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## Theory and Practice in Philosophy and Education: A Conceptual Clarification

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### Abstract

*The paper takes off from the debate of Paul Hirst and Wilfred Carr on the position of philosophy of education, whether it could rightly be seen as a practical discipline or it is exclusively theoretical. While taking precautions on a hasty submission, the paper first examined some conceptions on the nature of theory and arrived at a definition of theory as a body of knowledge that is foundational and fulfils the function of describing, explaining and stipulating certain issues or problems. This makes theory comparable to practice, which is overt demonstration of what is known to serve a desired purpose. Practical activity was viewed from deliberate and non-deliberate*

*perspectives and the submission was made that in either way, the practical rests on theoretical foundations. The paper also examined methods of theorising and observed that all the traditional methods of knowledge acquisition hold for theorising. The paper concludes on the submission that philosophy of education in its content and method is theoretical but must form a link with practicalities to be relevant to life.*

**Keywords:** Education, theory, practice, dichotomy

### **Introduction**

An issue of clarification on theory and practice becomes impelling judging by exposition of learners to various types of theories ranging from the scientific, philosophical, psychological, sociological, anthropological and the educational among many other areas of learning. As a matter of fact, every course of study is presumably theory-laden in the sense that it has its basis in some theories and is prone to establishment of new theories. Education as a theory-laden concept permeates every discipline and one would imagine therefore that every theory would bear a taint of education. This is to say that theories in themselves are educative.

Hirst & Carr (2005) squared up to each other on the relationship of philosophy and education with of theory and practice. This was prior to the Annual Conference of the Philosophy of Education Society held at Oxford in 2005. Hirst contented that the focus of philosophy of education is to abstract and subject to rational scrutiny some aspects of the practices of education, thereby drawing out theories on education and that philosophy of education is theoretical.

Carr (2005) maintained that we need to see philosophy of education as a kind of practical philosophy that is central to the development of national educational practices. The debate seemed to be hinged on the term 'practical' as applicable and appropriate to philosophy and hence philosophy of education. This paper is not out to settle scores with Hirst Paul and Carr Wilfred on their positions as such, rather it would infer from the two positions the place and prominence of theory in both philosophy and education since both of them still see philosophy of education as theory prone. Their arguments and commentaries shall constitute the body of literature for this paper.

Hirst said precisely:

Philosophy, like psychology, sociology and history is an abstract, academic, theoretical discipline that is a hugely significant instrument in contributing to the exercise of practical reason in educational affairs and the progressive experimental development of practices that best pursue that particular form of good in our complex society... The philosophy of education then... should contribute philosophically by the use of theoretical reason as developed in academic pursuit of philosophy to the national development of the activities and discourse of educational practice by the use of practical reason.

Here, Hirst admitted the theoretical nature of philosophy with its propensity to contributing rationale to the development of the practicalities in education. Carr, in his own case, went beyond seeing philosophy merely as an abstracting academic theoretical discipline. He attributed to it a consciously performed and culturally embedded human activity that is by nature practical. He contended:

Evaluating the 'rational validity' of educational practice is thus not as Hirst believes, a complex task that is 'difficult' to achieve, but an impossible task that can never be achieved. It can never be achieved because the theoretical knowledge that is used to 'justify' educational practice is itself always an abstraction from practice and hence infected by those very features of practice... The philosophy of education cannot inform educational practice because it is itself a form of practice.

Carr maintained the possibility and existence of practical philosophy while Hirst (2005) upheld the position that philosophy is essentially theoretical and concerned with developing justifiable propositional accounts of the conceptual relations, justificatory procedures and presupposition of all forms of theoretical understanding engendered in the exercise of theoretical reason, including those of philosophy itself and all forms of practice engendered in the exercise of practical reason. But Carr (2005) maintained that to continue to cling to a conception of philosophy as a theoretical discipline does not so much draw on recent developments in philosophy as ignored them.

This point would seriously make one usher in a remark that it is not an error to ignore some recent developments if such developments would introduce confusion rather than clarity since the question remains unanswered: In what

sense is philosophy practical? Practical activities are offshoots of the intellectual ones that determine them. Philosophy as an intellectual activity is not practical; rather it is the springboard for every practical activity.

Carr however insisted on the possibility of practical philosophy, tracing its origin to Aristotle's analysis of 'phronesis' and 'praxis'. For Aristotle, 'phronesis' is a moral and intellectual virtue that is inseparable from practice and constitutive of the moral consciousness of those whose actions are rooted in a disposition to do 'the right thing at the right time and in the right way' (MacIntyre, 1981). It is thus a mode of ethical reasoning. On the other hand, 'praxis' is simply a practical exhibition of how the idea of 'the good' is being conceived and understood. The 'good' as a concept is derived from experiencing in practical terms what is good. Both Aristotle's 'phronesis' and 'praxis' harmonise to breed practical thinking on ethics. This, according to Carr, was the beginning of practical philosophy (Carr, 2006). He maintained that the embedment of 'phronesis' in 'praxis' and its inseparability from the concrete situations in which it is applied indicates that it is only sustainable by practical philosophy.

The question of what is practical in philosophy would yet remain unanswered unless one tries to perceive it from the perspective of the behaviour of thinking in which case the practical activity of thinking is what is understood as philosophy, but philosophy does not consist in the procedural ways of thinking rather it is the rational outcome of thinking on terms, ideas and concepts to build a body of knowledge. The conception of practical philosophy would rather sound ambiguous to the explorative mind that considers philosophy as identifiable with knowledge in any form an inquiry takes whether the form is by nature, practical or theoretical.

### **Nature of theory**

The term 'Theory' could be used to refer to stipulations and instructions that are meant to guide some specific activities, as exemplified in formulae and procedures for working mathematical problems. The term could also assume the embodiment of oral or written ideas on a particular issue as distinguished from its practical dimensions, as exemplified in the theory of driving or theory of automobile engineering as distinguishable from the practical dimensions. Again, it could refer simply to rule of conduct as in moral theory or social theory compared to practical behaviour. Again, the term 'Theory'

could assume the thesis that is made out of research findings. These are among possible connotations.

Kneller (1971) in his discussion of contemporary education theories ascribed two meanings to the word 'Theory'. According to him, the word can refer to a hypothesis or a set of hypotheses that have been verified by observation or experiment and it can also refer to systematic thinking or a set of coherent thoughts. Kneller's first meaning of theory corresponds to the fourth alternative meaning stated above, while his second meaning corresponds to the second alternative meaning. It is presupposed that other meanings given to the term 'Theory' would bear upon any or a combination of some of the meanings stated in the last paragraph.

O'Connor (1980) remarked that the word 'Theory' is used vaguely and ambiguously to carry several but related meanings. From the remark, one would observe that no single restricted meaning can be given to the word 'Theory'. A central point to make, however, is that theory as a concept is foundational in nature. In this sense, it provides a base for other thoughts and activities. In a more general sense therefore foundational courses such as history, psychology, sociology, anthropology and philosophy among others are perceived as essential theoretical. As a foundational thought theory fulfils certain functions namely to describe, explain and stipulate. These three functions are interconnected in the sense that one derives from an in turn leads to the other. A theory is built up from facts or events through a description of the matter or events and explanation of same in a comprehensive language. The theory then becomes a principle of exploration of further knowledge on the matter or on similar matters; this is the stipulative aspect of the theory.

For example, scientific theories develop through a description of some forces in nature as they impress on the human intellect and these are explained in terms of their meaning and possible relevance to human condition and they become stipulative in the sense that they become yardsticks for determining new experiences.

There is a question to ask, 'Do theories assume the same nature in all disciplines?' Every discipline, one would say, lends itself to theorising and hence we have theories in linguistics, philosophy, sciences, mathematics, anthropology, sociology, psychology among many others, and of course, education. A critical reflection on such theories as Einstein's theory of

relativity in physics, or theory of realism in philosophy, among others, leaves one to question whether the concept 'theory' assumes the same meaning in every discipline.

Generally, theories develop from hypotheses after they might have been tested through the use and application of dialectics, logic and statistics among other rational tools. Hypotheses are assumptions and they do no more than offer probabilities on what constitute knowledge. Epistemically, hypothesis is nothing but unjustified belief, it is simply a starting point for knowledge inquiry. Hypotheses conclude as theories after they have been tested, verified, and accepted as principles and rules of procedure to analyse, predict or explain the nature or behaviour of a specific phenomenon.

Sax (1968) described theory as a unified system of principles, definitions, postulates and observations organised in such a way as to most explain the interrelationship between the variables. What is pertinent here is that a theory can harmonise some of the features in any discipline. By way of summation therefore a theory can assume a principle, policy, belief, speculation, explanation and opinion among other variables. The variables that describe theory make it foundational to laws and other ideas. As to the question raised on unification of nature of theory in every discipline one would uphold that theories remain foundational to every discipline irrespective of their peculiarities.

### **Theory-practice dichotomy**

Whatever position one may take regarding the understanding of theory, the concept is explainable in the context of an in relation to the practical. A disparity between theory and practice is traceable to Dewey's attribution of the problem to Greek culture of division of experience into temporal and extra-temporal categories. Dewey (1916) conceived the Greek notion of 'idea' as a spirited view of the world. This inquires into a difference between ideating on experience and practically acquiring one. He saw this distinction as creating two genetic forms of understanding on the concepts 'theory' and 'practice'. Dewey's position was to establish the two as inherently connected. This implies that one is conceivable and explainable in the context of the other. Dewey however seemed to have carried too far the Greek distinction between idea and practice. The distinction may not be as sharp as he portrayed it. The theory-practice distinction may be explainable in the analogy of a building, which for convenience may be labeled 'Experience'

with theory constituting the foundation and practice represented by the walls and the roof.

The foundation of the building is distinguishable from the rest of the structure but not separable from it. In the same way, the theory is distinguishable as a foundation for practice but not separable from it. It is conceptionally distinguishable but essentially part of it. Since a theory is ingrained in a practice, one may therefore ask in what way whether every practice requires a foundation theory, like in the case of human activities that are practical and integral to living. Human activities can be classified into: 'deliberate' and non-deliberate' acts. This may not be taken as an established classification but simply a description of two perspectives to examining and understanding them. Deliberate acts are sourced from human volition while non-deliberate acts are output of circumstances or situations. A practice activity, whether deliberate or non-deliberate, is explainable to some underlying working principle. This inevitably becomes the theory for the activity.

For example, natural human activities like walking and talking may be theorised by the process of carrying them out which is simply a description of the movement of the legs, one head of the other to move the entire body from one place to another. This is one sense of theorising on walking. Similarly talking may be theorised as the process of the movement of the lips and tongue to gush out sounds that compose into a language. These natural activities can be further theorised from various perspectives to knowledge. To imagine whether there can be a practical activity that lacks a theoretical base, would be in the negative since every activity is founded on a working principle. Thinking in essence yields theorising while doing entails practicalising. In as much as ability to do is dependent on and controlled by ability to think, then it is inconceivable that there is a practice without a theory at its base.

The common views of Somekh (2003) and perhaps of others is the dilemma of making a distinction between theory and practice, coupled with the danger involved in rendering a wrong, or at least, an inappropriate distinction. One point is however clear, it is that theory and practice are interrelated cognitive experiences that are springboards for knowledge acquisition and utilisation is a pre-occupation of philosophy.

In a more scientific sense a theory is expected to establish clarity of thought from which new practices can develop. This invariably becomes a matter for new knowledge. Scientific laws often times spring up as theories on nature and natural occurrences since they are conclusions derived from systematic findings.

Again, theories that may be ascribed as scientific are not limited to verified propositions in the discipline of the sciences. Any theory in any discipline can be so described when adjudged as knowledge prone. The scientific nature of theory therefore is the propensity to offer precision of thought and certainty on a particular subject matter.

In his understanding of Aristotle's distinction between theory and practice in the topics, Blondel (2000) explained an action as understandable in three terms, which are production, theory and practice. Every action supposedly stems from theory, which is the contemplation in a strong and technical sense on ways to carry out the action, then follows the practice which is the demonstration of the premeditated way, and lastly production, which is the expressive output of the demonstration. This understanding, even though, merely descriptive but not explanatory enough of the tripartite nature of action, clearly establishes theory as a foundation for practice and consequently for production.

Every proposition carries the propensity for knowledge, but does not become knowledge until it is certified in truth. Since it has been argued that a theory is a body of knowledge that constitutes a foundation for further knowledge and experience, an unverified proposition may therefore not be a theory since it has not been established as knowledge. On a similar note, it is not every knowledge that becomes a theory. What makes a body of knowledge theoretical is its propensity to offering new knowledge, in which case it becomes a working principle from which to make out new knowledge.

For one to be capable of establishing a theory, one needs to possess aptitude for research to discover some truths of world realities. These truths remain as facts at the first instance, then in addition to this one needs to be able to harmonise these facts into a body of knowledge to serve as foundation for further knowledge. This is possible through the ability to make logical connections of these facts to emerge with propositions that would prove as knowledge. Some facts remain merely at the level of identification of relativities. Such facts of identity as one may call them, are exemplified in



such statements as, 'A blind person is the one who cannot see', 'A bachelor is an unmarried man', and 'There are seven days in a week', among others. Statements of this nature say nothing more than describe some phenomena to their identities. There is nothing theoretical about them.

But if one considers such statement as, 'The multiple of two and three is six', 'Whatever goes up must come down', and 'A child is born from the womb of a woman' among others, one would uphold that those statements are theoretical in the sense that they are expressive of principles of operation or occurrence that would yield the same experience under repeatable similar conditions. Theories in the arts, the sciences and various disciplines, as a matter of fact, assume this nature.

Apart from propositions that are scientifically validated and justified as theories, proverbs and wise sayings, could serve a theoretical purpose. This is because many of such statements express realities that would remain the same when subjected to the same conditions. Ability to theorise therefore would depend to a great extent on competence in recognising facts, and aptitude in the use of language and logic to organise the facts into principles of regular occurrence. Theories are epistemic in nature, hence all the sources of knowledge contribute to building of them. These include sensation, reason, intuition, introspection and memory among others. Ideas that develop through these means do not become theories until they are veridically ascertained.

O'Connor (1980) again ascribed to educational theory three components namely the metaphysical, value judgment and the empirical components. The metaphysical component is observable in statements that are acceptable in respect of their meaning and logical structure. They are statements that uphold phenomena as they are. The value judgment component of theories consists in statements that are upheld because of the values they are set to preserve. What is crucial to such statements is their justification as values. The empirical component of theories however, consists in statements that are capable of being supported by evidence of the sense.

Actually, what O'Connor referred to as component here may be better understood as dimensions to theorising since each of them needs not feature in every theory and a theory would suffice as one when it assumes any or a combination of these features. In respect of aptitude for theorising, it would

be knowledgeable of a theorist to show competence in making out knowledge from the perspectives of these theory dimensions.

### **Method of theorising**

Ordinarily, it may sound appealing to believe that theory is what anybody can postulate and maintain, yet it may not be proper to see it as a thing one can arbitrarily do. There are some steps to take in doing it even though the steps may not be stereotyped.

A first consideration of the methods of theorising would examine ways by which statements of belief are postulated and validated as knowledge. The traditional ways of knowledge acquisition hold for theory making. These include the empirical way by which knowledge is obtained through sensation and the rational way which makes use of reason to acquire knowledge. Other traditional ways include intuition by which knowledge is gained through insight and revelation which sources knowledge from inspiration and contemplation. These are among other possible categories.

Theory making may not exclusively depend on a single way of knowing, rather it would be better seen as a composite of two or more ways. For example, the senses do no more than identify certain things in nature, it is through the complementary activity of reason that things identified have meaning and relationships are established in theory. Equally, the experience of intuition or revelation which is closely allied to sensation is introspective and requires the use of reason to make meanings and establish relationships into a theory. In a more scientific way, the methods of knowledge acquisition agglomerate as identification, verification, justification and evaluation of contents of the mind. Every theory springs up from the mind and the mind needs to go through these steps to emerge with one. The steps shall be analysed briefly.

At the onset of a person's intellectual experience, the mind identifies an issue, object or a problem. Through the process of reasoning, it seeks to clarify the matter by giving it meaning through an interpretation it gives to it, verifies the authenticity of the interpretation and adduces to it certain values of speculated solutions in the case of a problem. The next thing is for the mind to justify the speculated values or solutions to ascertain their relevance to human situation.

Finally, the mind evaluates the worthiness of the values in terms of consistency through times. The objects of the mind's experience, the values ascribed to them as well as the evaluations made on them are ideational and on them theories develop, hence they are stated as propositions which are subject to change since ideas and experiences change with time. Theories are value-laden propositions that may be subject to change.

Ideas, as Oladipo (2002) put it, 'Are not formed or instituted as ends in themselves rather they are formed or instituted with a view to providing an orientation in life or aspects of it.' Ideas are therefore stated first as propositions to provide some orientations on the issues at stake. Thereafter, the propositions are justified and evaluated as theories for universal application in similar situations. Again, such theories could be revisited from time to time to amend or even develop new set of theories from them. It much depends on ability to engage in critical thinking on existing theories to bring about new ones.

### **Conclusion**

This paper attempts to critically examine the intellectual views on the discourse of their and the position of philosophy on the matter, the two conflicting positions of Carr and Hirst, one of which ascribes practicality to philosophy as a deviation from the old view of seeing philosophy as exclusively theoretical. A possible median position is that philosophy in its content and method is theoretical while it serves practical purposes to be relevant to life. In as much as a theory needs to be practicable to be relevant, philosophy must form a link with some practicalities to be worthwhile, hence philosophy of education, as it is the case with philosophy of science, religion or any other discipline becomes relevant to the discipline in lieu of its predetermined practical purposes.

Ordinarily, the engagement of reason on abstract issues and terms would be a futile exercise if there is no predetermined goal it serves. The goals of philosophy as manifest in various disciplines provide the practical dimensions to it. Even in the case where philosophy is studied for its own sake, it has its presumed practical goal as may manifest in a person's behavioural response to issues and problems.

Education too is a discipline that carries both theoretical and practical dimensions. Philosophy of education thus provides theoretical base for practicalities in education. Actually, it is inconceivable to talk of education

theory that is devoid of philosophy. It is comparable to a house without a foundation. Theories in education have their philosophical components, irrespective of the perspectives to studying it. The historical, psychological, sociological and economical perspectives to theorising on education, among others, involve the exercise of philosophy in as much as it rationally examines issues and logically build up systems of thought for educational operations. Every conclusion drawn from a philosophical discourse on education inevitably becomes a theory in education since it would serve as a foundation for educational practices and further thought development on education.

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