

CHAPTER 3

PHILOSOPHISING AS AND IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

That is all that 'philosophy', in the sense in which I am using the word, requires: it is a practice, a discipline of thought, devoted to getting clear about words and concepts and the logical implications that they carry. (Wilson 1994: 4 his underlining)

PHILOSOPHY AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

I began by distinguishing three sets of relationships between philosophy and educational research:

- *philosophising about educational research*, ie examining in particular its epistemological and ethical underpinnings;
- *philosophy as a form of educational research* in its own right paralleling historical, sociological and other academic traditions which provide a resource for educational enquiry, for example, philosophising about educational policy and practice;
- *philosophising in educational research* ie philosophy's role in and in relation to more traditional empirical research. For Wilson this has been primarily a role in 'getting clear about words and concepts and the logical implications that they carry' (Wilson 1994: 4), but I shall argue for something more substantive, and these considerations will lead me into an examination of the status of the distinction which is conventionally drawn between the empirical/scientific *a posteriori* and the necessary/philosophical *a priori*.

In this chapter I shall explore the second and third of these relationships.

PHILOSOPHISING AS RESEARCH

There is clearly a political problem here and, I suggest, a more interesting philosophical problem about the nature of philosophy. The political problem, though not perhaps an overwhelming one, is that in many universities, the paradigm of research which is best understood and most powerful is the scientific paradigm with all its socio-cultural baggage of expensive equipment, large scale funding, international teams and half a page of collaborating authors in *Nature* as well as its more intrinsic positivistic features of data gathering, hypothesis testing and replicability. It is easy for research to become defined in terms of this paradigm in a

way which makes the work of social scientists look like a poor imitation of 'proper' science and that of the arts faculties including philosophy something which may well be dignified and respected as 'scholarship', but which is a distant remove from research *per se*.

This problem has been compounded in the UK (and perhaps elsewhere) by the requirement for the audit of research productivity and the link which is made between research productivity and university finance (see chapter nine). This puts the onus on academics to demonstrate that they are gainfully employed in *research* and to engage in their discipline in ways which generate auditable research products. This is one reason why philosophers of education have become alarmed when their discipline has appeared to be forgotten or rejected in the discourse of educational research. But they have problems too about incorporation in the culture of research audit. Martin McQuillan, head in fact of a university School of Fine Art and Cultural Studies, has put the problem rather nicely:

Thinking is not auditable. Thinking, the business of university, should be inimical to categorisation, measurement and commodification. Thought should disrupt and transform, opening up new directions in knowledge and experience. How could one audit the work of Socrates, Michelangelo, Blake, Kant or Heidegger? The moment that the articulation of thought is reclassified as 'research' (a 'product' that is auditable) then thought itself is compromised by the conditions under which it can emerge (McQuillan 2002: 15).

There are two or three alternative moves for philosophers here, which are interesting not just as defensive political moves in a particular academic economy, but for what they reveal about the characteristics of different kinds of philosophical activity:

- to accept that the term 'research' is appropriately attached to the scientific or (in the case of social sciences quasi scientific) paradigm indicated here and to find a different descriptor for the activities of philosophers;
- to advance a somewhat more inclusive but still restrictive definition of research which would include the evidentially based work characteristic of historical and literary scholarship and biography and hence a good deal of philosophical writing rooted in the history of ideas or, for example, the sort of philosophical biography that Monk produced of Wittgenstein (Monk 1990). This would, however, leave out most of more strictly philosophical writing;
- to advance an even wider definition of research which would encompass at least some philosophising. Stenhouse defined research as 'systematic and sustained enquiry made public' (Stenhouse 1980)⁶. Now most philosophical work could probably meet the first two criteria – ie it is

⁶ Peters and White employed a very similar account of the use of the term research in academic communities to refer to 'systematic and sustained enquiry carried out by people well versed in some form of thinking in order to answer some specific type of question' (Peters and White 1969: 2). They contrast this with a broader definition employed by Mace who in his *Psychology of Study* maintained that 'research is, after all, just "search", looking for answers to questions and for solutions to problems'. (Mace 1963)

systematic (in the sense of eg being rule governed) and sustained – and the fourth criterion of being ‘made public’ through eg presentation at a seminar or conference. It is interesting however to consider how far philosophical work represents an ‘enquiry’ – a condition which I think is properly attached to the nature of research.

The notion of enquiry suggests some initial puzzlement or curiosity, a question which the individual seeks to clarify and answer. Is this something we should reasonably expect to be a characteristic of philosophical research? And if so, would all or only some philosophising qualify?

I realise as I pose this question, that it is a difficult one to answer, because it supposes that one may know something at least about how a philosopher went about his or her work. In reports on scientific and social scientific enquiry we conventionally expect to find an account of and defence of the methodology employed. We know, or at least have a report of, the approach taken, the research questions which were posed and in some conventions of, for example, ethnographic research the relationship of the researcher to the research project. Some philosophical writing describes or represents a particular methodology – Socratic questioning, Cartesian doubting or linguistic analysis, for example – but a great deal more leaves it implicit or even invisible. It is certainly not a standard requirement of philosophical writing (in contrast with social science) that the author explains and defends his or her methodology. Indeed I suspect that many philosophical journal editors would probably wield a thick pen deleting such matter if an author dared to include it. Traditionally, scientific writing renders the researcher artificially invisible. Philosophical writing tends to take this a stage further and render even the research process invisible. One curious consequence is that of course we have relatively little public evidence of the way in which philosophers go about their business⁷: we have rather the fruits of that business.

Now the actual products of philosophical work provide a very mixed picture of the extent to which the producer was indeed engaged in an enquiry. Commonly they take the form either of a critical attack on a previous writer or an attempt to advance and defend a point of view held by the author or some combination of the two. Occasionally the author will place the question or point of curiosity in the centre, but this is by no means a requirement or expectation of philosophical writing, which in some of its more declamatory forms can come across as the product not of a humble enquirer after truth (or whatever passes as the alternative in a post-modern age) but of a somewhat arrogant holder of the truth, a knower rather than a seeker after knowledge. It is interesting, for example, to contrast the very assertive character of Wittgenstein’s philosophical writing with the agonising picture of the process of its construction which can be gleaned from biographical accounts. For post-modern scholars any text is in any case a piece of polemic, so that for Foucault, for example, the goal is ‘to incite us to listen to a different claim rather than to accept the findings of an argument... to excite in the reader the experience of discord between the social

⁷ It was partly this observation which prompted me to record and write my own account of the process of writing a philosophical paper – included here in chapter thirteen.



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