

A Philosophical Critique of *Teachers without Goals, Students without Purposes*

When one considers a theory or belief system, big or small, one can critique it from several angles. Being a philosopher by training, I tend to look fundamentally at the logical consistency of the argument postulated first, as most cases contain some flaw at this basic level, which renders them at least temporarily insufficient. There are two necessary and sufficient components of any true theory, as true theories are generally defined in our philosophical circles: validity and soundness. Validity concerns the structure of the argument. Soundness refers to its content. An argument is valid to the extent that its structure makes sense and that this structure, transferred to any other argument, would make sense. An argument is sound to the extent that, once its validity is established, its propositions are found to be true, at least insofar as is known by the evaluator. While it is readily visible that there are potential problems with this system, especially given Perkinson's own views on truth, it is one set of tests that can generally determine whether a given theory merits further investigation.

Perkinson makes some interesting claims about logic as is popularly accepted in our culture. Classical philosophers submit that knowledge consists of a justified, true belief. This assumes first that there can be knowledge at least in theory, for the word would not need definition if it were a logical impossibility; it assumes the possibility, at least in theory, of justification of beliefs; it assumes the possibility, at least in theory, of verification of beliefs. This is one of the most hotly contested theories in philosophy, and Perkinson falls on the side against its completeness. Perkinson submits that "justification is impossible" (49), because "attempts to justify knowledge can lead to an infinite regress. It is logically impossible to justify knowledge" (50). He argues against the soundness as well as the validity of

assuming that such justification is possible. I would submit that the validity of a claim can be logically justified, but that its soundness cannot always.

Perkinson makes some assumptions which are central to his position on a critical approach to education: that all humans have an "aversion to disorder" (12-13), that children can only improve and make progress in a positive direction is inevitable under the critical approach ["a young child's understandings are always inadequate, always mistaken" (30)], that no one of us knows what a good society is" (62) or have any certain knowledge at all, and that "no one wants schools to indoctrinate students, to propagandize them, to impose knowledge on them" (76). My response to all of these is that none of them are analytically true, and that Perkinson provides no proofs in favor of any of them. While I appreciate the logical tightness of his arguments based on these assumptions, never once does he set these out as what they are: blind assumptions about the nature of humanity and the world upon which he builds the rest of his arguments.

Perkinson's knowledge and use of logic is unusual for someone writing in a field outside of express philosophical discourse. He appreciates the importance of teachers understanding logic and philosophical inquiry (32). He is careful not to fall into any of the usual traps of logic (22, 24, 57, 62), and extols the virtues of simple rules of thumb in logical argument (23).

Perkinson makes good use of the fields of epistemology and of the philosophy of language. He redefines objectivity (11) to fit it smoothly into his new order. He borders on skepticism with his belief that none of us can ever know anything with certainty (25), while avoiding the trap of relativism (53). He invokes Wittgenstein and pragmatic philosophy (51, 54, 53) and their importance in understanding our limitations due to our innate dependence upon language for thought and concept formation and communication. Popper's evolutionary epistemology provides an effective defense against the pitfalls of epistemological skepticism by acknowledging the existence of absolute truth while denying the possibility that humans can ever attain it (56, 57-58).

Finally, Perkinson calls upon the methods of true scientific inquiry, of trial-and-error testing, of looking for the refutation of our beliefs rather than the support of them, to provide the soundest education (20, 31-32, 45, 46, 58). These are ways, as he points out, of avoiding affirmation of the consequent, a common logical hazard, that are seldom found being taught in schools at any level short of doctoral training in scientific research, if at all.

The real beauty of Perkinson's program is its perfect symbiosis with the democratic ideals upon which the political systems of our government were founded. What could be less autocratic and more democratic than the critical approach (18)? What could provide greater individual freedom of thought to students than this approach

(62)? What could remove political agendas from the schools more completely than the critical approach (54)? What could foster more independent thinking than this method (41)? And best of all, the institutions for putting this theory into action are already in place--no revolution necessary (65, 66).

Perkinson effectively answered every criticism I could think of at some point in his writing, with the exception of his not presenting his assumptions as assumptions. Even the potentially fatal flaw on which I held out until the end, that he was using the very system of certitude that he criticized in order to present his argument, was knocked down at the last by his inclusion of criticisms and rebuttals--a perfect example of his system in action.