

A CRITICAL REVIEW OF *REASON AND TEACHING*

Reason and Teaching (Bobbs-Merrill, N. Y., 1973) is a collection of sixteen papers and talks, fifteen on education and one on Ryle's epistemology, written or delivered by Israel Scheffler in the years 1954-1971. Although many of these papers and talks are addressed to topical or more special issues in formal education, e.g., the "new activism," "University scholarship and the education of teachers," etc., they are all intended in one way or another both to *explicate* and *embody* something Scheffler calls a "philosophy of education" or, sometimes, an "analytic philosophy of education" but which might better be called a "conception of formal education." First: because Scheffler is almost everywhere in *Reason and Teaching* dealing with *formal education* and not *education* (one might even argue with some show of plausibility that formal education is necessarily mis-education). Second: because as used in "analytic philosophy" itself the term "philosophy" denotes that sort of inquiry which accepts as the basis of its arguments and conclusions no set of commitments without prior certification except those to cogent argumentation.

In this sense of the term "philosophy" one does not find a philosophy of formal education either explicated or embodied in *Reason and Teaching*. What one finds instead is something much more akin to what one finds in theology: a body of critically unquestioned dogmas or commitments, from which various corollaries, comparisons, illustrations, and arguments are somewhat loosely derived. These dogmas include: as "good guys," *formal education*, *rationality*, *democracy*, *tradition* (but nicely emasculated to conform to liberal-establishment standards of modesty), and the liberal-establishment shibboleths of the 50's and 60's in general (e.g., *activism* on behalf of "civil" and "student" rights, but hardly, one imagines, *activism* on behalf of segregation, "majority" rights, etc., etc.); as "baddies," *elites* (mere technicians, however, seem to rate as untouchables in the Schefflerian scheme of things), *authoritarian societies* that insist on the *unquestioning acceptance of dogmas* (see p. 138), etc., etc.

Superficially, there may seem to be nothing really inconsistent in these stands and postures of Scheffler's, though certainly nothing very profound in them either. To be sure: he entertains a body of unquestioned dogmas himself while censoring authoritarian societies for

insisting that doctrines not be questioned. This may be on the way to an inconsistency; it has not, however, arrived at one. But while it is surely open to a person to entertain unquestioned commitments, and to do so while censoring those who would insist on one's doing so, it is not open to Scheffler to do so. And yet, as we shall see later, he is theoretically compelled to. How does he become bound up in such a Gordian tangle? Ironically, his difficulties all stem from one brief piece of philosophizing that he engages in; the only piece of genuine philosophizing that he engages in, so far as I can make out, in *Reason and Teaching*. It is not a very happy or impressive piece of philosophizing. I honor it with the label "philosophizing" only because Scheffler here (for once!) appears to be endeavoring to answer a philosophical question by *thinking* on it (we might say) instead of *tinkering* on it. The philosophical question that Scheffler seems to contemplate *as such* is the question, "What is rationality?" The amount of hard thought that he expends on this question lying at the very center of his educational proposals is instructive.

First he notices that the theory that rationality "belongs to some special faculty of the mind called *Reason*" may be "unappealing," giving as it does to the term an "old-fashioned ring" (p. 62) and so, with appropriate disdain and curtness he dismisses that answer. He next dismisses the identification of rationality "with some restricted set of rules for making logical deductions" (one wonders who Scheffler has in mind. Has any philosopher ever so defined "rationality"? One is tempted to think that here, as almost everywhere, Scheffler is simply tinkering with ideas). He then faces straight up to the question and, evidently by some kind of immediate intuition that needs no testing of its adequacy (for none is vouchsafed), he concludes that "Rationality . . . is a matter of *reasons*" (p. 62).

What does Scheffler mean by "Rationality is a matter of *reasons*?" One cannot be exactly sure. On the assumption, however, that in his immediately following statements he is describing education insofar as it embodies rationality one should have to say that what he means is this: rationality is (in the sense of "equals") seeking (and giving) reasons or justifications. Thus, he goes on to say that to take rationality as a fundamental educational idea "is to make as pervasive as possible the free and critical quest for reasons, in all realms of study" and in the same connection he refers to the "student's right to ask for reasons" (*loc. cit.*).

Above the portals of philosophy there ought to be inscribed, not perhaps "Abandon hope all ye who enter here," but certainly, "Abandon hope all ye who are not philosophically careful who enter here."

Or another inscription might well be: "All that glitters is not gold." In the market place of contemporary cant the definition of rationality as the seeking of reasons is almost sure to prove—to use Scheffler's up-to-date terminology—"appealing." Inquiring minds—inquiring students—inquiring citizens—is this not what life, education, and a democratic society are really all about? So, with the help and indoctrination of educational lay-preachers like Scheffler, obedient and susceptible souls have been led to believe.

Now in a loose and careless manner of understanding these things, one can hardly object to inquiring minds, inquiring students, and inquiring citizens. Since the term "rational," like the terms "good," "polite," "beautiful," is evaluatively positive, one cannot deny, either, that teachers, students, education, political systems, persons in general ought to be rational. A definition, however, does not leave any leeway to "sometimes" or "most times but not always" or "depending." *Rationality* having been defined as seeking (and giving) reasons, seeking (and giving) reasons becomes the necessary and sufficient condition of being rational. If and only if a person seeks reasons is he rational; if and only if an institution calls for or engenders seeking reasons is it rational.

Grafted upon formal education Scheffler's definition of rationality can therefore be expected to dictate that schooling be primarily schooling in asking for and giving reasons or justifications; and not surprisingly this turns out to be the basic educational contention of *Reason and Teaching*. To be sure, Scheffler has some good words for education's transmitting the "science, art, history, poetry, morality, religion, languages and philosophy" of the past (p. 60) but when all the dust has settled this transmission of past lore is seen to serve as a means to an end and not an end in itself: after all, if this past lore were not transmitted, about *what* would the student ask his justifying questions? In any case, adhering to his definition of rationality and the evaluative tautology that formal education, conceived as an intrinsic good, ought to be rational, Scheffler makes it abundantly clear that in his system it is not the transmission of past lore that is education's basic task but the engendering of critical inquiry, i.e., seeking reasons. But since the same definition of rationality leaves no leeway to "sometimes seeking a reason and sometimes not," the critical inquiry conducted by formal education necessarily turns out to address itself not only to "questions concerning the foundations" (p. 61) of this or that particular subject but to the "critical and open evaluation of rules and principles in any area of Life" (p. 62). If one keeps on asking for reasons long enough one comes to the foundations of things; in short, philosophy or metaphy-

sics. Not inconsistently, therefore, and certainly not reluctantly, Scheffler concludes that the primary aim of the teacher must be to "form" the student into a person who engages himself "in the critical dialogues that relate to every area of civilization: to science and art, morality and philosophy, history and government" (*loc. cit.*).

This grandiose picture and scheme of education again "glitters" like gold. But now let us subject it to a harder look. We envisage a student well along in his educational development. Perhaps he is forty or forty five. He has attained enough mastery of the fields of history and government to carry on critical dialogues in them with some air of authority but ten years ago he realized that in order to satisfy Scheffler's definition of rationality all that he had to do was seek (and maybe give) reasons; nothing was said or could be said about the competence of the reasons, in that to judge one reason better than another would call upon a meaning of "rational" not contained in the definition. Thus he asks for and gives reasons concerning the foundations—indeed, the very existence—of science, art, morality, philosophy, history and government, even though still largely unacquainted with the first four fields. Adept at seeking reasons that he is, thanks to forty years of intensive formal education, he exclaims, "Why do science? Reason: blah-blah. Why be good? Reason: blah-blah. Why admire paintings? Reason: blah-blah," and so on and so on. Let us suppose that the reasons he adduces are not merely banal or flippant, though nothing in Scheffler's definition says that they need not be. Our student is really working hard on his "reasons." He even (like Wittgenstein) pounds and clutches his forehead, groans and agonizes. But not only he. If Scheffler's ideal of formal education and his definition of rationality have been fully realized and implemented, everyone else, except the smallest infants, the imbecilic, and the mad is going through the same motions and commotions, and not just an hour a day, but throughout his waking hours (we assume that persons will not be required to be rational while asleep).

Some obvious questions arise. For example: "How do the members of this Schefflerian Utopia manage to survive?" Are they fed by Hempel's ravens? But another one that arises is: "And why engage in this asking everywhere for reasons?" And here the reasonable person will surely want to say, "There seems to be no reason at all for doing so. It's all as meaningless as lacerating oneself with whips: a painful nonsense that profits no one." Thus, the reasonable person will want to adjudge formal education—at least when conceived in Schefflerian terms—as being nothing more than a common nuisance, a fraud, and an absurdity. And so, indeed, it would be.

But this is not the end of the matter. I want now to revert to my previous contention that Scheffler's definition of rationality precludes him from entertaining unchallenged or unjustified doctrines or commitments. On the very face of it it does this. The consequences of its doing so are importantly instructive when traced to their Schefflerian terminations.

In order to be rational a person (by Scheffler's definition) must seek (and give) reasons or justifications. It is clear, however, that one cannot continue indefinitely to ask for the justifications of justifications. Scheffler sees this break-down in his definition. What does he do? Without telling us in so many words, he abandons ship. He says that to be rational one must ask for justifications of generally accepted views one time around (as it were). Current educational programs in this country, for instance, appeal (Scheffler is addressing the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1957) to the accepted code of "the American way" (p. 121). To be rational, we need to justify this code by an appeal to "rules." But these rules cannot themselves be justified by an appeal to further rules. There must be "controls of rule-sets by initial commitments to moves themselves. The rules we appeal to in justifying social moves are rules that we hope are themselves adequate codifications of our initial commitments" (*loc. cit.*: like the descriptions of word-uses set forth by analytic philosophers).

What all this fancy footwork comes to is that our starting points in justification are, by Scheffler's own admission, doctrines or commitments for which we do not and presumably cannot give reasons or justifications. They are accepted in the same way that the "authoritarian" accepts his unquestioned doctrines. But his definition of rationality remains in force. It has nowhere been amended or annulled. Thus, in effect, Scheffler maintains—in fact, necessarily maintains—that rationality rests upon irrationality or non-rationality. We are all at bottom non-rational and all controversy is at bottom non-rational.

But this being so, then all that the elaborate giving of reasons which Schefflerian formal education is to foster at the infinite blood, sweat, and tears of everyone amounts to no more than meretricious rationalization, mere window-dressing and sophistry. And this, it must be confessed, is pretty much the appearance that *Reason and Teaching* itself presents throughout: of a sort of haberdashery, in which what Scheffler does is simply to dress up in philosophical remnants and erudite hand-me-downs his personal prejudices. Because the latter do not conform to conventional morality in certain respects or American educational tradition, for instance, conventional morality or American educational tradition need to be subjected to justifying question; that

is, held up to Scheffler's prejudices or commitments codified as "rules". When they are they will, of course, be found lacking, i.e., in need of alteration, i.e., in need of reshaping according to Scheffler's prejudices. Presumably, were Scheffler's initial commitments to conventional morality or American educational tradition the line for not asking for reasons would be drawn at that place and not elsewhere. What, then, is *Reason and Teaching* but a hollow though pretentious sham? And yet this must be said on its behalf: its being so is philosophically motivated. One cannot accept Scheffler's definition of rationality without ending up operating the same sort of haberdashery shop that Scheffler operates.

Had Scheffler at all examined his definition of rationality he would have had to see that it was seriously defective. One is sometimes being rational in asking for or giving reasons; but in some contexts and areas asking for or giving reasons is recognizably irrational. A person, for instance, who is used to driving in Colorado and who demands reasons why he or others should drive on the right side of the road is being irrational. If Aristotle is right, and clearly he is, a person who demands reasons for wanting to be happy is being irrational. But if asking for reasons can be irrational, rationality cannot essentially be a "matter of reasons."

What is the essence of rationality? This is not the place to answer the question. We should opine, however, that a right definition will not entail, as Scheffler's does, the consequence that the ultimate basis of thought and action has to be the irrational or non-rational. We should also venture the opinion or guess that the right definition will not impose upon all education, both formal and non-formal, as Scheffler's does, the task of converting itself either into a species of philosophy or (more likely) into what the jacket of *Reason and Teaching* calls "metaphilosophy" and what we should like to call, if there were such a verb, "philosophical haberdashering."

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