION DEVOTED TO LEARNED OPINION

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Authority, Power and Resistance: Response to A.S. Carson

I have the sense that Dr. Carson sees me as inciting students to riot by justifying student rebellion against teacher-authority in "Epistemic Authority," JET (April, 1982). Would that philosophers of education writing in academic journals could aspire to such lofty, if somewhat anachronistic goals! However, I must confess to far more limited aims. My intention was merely to question the extent to which a widely-invoked justification for teacher authority could be used and abused in the concrete of context of schools.

Dr. Carson begins by reconstructing my argument in terms of four 'theses,' none of which I hold in the form Carson presents. At the basis of my argument was the simple logical point that teacher-authority can be epistemically grounded only if what one is an authority on is also that which one is in fact transmitting to students. Although I did make mention of situations in which teachers instruct students in subjects they themselves are not academically qualified to teach; the problem with which I was centrally concerned was curricular, not disciplinary. In particular, I was referring to the 'modification' of mainstream curricula for 'less able' students, and in general, to the substantial differences between 'school knowledge' (the curriculum) and knowledge representative of the discipline in which teachers are 'authorities,' and in whose name such curricula are used in schools. It would therefore make no sense for me to argue that relevant epistemic authority for teaching the school curriculum in, say, economics could only be had by (certified?) academic education in economics at university. Nor could it then be relevant to cite the 'dramatic improvement' in Canadian teacher preparation evidenced, for Dr. Carson, by the demand for a university degree in most provinces. Indeed, Carson's phrase 'epistemic credentials' perpetuates the confusion of degrees and certificates with knowledge relevant to teaching in schools.

The crux of the misunderstanding between us, however, is in both theses A and B, which specify conditions in the absence of which 'the exercise of authority is arbitrary and hence illegitimate'. Carson proceeds to list a number of instances of teacher-authority which he himself recognizes to be exceptional cases, but which he yet supposes sufficient to undermine my general claim. Not only is the logical form of this counter-argument fallacious therefore, but its method of argument is suspicious at best. I have never been happy with arguments based upon what 'we' would want to do or say. Invariably, I find my own intuitions at odds with the rest of 'us.' So unlike Dr. Carson, I probably *would* refuse authority to "a teacher who was very knowledgeable in a subject but knew little about teaching methods or child psychology." Nor would I seek to rest teacher-authority on personal charisma, or 'facilitation skills.' And were I to justify teacher-authority "by appeal to qualities relating to proficiency in socializing," I would certainly be concerned first and foremost about *what* children were to be socialized *into*, and not much about generic socializing skills, if such

*See Castell's article on "Epistemic Authority," April 1982 and A. Scott Carson's Reply, August 1982.

a notion even makes sense at all. The essential point which Carson has missed is that Peters' original argument, and my re-invocation of it, asserts that epistemic authority, based upon the teacher's superior knowledge, constitutes the optimal grounds for justifying authority in an educational context whose aim is the development of rationality. This by no means implies that no other grounds for teacher-authority might exist, merely that they are not optimal grounds in an educational context. Hence the appeal by Dr. Carson that we ought to ascribe authority to teachers with large families hit by economic recession, while its sentiment is admirable, does not cohere with the position I was proposing, and hence cannot function as a counter-argument to it. Indeed, Dr. Carson is right to extend the grounds of teacher-authority beyond those I discussed, insofar as he is referring to actual conditions in schools. Teachers are placed in positions of authority for reasons extrinsic to educating, such as socializing 'proficiency,' organizational and 'facilitative' skills, and institutional seniority in teacher unions and federations. I am not even arguing that this should not be so. All I am suggesting is that where (de jure) teacher-authority is justified by appeal to principles extrinsic to education (in the traditional Peters and Hirst sense), the healthy convergence between being 'in authority' and being 'an authority' is lost, and so the optimal justification for teacher authority in educational contexts must be relinquished. This then calls for a new set of justifications, and an explication of the relation between this new set of justifications and 'education.' I am further suggesting that the need for a new set of justifications for teacher-authority has received insufficient attention in philosophical work on teacher-authority, because philosophers have, I further contend, complacently accepted the (essentially idealist) justification proposed by Peters, and have ignored the fact that this justification may rest on a set of contra-factual conditions, which sociological studies of the curriculum are able to expose.

Why is this important? Firstly, because it forces us to recognize the degree to which the normative order of the school depends upon justifications which are extrinsic to the activities and goals of education, and secondly, offers us a critical perspective with which to re-appraise at least some instances of student resistance (challenges to teacher-authority) as rationally based, rather than irrationally motivated. These are the instances in which, to take up the second strand of my argument, the 'knowledge' that the teacher imparts is so far eroded with respect to the rational organizing principles which make sense of substantive curricular content that the whole is simply a sum of disconnected parts. This kind of 'knowledge' offers no cognitively satisfying closure to students, and no (non-arbitrary) way to organize the knowledge into a systematic and conceptually integrated whole. For students who get, on the other hand, the 'bits' of substantive, content-area knowledge in conjunction with the organizing principles which make sense of that content, at least the possibility for the development of autonomous rational judgement exists. Hence, for such students, it is possible to suspend judgement rationally, with the (again, rational) expectation that the teacher's authoritative knowledge will redeem an (implicit) promise to demonstrate the sense that the curricular information makes.

However, Carson says that my "untested empirical hypothesis that ("some, many, most") students become frustrated by teachers who cannot or will not teach the discipline proper" fails, since "if students were not given instruction in the discipline proper it is difficult to see how they would have grounds for rejection." "How would they know what they were missing?", he asks. But surely one does not need to know how bits of information might possibly fit together, in order to know that, in any particular case, they do not. Children have enough relevantly similar experiences of situations making sense, having a rational structure, providing closure to a problem, to detect the difference between items of information arbitrarily stuck together, and items of information intelligibly connected with one another. Consider the wealth of such experience in the completion of a mathematical set, the solution of a riddle, the resolution of a story, the end of a game, and so on.

Carson thinks I would have done better to base criticisms of epistemic authority on the selective (and perhaps ideologically selective) teaching of one school of thought within a discipline, and the omission of others having equal entitlement to be included — Marxist economic theory, for example. But, whether rightly or wrongly, my concern here is not with indoctrination or ideologizing. In my own view, even that *can* be educational in the sense of engendering the development of rationally informed judgement, under certain conditions. What I am objecting to is the absence of any connecting explanatory principles in much of what passes for curricular knowledge in general, and 'modified' curricular knowledge in particular. The problem here is not about the truth or even 'the whole truth' in what is taught, but about the cognitive impoverishment and irrationality of school knowledge (in the kinds of cases specified) and much of classroom procedure. At least Marxist economics gives food for thought, but random bits of quasi-economic information leave little scope for intellectual development. I do not understand Carson's point about competing schools of thought within a discipline implying any paradox to do with legitimately authoritative pronouncements therefore generating both rational and non-rational proposals. Carson seems to conflate intellectual processes with substantive propositional products. It is not a proposition itself which is inherently rational, but that proposition in conjunction with additional conditions of sufficient evidence, conceptual coherence, epistemic attitude of the believer to the evidence invoked in support of the proposition, and so on.

Carson seems also to believe my case would be strengthened by reference to the lack of 'objectivity' which might be shown by a teacher whose sympathies lay with a rival school of thought from that being taught. But here again I'd want to point out that at least we would then be dealing with a 'school of thought' which is infinitely preferable to fragmentary and disjointed bits of information. "We should object," he writes, "if a Freudian psychologist claims to be an authority in psychology *tout court*." But should we? Unless the claim extended to, say, animal psychology — which *would* be a mistake — it is quite expectable that a school of thought claims comprehensive-ness over its field, for this is precisely what 'schools of thought' typically do.

In a couple of places Dr. Carson asks for my 'data base.' But mine was a philosophical argument, not an empirical thesis. It was framed conditionally: *if* Keddie's (empirical) contention is borne out in fact, so that modified curricular knowledge does indeed omit precisely those aspects of a discipline which unify and make rational sense out of its substantive knowledge claims, *then* student-challenges to the authority of the teacher transmitting that curricular knowledge may be rationally justified. Acceptance of teacher-authority in such situations could not be based on reasons intrinsic to the discipline transmitted, but on reasons more relevant to institutional power-ascriptions. If this is satisfactory to others, it is not so to me. The justification for obliging student acceptance of teacher authority where the student himself cannot immediately see why such authority is justified (because of as yet insufficient knowledge of the subject taught) presupposes that the student will be granted access, at some future time, to the epistemic grounds for his (provisional) authority-ascription. Keddie's point is that this presupposition is justified for the 'A' student, but not for the 'C' student. Keddie observes that "it may be that the important thing for 'A' pupils is the belief that the knowledge is structured and the material they are asked to work with has sufficient closure to make 'finding the answer' possible." However impoverished the curriculum of the 'A' stream, it is certainly closer to teachers' definitions of the subject or discipline than the 'human interest stories' which populate the modified curriculum.

In education, *all* epistemic authority is provisional in principle. Indeed, the point of education is at least in part to engender epistemic authority in students. But education cannot be construed as leading to the development of rationality (and rational authority-ascriptions) if the 'knowledge' transmitted does not leave room for the exercise of rationality, which it does not, I contend, where it

is watered down, denuded of fundamental principles of organization, and simplified into intellectual insignificance. The data base? This is by no means documented, but an examination of curricular materials in use in the public schools over the last century provides ample evidence of an 'embarrassingly declining' similarity between disciplinary knowledge and curricular knowledge as specialists and professionals in the curriculum 'sciences' make their presence felt to an increasing degree. A second source of data, probably not even documentable, comes from spending time in 'modified' classrooms and seeing the utter senselessness of so much that passes for educational knowledge and educational activities.

If we cannot make rational sense (and thereby develop rational sense) to students using modified academic material, then we ought to look elsewhere for their curricula, or explicitly espouse a very different set of educational goals for the less academic students. But in fact I cannot see why the same goals of critical and autonomous rationality could not apply to less intellectually gifted or inclined students. I may not have the capacity or inclination to appreciate Blake, but I presumably cannot be denied access to *any* worthwhile literature on that basis. The same holds for all other schools subjects, I'd have thought. Yet Carson seems to think that my objections here are to the teacher's right to include 'practical advice' in disciplinary instruction. He thinks (and I do not) that a plausible reason for objecting might be that practical advice is not 'objective.' Fortunately for both of us, it transpires that practical advice *can* be objective. Dr. Carson reminds us that it was, after all, as an economist that J.M. Keynes gave practical advice at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. Although we're not told what his advice was, and in particular whether it was *good* advice, we can at least safely assume that it had a theoretical rationale within the discipline, a theoretical rationale accessible to the delegates in 1919. The question is whether that presumption is warranted in schools, and in particular in lower-stream classrooms. Let us not ignore the differences in the *kind of* 'practical advice' given. Practical advice for 'A' stream on "what to do when you are negotiating with a labour union" might become, for the 'C' stream, "what to do when you are in a labour union negotiating." The problem lies not with giving 'practical advice' *per se*, but with (a) the kind of advice given, and (b) its relationship with knowledge in its cognate discipline.

In conclusion, I think Dr. Carson is quite correct in pointing out that 'epistemic credentials are not always needed for legitimate authority' within institutional contexts — including schools. I am surprised, however, that as a philosopher he is so apparently unmoved by this fact. It is as though all that we, as philosophers of education, had to do was to formulate a justification for educational practices, and then stand back and contemplate unjustified practices with the complacency of the 'practical man' who recognizes that the world is not always as it should be.

Peters' argument identifying the educationally optimal grounds of teacher-authority — that such authority is always provisional, and based upon the teacher's superior knowledge of that which the student is to learn — is *important*. It remains important even if we find that in the real world of schooling the basis of teacher-authority is often extrinsic to educational aims, and internally connected with the maintenance of institutional order. It becomes even more important if it is found that in the real world of schooling some students are expected to acquiesce to non-educationally justified authority significantly more often than other students, because here we have a clear case of bias. This is not a black and white issue; rather it is a matter of emphasis. If the emphasis in some students' schooling towards institutional socialization, while other students' schooling is biased towards education, the problem must surely be seen as more than a philosopher's puzzle.