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Post-structuralism, Realism and the Question of Knowledge in Educational Sociology: a Derridian critique of social realism in education

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ABSTRACT This article engages with a current debate in the sociology of educational knowledge which seeks to dispel the alleged relativism of social constructivist influences in education. While supporting the claim that the sociology of education needs to bring knowledge 'back in' to its understanding of school processes and policies, the author contends the necessary relativism that proponents of such efforts often attribute to some of the philosophies that have inspired constructivism. To support this, the article explores the compatibility of some of the realist tenets of post-empiricist philosophy with those of post-structuralism, especially as seen in the work of Jacques Derrida. It is suggested that if the latter's thought does not necessarily shun the connection between knowledge and reality, its contributions towards an ethical understanding of knowledge can be positively incorporated in current debates about the role of knowledge in education.

Introduction

In recent years, Michael Young and colleagues have developed a formidable critique of various forms of relativism in education and the social sciences that they associate with constructivism and post-structuralism, as well as with neo-utilitarian conceptions of knowledge and the curriculum which presuppose relativist views (Moore & Muller, 1999; Muller, 2000; Moore & Young, 2001; Young & Muller, 2007; Young, 2008). This is a central part of their strategy in advancing towards 'social realism' in educational sociology.

Their argument has been focused on the need to reinstate knowledge in curriculum studies and educational sociology more broadly.[1] The present article will engage with this debate while rejecting the claim that constructivism and post-structuralism necessarily lead to thorough relativism or anti-realism. To do so it will draw from contemporary developments in post-empiricist philosophy of knowledge, as well as from post-structuralist philosophy.

The argument will focus on one exemplification of this position: that of Young & Muller (2007) on 'Truth and Truthfulness in the Sociology of Educational Knowledge', which sums up many of the central arguments of the broader social realist critique (also in Young, 2008). Their article argues against constructivism and attempts to provide a conceptual basis for the possibility of objective social knowledge by drawing on the work of Durkheim, Bernstein and Cassirer. While I agree with the overall aim of their argument – particularly the idea that knowledge needs to be

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brought 'back in' to the sociology of education – I believe the strategy taken by the authors can be debated. At the core of the question of knowledge in the curriculum lie deeply philosophical questions as to the nature of reality and the way we come to know it. By deploying a largely sociological strategy in their quest, Young & Muller fail to engage with contemporary debates in the philosophy of knowledge and do not provide a consistent theory of knowledge and truth capable of supporting the claims they want to make. In their rejection of social constructivism and in their attempt to overcome all forms of relativism stemming, for instance, from post-structuralist philosophy, their argument often appears to rely on an implicitly foundational understanding of truth and knowledge. At the same time, it largely fails to provide an account of social change and its relation to theory growth in the social sciences.

Combining conceptions of knowledge emerging from post-empiricist philosophy and post-structuralism can arguably provide a better understanding of such issues without falling back into foundationalism. While post-empiricist philosophy has embraced a fallibilistic understanding of knowledge, it has also worked on the definition of so-called 'demarcation criteria' with which to judge different knowledge claims. Post-structuralism, on the other hand, has developed a critique of representation that provides a basis for a more reflexive and ethically minded understanding of knowledge. The present article argues that by bringing the two together under the claim that their understanding of the relationship between knowledge and reality can be made compatible, a better epistemological basis for debates on curricular and other educational developments can be achieved.

Young & Muller's Argument

Young & Muller's paper revolves around the need to restore a notion of truth, which is seen as the only guarantee for truthfulness. They argue that without such a commitment to truth any assertion of truthfulness would be vacuous. The authors then set themselves to find a solid enough notion of truth capable of overcoming the critiques posed by constructivist thinkers. Their argument starts from a suggestion that the relativisation and consequent trivialisation of academic knowledge that can be currently found in many approaches to curriculum development stem from a persistent 'disdain for the very concept of objectivity' and, consequently, in their view, for the concept of truth.

The authors follow Bernard Williams's (2002) criticism of constructivist trends in sociology (e.g. phenomenology, symbolic interactionism, critical theory, neo-Weberian sociology and post-structuralism), which are thought to assume that truth lies only in 'the corruption of the powerful'. This often leads constructivists to assume that an engagement with the powerless would bring one closer to 'truth'. Young & Muller then try to show how the central claims of constructivism are contradictory and appear to undermine its emancipating force, turning it into a conservative, even reactionary, stance. In this view, the alleged anti-realist position assumed by social constructionists stops them from making any claims about reality. The consequence is that all we have left is critique, but no engagement, a sort of perpetual struggle to unravel the interests underlying claims to knowledge. So, according to Young & Muller, while supporters of this view think it is liberating, on the contrary it appears to be rather paralysing, as it appears to allow nothing but critique and thus undermines knowledge production.

Young & Muller are concerned with finding possible ways out of these problems. This turns into a search for clear demarcation criteria for establishing what is and what is not relevant school knowledge, and takes the form of an inquiry into the possibilities of developing true, objective, knowledge. One of their central claims is that while pointing towards the social character of knowledge, constructionists have taken this as undermining objectivity. Contrary to this, Young & Muller believe that 'its social character is ... the only reason that knowledge can claim to truth' (p. 183). In this they stand on the shoulders of Durkheim, who had seen in the pragmatist developments of his time, some similar risks as those identified by Young & Muller in current constructivist trends. While Durkheim acknowledged the importance of the pragmatists' humanisation of knowledge – i.e. the fact that knowledge is culturally and historically mediated – he thought their conception overlooked the fact that 'Truth and knowledge have a givenness ... that is historical and social' (Young & Muller, 2007, p. 184).

In this sense Young & Muller's route to objectivity seems to be that of convention or authority. For Durkheim, truth is historical in the sense that 'it relies on what society has demonstrated to be truth' (Young & Muller, 2007, p. 185). Objective knowledge is therefore dependent on shared values, which constrain our possibilities of constructing reality. This means that while assuming that knowledge is interpretive, there are clear limits to the possibility of interpretation. This resembles what Lakatos (in Lakatos et al, 1999) described as *authoritarianism*, a position that he associated with the work of Kuhn and Polanyi, and according to which demarcation (between true and false or good and bad knowledge), however possible, cannot be distinguished by unambiguous criteria. We therefore have to trust the judgements of the scientific community.

While Durkheim has a position about the basis for objectivity, he seems to have less of a concern for how knowledge progresses, and for how different forms of knowledge develop (in the natural and social sciences for instance). For clarifying this latter issue the authors turn to the work of Basil Bernstein (1999) and his distinction between vertical and horizontal forms of knowledge. The latter provides an explanation of how different forms of knowledge (e.g. in the natural and social sciences) operate. Bernstein (1999) distinguishes two dimensions of knowledge: its capacity to either integrate theories or to make theories proliferate (which respectively determine the vertical or horizontal nature of knowledge); and its capacity to develop a language of description, which, the stronger it is, the better able it will be to identify empirical correlates through which to either confirm or disconfirm theories and therefore generate progress. The natural sciences, which have both the capacity to integrate theories and empirically confirm them, appear, in this sense, stronger than the social sciences, which have a tendency towards proliferation.

The problem with this understanding of knowledge is, in part, that it explains the way in which different forms of knowledge elaborate, but not the way in which knowledge grows – particularly in the social sciences. As Young & Muller show, this might stem from the fact that Bernstein's ideal of a 'hard', 'true' science was physics. This accounts for the theory's failure to understand and explain social change and the internal theoretical growth in the social sciences. As will be argued later, philosophers of science working in the post-empiricist tradition have shown the possibility of theory appraisal and choice – and therefore of theoretical growth – in the social sciences, where the latter can postulate underlying regularities that explain social phenomena, and which can be empirically 'tested' in a way not dissimilar to that used in the natural sciences.

Aware of the consequences of Bernstein's ideas for knowledge in the social sciences, Young & Muller turn to the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer. The latter highlights the symbolic nature of knowledge, given that it is through symbols that human beings relate to and come to know the world. While this allows for the abstraction and formalisation of different aspects of the world – where Cassirer associates higher knowledge to greater degrees of abstraction – such abstraction generates a 'loss of the "living body" and an increasing dependence on a "semanticised" nature' (Young & Muller, 2007, p. 192). While the increasing reliance on the symbolic and abstract representation of the world opens up to some form of universality, this comes at the cost of the particular.

One of the ideas that Young & Muller seem to find most useful in Cassirer's work is his distinction between the objects of the social and the natural sciences, which lead also to different – but no less objective – forms of abstraction in each case. While the world in general is symbolically mediated, the objects of the social sciences are, so to speak, doubly so, because they are mediated 'by a certain self-consciousness or reflexiveness' that makes abstraction somewhat more difficult or unstable (Young & Muller, p. 194; see also Hartman, 1949).[2]

According to Young & Muller, Cassirer understands truth as 'the maximum amount of abstraction or objectification possible under the circumstances consistent with the nature of objects under study' (Young & Muller, 2007, p. 194). For Young & Muller this characterisation accounts for the aspects left out by both Durkheim and Bernstein. Cassirer solves the problem of the growth of knowledge in the social sciences by showing that objectivity can be different in different fields, but that this does not make social knowledge any weaker than knowledge in the natural sciences. His 'cardinal virtue' is 'to have demonstrated the essential unity of conceptual inquiry' (Young & Muller, 2007, p. 195).

Young & Muller therefore arrive at a notion of knowledge which, like Durkheim's, assumes its social basis. Their notion incorporates a differentiated account of how different forms of

knowledge develop and of how each kind of knowledge is based on a distinct form of objectivity. This helps them overcome the limitations of a conception such as Bernstein's, as, according to Cassirer's view, sociology does achieve a form of verticality, albeit different to that of the natural sciences.

The risk of such a conception is the development of a foundational form of knowledge that will very likely leave no space for the particular, for otherness and difference, and for the alternative conceptions of the world that can stem from the latter. It does, in other words, seem to overlook issues of power in the definition of knowledge, which the recourse to the community of specialists does not solve – quite the contrary – leaving the authors' purported social justice concerns unresolved.

While, as Young & Muller have shown, the opposite risk of extreme relativisation is equally problematic, they fail to spell out several key aspects of the relationship of knowledge to the world. In particular:

1. It is not clear what constitutes knowledge for Young & Muller.
2. They consequently fail to account for changes in knowledge and, relatedly, to account for the growth of knowledge except on the basis of a form of foundationalism.

In turn, 1 & 2 lead to the following:

3. They fail to articulate criteria by which knowledge claims are to be judged, and hence
4. They have no basis for asserting the link between knowledge and truth.

The following will explore these issues, starting from a discussion of developments in post-empiricist philosophy and then moving on to the work of Derrida and the role of ethics in determining knowledge claims.

On the Nature of Knowledge and the Issue of Demarcation in Post-empiricist Philosophy

The basic ground for this discussion can be found in the critiques of empiricism that various philosophers have formulated since the early twentieth century. A seminal work in this area is Quine's (1951) famous 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism'. After discarding one of the central empiricist tenets, namely the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements – which refers to the distinction between ideas directly and indirectly derived from fact – Quine goes on to dispel the idea that the truth of statements can or should be judged in relation to their correspondence with some empirical fact – what has been considered the dominant notion of truth.

In his attack on the second dogma, Quine shows that knowledge is underdetermined by evidence. He also suggests that any system of beliefs can always be adjusted to accommodate new evidence, so there is no final correspondence between ideas and evidence that might lead **TO?** or support a definitive judgement as to the truth of a statement. This makes demarcation – the aim of Young & Muller's argument – problematic, as *potentially* any argument is as true as any other (the stress here goes to show that while potentially this is so, in the end we do need, and generally act on the basis of some idea of truth that will allow for judgements to be made; only that such judgements are fallible and thus temporary). Quine, against Durkheim and Young & Muller, suggests that the pragmatic consequences of an argument will determine its truthfulness. So while there is no definitive empirical foundation on the basis of which to determine the truthfulness of knowledge, we can still judge between competing theories (or alternative forms of knowledge). The question, here, as Durkheim suggested, is that we do not seem to have a basis from which to judge what makes one group of consequences more important than another. However, while Quine opened the way for post-empiricist philosophy, his account of knowledge can be questioned. More recent developments within post-empiricist philosophy have refined these arguments by providing a more precise account of what constitutes systematic knowledge and the criteria by which it may be judged.

Imre Lakatos (Lakatos et al, 1999) in particular worked to establish alternative forms of demarcation that, while allowing for the making of judgements between knowledge claims and avoiding extreme forms of relativism, would move beyond revised forms of empiricism, such as Popper's falsificationism (see Boland, 1994). For Lakatos et al (1999) the basic unit of knowledge is

theory and it is our best theories that constitute provisional knowledge. As a sophisticated falsificationist Lakatos rejected foundationalism but he argued that there were criteria by which we could choose our best theories and that these constituted a way of demarcating knowledge. While, therefore, he acknowledged no evidence could conclusively prove a theory to be true, it nevertheless could be judged as better or worse than rival theories.

Viewing theories as the basic carriers of systematic knowledge is crucial to the next problem we confront in Young & Muller's position, which concerns the growth of knowledge. For Lakatos, (1999) our best theories are not static entities but grow and it is in the way they conform to specific criteria in their growth (i.e. the rejection of ad hoc hypotheses when theories are confronted with counter-evidence or anomalies) that judgements about their claims to provisional knowledge can be made. What Lakatos et al (1999) provides is an account of knowledge growth which can be applied to both the social sciences (Hutchison 1977; Lauder 1982) and the natural sciences.

Lakatos et al (1999) did not believe that the social and natural sciences enjoyed the same status because the major criterion for theory choice is predictability, clearly a difficulty for most social science theories. However, this view has been a matter of debate. Haig & Boorsboom (2007 unpublished), for example, see explanatory adequacy as the key to theory choice in both the natural and social sciences while others have seen the criteria of explanatory breadth and depth as being crucial to determining the best of rival theories at a given time (e.g. Bhaskar, 1998).

While, Lakatos et al (1999)'s account provides a starting point for thinking through the question of knowledge growth, through the strong demarcation that he identified between well-structured and developed theories, it should be noted that the issue of the relationship of social change to change in knowledge needs further discussion. Young & Muller are seeking, quite rightly, a social theory of knowledge but they have no account of how the two relate, especially since in contrast to his earlier work, Young now rejects the relationship of claims to knowledge and the interests of the powerful. This is a point which is taken up in the discussion of Derrida.

However, two related problems are raised by the post-empiricist account that has been given so far and they concern the relationship between knowledge and truth. Fallibilism, even of the sophisticated kind exemplified by Lakatos et al (1999), posed acute problems for the relationship of theories to reality and to truth if we cannot ever assert a link between our knowledge claims and their truth.

Theories and their Relation to the World

Bhaskar (1997) has developed a 'naturalistic' or scientific account of the social sciences from a post-empiricist perspective. He is equally critical of empiricist attempts to reduce the real to the observable as he is of some strands of constructivism (he refers specifically to hermeneutics and post-structuralism) that attempt to reduce the world to thought. Each of these positions lies at an opposite although equally reductionist extreme. While empiricists defend a naïve form of realism – where only observables are assumed to be real – constructivists often appear to fall into an equivalent epistemic fallacy of conflating 'the ontological issue of the reality of ideas with the epistemological or ethical issue of their truth' (Bhaskar, 1997, p. 139). 'Like naïve objectivism, idealism collapses thought and its objects together, only the direction of the reduction is different' (Sayer, 1992, p. 67). At the level of epistemology, that is, of how we come to know the world, we can say that it is always through theory or interpretation. However, the notion that knowledge is fallible:

> supports rather than undermines realism. For it is precisely because the world does not yield any kind of expectation that we believe it exists independently of us and is not simply a figment of our imagination. (Sayer 1992, p. 67)

The point of this discussion is to show that it would be equally absurd to suggest that the truth of ideas can be determined on the basis of their correspondence with empirical evidence, as it would be to suggest that they have no relation whatsoever with a world 'out there'. A position like the latter would lead to the kind of constructivist position that Young & Muller criticise, as it would suggest that any kind of statement is as valid as any other. Bhaskar (1997) attempts to show that there is a definite, although not unproblematic, connection between thought and the world. As Lakatos et al (1999) had done earlier, Bhaskar points to the claim that knowledge does indeed grow,

no matter what our conception of reality or truth is. For him this is sufficient to postulate the ontological reality of the world and the openness of the epistemic realm of knowledge to it.

These ideas lead Sayer (1992) to propose the notion of 'practical adequacy' as a measure of theory robustness, where 'to be practically adequate, knowledge must generate expectations about the world and about the results of our actions which are actually realised' and which must also be 'intersubjectively intelligible' (p. 69). The possibility of realisation in the sense discussed by Sayer (1992) supposes that the world has a certain structure that is theoretically intelligible to us and which, although being underdetermined and never perfectly graspable, would not allow just any kind of explanation, even if it were conventionally accepted. Theories, representations or abstractions, therefore need to be sufficiently 'robust' in order to be deemed practically adequate, as otherwise the structure of the world would reject them. Besides this basic condition, critical realists like Bhaskar and Sayer himself have argued that it is theories' 'explanatory power' what allows scientists to make choices between competing theories. Such power can be judged on the basis of how well theories illuminate empirical phenomena, but also on the basis of the extent to which they can offer a more complete understanding of certain phenomena than other available theories.

Post-empiricist philosophers have thus proposed that it is impossible to reach a God's eye view from which to determine whether our knowledge actually corresponds to the world or not. A correspondence theory of truth and knowledge is therefore impossible, as there are no grounds on which to judge whether knowledge perfectly matches the world it seeks to describe and explain. While this entails some degree of relativism, in the sense that knowledge appears to be underdetermined by evidence and therefore open to contestation, it does not entail an extreme relativisation of knowledge, such as Young & Muller fear, precisely because it is possible to judge, albeit provisionally, between competing theories.

While meanings and knowledge can be said to be socially produced, they are therefore necessarily (intrinsically) related to a notion of truth which has normative consequences for what we say and do, and which offers a basis to judge between theories, in that we believe that our claims to knowledge on the basis of our best theories approximate truth. In this respect truth becomes a regulative ideal; indeed it would be hard to conceive of social life if we could not think of the claims we make as having some bearing on the truth.

However, given the under-determination of theories by evidence and the element of indeterminacy which follows, it can be argued that the cognitive content of theories and their relationship to evidence will not, typically, be sufficient to provide the resources we need to make good theory choices. This may be especially so in the social sciences. In turn this opens the way for other criteria by which theories should be judged including the ethical.

Post-empiricism, Derrida and Theory Choice

While developments in post-empiricist philosophy provide a basis to engage in contemporary debates about truth and knowledge, it appears from the arguments by Bhaskar and Sayer, cited above, that they take for granted the stability of the world's structure, and the possibility of theorising it in precise ways. By highlighting the under-determined and differential nature of structures, post-structuralist philosophers question the possibility of discovering a single underlying grammar explaining events, and offer a more nuanced discussion of the limits of knowledge as a form of representation, especially in relation to the social world. What follows will deal with such theories, as seen particularly in the work of Jacques Derrida.

It has often been suggested that Derrida's work, particularly the idea that reality can be read as a text, conflates philosophy and literature (Thomassen, 2006), thus relativising or reducing knowledge to a mere fictional play. This leads to the suggestion that Derrida is an extreme reductionist and therefore a relativist in the judgemental as well as the foundational sense. This, of course, would leave no basis for defining knowledge, or, indeed, for politically engaging with the world, and would very possibly lead to the trivialisation of knowledge or to a reliance on utilitarian and/or market-led views in education such as Young & Muller and others in the debate have warned against.

Some recent appropriations of Derrida's work, however, point in a different direction. They underscore the strong ethical and political implications of his thought, especially of the notion of deconstruction. While the latter has often been conflated with 'destruction', it has become clear that such is not the case (Derrida, 1995, p. 375). Derrida's position does not start from a very different standpoint to that of post-empiricist philosophy. While the latter, having acknowledged the fallible nature of knowledge, moves in the direction of trying to establish grounds for scientific development in the social sciences, Derrida sticks to the question about the problematic nature of knowledge definition. It is the conditions of possibility of representation, rather than demarcation (between scientific and unscientific or good and bad forms of knowledge), that he is concerned with, although this does not imply that he denies the possibility of making knowledge claims.[3] Derrida highlights the impossibility of final demarcation, thus stressing the temporary nature of knowledge claims. As the following lines show, however, this is not incompatible with the overall aim of demarcation:

> I believe that in clear contextual situations, not only you can but you must discern between a philosophical discourse, a poetic discourse, a literary discourse [or, we could add, between scientific and non-scientific discourses and their different validity claims], and we have at our disposal ... large critical resources, large criteriological apparatuses for distinguishing one from the other. It is necessary to do so as far as possible. ... But there is perhaps a moment, and this is the difficulty, the one that interests me in particular, where discerning between two experiences becomes more risky. (Derrida 1995, p. 375)

So, while demarcation is not only possible but necessary, the process of judging between theories is not as straightforward as we would like to think, and by not recognising its problematic nature, one can often fall into totalising knowledge claims, whereby correspondence would seem to be taken for granted. While we still can, and must decide between, for instance, what curricular knowledge is relevant or not, or between which education policies it is better to implement, there is a moment in such decisions that should pass through the experience of 'undecidability'. And it is precisely this move from undecidability to decision that Derrida is concerned with (Critchley, 1999), not in order to undermine the basis for decision, but in order to make it pass through what, in Critchley's terms, can be described as an 'ethical moment'. 'Derrida insists that judgements have to be made and decisions have to be taken, provided that it is understood that they must pass through an experience of the undecidable' (Critchley, 1999, p. 275). It is this moment of hesitation that makes things different, not in the sense that such hesitation should stop us from acting, but in the sense that it makes us consider the unavoidable *other* of our knowledge claims. This, in turn, places a stronger emphasis on taking responsibility for our claims and actions.

This idea relates to Derrida's admonition that, when trying to define which knowledge or which practices are better than others, we must be 'aware of the stakes of language in philosophy' (Derrida, 1995, p. 375) or, in other words, of the difficulties inherent in representing the world. While introducing a degree of relativisation in our thinking and acting, this does not hinder us from thinking or acting. It is relativisation regarding the possibility of making metaphysical or absolute claims to truth.

The importance given by Derrida to language comes from his reading of Saussurean linguistics, which pointed out the arbitrariness of the signifier–signified relation. For Saussure et al (1983), what gives meaning to a word is not a relation of correspondence to the thing, but rather a relation of difference from other words. The linguistic sign is arbitrary in relation to meaning and it acquires meaning only from its structural relation to all other signs in the system. So, to some extent, it is by what it is not, that the sign acquires a certain meaning, rather than because of its correspondence to the thing.

> Word and thing or thought never in fact become one. We are reminded of, referred to, what the convention of words sets up as thing or thought, by a particular arrangement of words. The structure of reference works and can go on working not because of the identity between these two so-called component parts of the sign, but because of their relationship of difference. The sign marks a place of difference. (Spivak 1974, p. xvii)

It is precisely this insight that marks the philosophy of Derrida, who then develops the concept of *différance* to refer to it, a concept which involves the double sense of difference and deferring. The

identity between the word and the thing is never fulfilled; it is always deferred, and is marked by the presence of a radical otherness: all that which the sign is not. In this sense, for Derrida, the structure of the sign, or, we could say, of any representation or abstraction 'is determined by the trace or track of that other which is forever absent – the sign is, by definition, that which stands for what is not there. This *other* of course is never to be found in its full being' (Spivak, 1974, p. xvii). The sign, be it in spoken or written form, is always necessarily a supplement. While this does not entail – as some critics, and indeed some followers, would have it – that we abandon our attempts at representation, it does problematise representation in such a way that we have to consider and assume responsibility for that which is left out, either by ourselves or by others attempting to represent the world.

Deconstruction aims at showing precisely those moments in which our representations efface the radical otherness that is constitutive of them. This can be described as an ethical moment because, thus understood, deconstruction leads us to consider and take responsibility for the necessary reductions involved in our thinking. As Critchley (1999) explains, deconstruction can be characterised as a philosophy of hesitation, 'although it must be understood that such hesitation is not arbitrary, contingent or indeterminate, but rather, a rigorous, strictly determined hesitation: the experience of undecidability' (p. 42).

It is thus that Derrida radicalises Saussure et al's idea that the structure of language is based on a systematic play of differences, rather than on a relation of presence between thing and thought. For Derrida this idea that meaning comes through difference is constitutive not only of language but of human experience in general, where our understanding and knowledge of the world is differentially constituted. 'Every referent and all reality has the structure of a differential trace ... and… one cannot refer to this "real" except in an interpretive experience' (Critchley, 1999, p. 39).

Representation, which is how we come to know the world, is based on a differential relation to the world, just as the linguistic sign is to meaning. The 'real', in this sense, is never fully present in our representations, the latter always adding an interpretive meaning to the original experience – and this from the very moment of perception, which, as mentioned earlier, is already mediated by theoretical structures. The similarity between this and the post-empiricist emphasis on the interpretive nature of knowledge is strong. The difference appears to stem from the consequences that Derrida derives from this in terms of a 'philosophy of hesitation'.

Any conclusive determination of meaning implies a claim to presence, to a somewhat perfect 'capture' of the world as it actually is, and in this sense it implies also an annulment of the difference between the 'real' and thought, which is constitutive of all experience. The ethical, in relation to this, comes from the recognition of the irreducibility of experience to any sort of definitive universal meaning, and from the consequent hesitation that this should entail. Decision about meaning and about action in general is unavoidable, but it becomes ethical when passing through the experience of undecidability. Realising the impossibility of finding an ultimate foundation to guarantee our thoughts and actions necessarily compels us to act responsibly. This is, to some extent, a rather general conception of the ethical, but one which has practical consequences in relation to the way in which we let our actions be guided by this principle of hesitation.

When representing an aspect of reality, when abstracting things into concepts, we are *necessarily* leaving something out, not only in the sense proposed by Young & Muller in which abstraction implies a distancing from the real, but in the sense that the act of thinking, language itself, is constituted on the basis of a difference, of leaving something out. In a more practical sense, this implies that while we still will go on representing the world – an activity that is constitutive of human beingness, and therefore inevitable – we must put into question 'the spontaneity' (Critchley, 1999) with which we do this, and consider, at least to the extent that we can, that something is always left out from our representations.

While this is the central aspect of deconstruction as an ethics of knowledge, it is also clear that the moment of hesitation is precisely that, a moment, and that the passage to a more political moment of decision is unavoidable. It is here, in the passage from undecidability to decision – or from ethics to politics – where the central tension in Derrida's thought lies, since 'there can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable' (Derrida, in Critchley, 1999, p. 42).

It is from this issue that most misinterpretations of Derrida's work as being relativistic have surged, as the passage from this ethics of 'hesitation' to a more political moment of decision has often been neglected, leading to suppositions that deconstruction entails a permanent and relativising state of doubt. So we should stop and consider how and why these suppositions have come about.

Many followers, and indeed, many of his detractors, have taken Derrida's ideas to imply that any attempt at representation should be relinquished. The questions he poses on the notion of truth have led to him being catalogued as a 'truth denier'. This is partly because contemporary cultural theorists taking on Derrida's ideas have often adopted an anti-representational stance, thus staying on the side of doubt and never moving on to decision, which is an inevitable consequence of the ethical responsibility involved in the moment of hesitation.[4]

The misconception that this stands on is the presumption that there might be some possibility to overcome the 'duplicitous qualities of representative signs', that by permanently criticising without taking position we might be able to analyse 'mis-representation in the name of the authentic identity of the represented' (Derrida, in Barnett, 2003, p. 13). This, as the discussion up to here will hopefully have made clear, is impossible precisely because any kind of critique will always already take place within the context of differentially constituted representations – something that Derrida recognises when he explicitly acknowledges that the critique of logocentrism can only take place within logocentrism itself.

It is such (mis)interpretations of Derrida's work that have led to what is so well described by Young & Muller as the constructivist idea that somehow truth can be found in an identification with the weak and in a rejection of power – e.g. by giving voice, particularly to those who generally don't have it, in the name of more *authentic* processes. The problem with these views is that they still believe in an emancipatory cause, in the possibility of 'authentic' representation, while the latter, as Derrida shows, is a structural impossibility inherent in human (meaning making, symbolising) experience. The belief in the possibility of an authentic representation in need of rescue would fail to realise that the 'leaving out' of something is an inherent and inevitable part of thought, indeed of experience itself:

> Rejecting representation as a mere supplement is to suppose that the identities of the represented and the representative are self-sufficient and not in need of further argumentation .... Representation is possible because pure representation is impossible. (Barnett, 2003, p. 16)

In the case of those approaches to curriculum development that deny the importance of universal knowledge and resort to particularism, to giving voice to the oppressed in defining their own knowledge, for instance, such assumptions about representation appear to miss the point, which is that representation, although intrinsically limited, is nevertheless necessary and unavoidable. In this sense, pretending that the solution to the problem of representation is not to represent at all and merely to open the space for the particular is the expression of a rather romanticised position that, as Young & Muller have duly pointed out, contradicts itself by trying to be liberating at the same time as it curtails the possibility of any kind of liberation or political action.

Assuming the historical, cultural and institutional situatedness of our knowledge does not mean that by not acting we might overcome such situatedness. What it does entail, and this seems to be Derrida's point, is an awareness or reflexivity about the contingent nature of our actions and knowledge claims, as well as of their institutional and historical basis. This opens up an ethical dimension in knowledge definition, but it does not necessarily amount to assuming an anti-representational stance (Barnett, 2003, p. 16) – nor an anti-realist one.

When considering the issue of the selection, definition and treatment of knowledge – as in educational curricula – this might mean that, besides making clear judgements as to what knowledge to include (on the basis, for instance, of the demarcation criteria provided by post-empiricist philosophy), it is also necessary to incorporate a dimension of 'epistemic values'. The latter refer to dispositions as to the handling of knowledge, such as criticality and reflexivity about the fallible nature of our knowledge claims, and include considerations about the historical and relational nature of knowledge, as well as the possibility of imagining different, more desirable, futures (Rizvi, 2007).

The post-structuralist understanding of knowledge then suggests that apart from focusing on how to select knowledge for educational purposes, it is nowadays equally fundamental to incorporate considerations about people's dispositions as to the handling of knowledge. While post-structuralism seems to point the way of the latter, post-empiricist philosophy of science seems to do so for the former. Compatibility between the two stems, on one hand, from post-empiricism's fallibilistic stance and its acceptance of the provisional nature of knowledge given that it is always underdetermined by evidence; and, on the other, from the post-structuralist acceptance (at least in the thought of philosophers such as Derrida) that knowledge does, although problematically, open to the world.

So, What Kind of Knowledge are We Left with?

Young & Muller, following Bernard Williams, suggested that 'if a commitment to truth is paired with a scepticism about truth, the latter inevitably corrodes the former'. Thus far, I have discussed how this is not necessarily so. The first part of the discussion focused on post-empiricist debates in the philosophy of knowledge which, having challenged the basic tenets of empiricism, led to a differentiation between foundational and judgemental forms of relativism. While foundational relativism appears to be inevitable – as we would otherwise need to assume a God's eye view in order to determine whether our knowledge corresponds to the world or not – judgemental relativism seems unnecessary. The latter position would imply the epistemic fallacy of reducing the world to thought.

What the distinction between forms of relativism entails is a move away from a correspondence theory of truth and knowledge, and towards notions of knowledge based on coherence, practical adequacy and intersubjective understanding. Although correspondence is impossible it is still feasible and *necessary* to judge between competing theories and to act in the world accordingly. A regulative notion of truth is necessary for communicative and practical purposes, although such truth needs not act as an Archimedean point providing an absolute ground for judging between theories. It does, however, serve to show how scepticism about truth does not necessarily corrode the notion of truth as a regulative idea. What it does corrode is the idea of correspondence, perfect understanding or absolute truth. Judgements between different knowledge claims come to rest, then, not only on considerations about their overall coherence and intersubjective communicability, but also on the practical expectations that they demand from the world and on the overall robustness and explanatory capacities of alternative theories.

Having questioned the idea that scepticism about truth necessarily undermines the notion of truth itself, a different but, it was argued, complementary line of arguments was explored. The discussion focused on the work of Jacques Derrida, who problematises the relation between our representations of the world and the world itself. This, it was argued, does not entail a disavowal of representation, but rather, a more nuanced understanding of its limitations and of its ethical and political dimension. Such a view moved us to considerations about the responsibility that stems when acknowledging the always present trace of the other – of that which is not there, which remains necessarily uncaptured by representation – in any judgements or decisions we make. Derrida's ideas, then, rather than banishing the project of scientific knowledge development – as sough by post-empiricists – make us more aware of the stakes of language in the development of knowledge, and of the deeply institutional and historical rootedness of our knowledge claims. The philosophy of deconstruction is, then, a philosophy of hesitation (Critchley, 1999), but one which, precisely because of that, also compels us to move to a more political moment of decision.

While still allowing for a commitment to truth – against extreme relativism – both post-empiricists and post-structuralists introduce unavoidable, and rather desirable, degrees of relativism in our understanding of knowledge – although whether hesitation and acknowledging the fallibility of knowledge should be described as forms of relativism is questionable, and only appear as such in the context of a search for an absolute truth (Wellmer, 2003).

As was discussed, the idea of decision implied in the move from the ethical moment of hesitation to a more political position – one in which we say what we believe, we argue in its favour and act accordingly – does, or must, include some notion of truth. The point is whether the latter needs to be an absolute or a regulative truth. To put it differently, the question is whether we

can make 'context transcending truth claims' without a universal notion of truth. The answer, from a Derridian perspective, is, I think, not only that we can, but that we have to, as there is an ethical demand to do so. However, such claims need to be made not on the basis of an appeal to universal truth, but should, rather, be tied to a process of justification, of giving reasons and inviting contestations for one's claims

The issue that motivated these reflections was a concern with some current trends in curriculum and education policy developments, which are leading to the trivialisation of educational knowledge and to the prevalence of utilitarian approaches to policy. While I concur with the need to address these problematic trends, I have tried to show that Young & Muller's proposed approach to the issue of knowledge, by relying too strongly on notions of objectivity and universal truth, and by not engaging with important contemporary philosophical debates, runs the risk of promoting a foundationalist approach to knowledge. With this I mean an approach that relies too strongly on its certainty about knowledge and which could lead to the latter being transmitted unquestioningly in educational institutions. And this is no little risk, especially as the problem of many educational practices has very often been the institutionalisation of an approach that presupposes 'absolute knowledge and the possibility of its transmission' (Hacking, 1999), leaving out both the possibility of alternative knowledges and the different ways in which learning takes place.

While it seems fundamental to put an end to the 'anything goes' approach to knowledge, which then makes any kind of educational or curricular proposal as good as any other, we need to promote approaches to knowledge development and transmission – through educational institutions – that incorporate some form of awareness about the limitations inherent in knowledge definition. After all, certainty, and not uncertainty, has frequently been at the root of educational problems – the certainty of policy makers, or teachers in relation to the knowledge on which they base their practices and decisions, for instance. It is in this direction that the reflections offered in the previous pages hope to have contributed.

Notes

[1] This position represents a fundamental change from that of Young (1971) where he embraced just such a form of relativism by asserting that claims to knowledge were reflections of power alone.

[2] It might be useful to remember that Giddens (1984) also uses the notion of reflexivity to discuss the differences between the social and natural sciences. Reflexivity allows human beings to monitor – and often change – the phenomena of social scrutiny, thus making the latter more unstable – or prone to permanent change – than the phenomena of the natural sciences.

[3] It has been suggested that post-empiricists working in the tradition of the philosophy of science did not follow the implications of the claims to their last consequences. In a suggestive comparison between the work of Quine and Derrida, Golumbia (2001) suggests that Derrida is something like the hidden other of Quine. While the latter's questioning of empiricist claims had introduced fallibility in knowledge, post-empiricists moved on to establish clear forms of demarcation that somehow dispelled the consequences of their thought.

[4] As Cahen (2001) reminds us, the early adoption of Derrida's work among literary critics, especially in the USA, generally left out the ethical dimension of is work, which has only more recently become the centre of Derridean interpretations – particularly after the publication of his more overtly political works such as *Spectres of Marx, The Politics of Friendship*, and his reflections on hospitality and cosmopolitanism.

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The Cosmic Community: a response to Maria Balarin's 'Post-structuralism, Realism and the Question of Knowledge in Educational Sociology'

MICHAEL YOUNG & JOHAN MULLER

We welcome Maria Balarin's response to our paper (Young & Muller, 2007; Young, 2007) as a contribution to an important and much neglected debate in the sociology of education as well as to wider issues in the sociology of knowledge and epistemology. Her article also provides an opportunity for us to clarify our own social realist approach to educational knowledge.

Balarin focuses on two themes in her comments on our paper. The first is that in criticising the implicit and often explicit relativism of social constructivism in the sociology of education and in arguing for the relevance of the often misunderstood Durkheimian tradition in the sociology of knowledge, we offer no adequate theory of social change and, in particular, no account of knowledge growth in the social sciences. On the face of it, there could be something of a misunderstanding here. It could be that in our treatment of Bernstein and his characterisation of social science as a medley of incommensurable languages we inadvertently convey the impression that we think sociology is unable to 'grow'. This is far from the position we hold.

When Balarin proposes Lakatos as a 'post-empiricist' corrective to foundationalism, in this case Popper's 'falsificationism', we could not agree more. What Lakatos shows is that in mature science programmes there are not only frequently rival theories, but also auxiliary theories, between which no amount of appeal to the empirical world can satisfactorily arbitrate. What constitutes the 'maturity' of such programmes is that they have theories with 'heuristic power' (Lakatos, 1978, p. 175) which allow for final arbitration. As Lakatos puts it, 'heuristic power generates *the autonomy of theoretical science*' (his emphasis) which is in turn the 'requirement of continuous growth' (p. 175). Again, we agree completely.

To move from an account of 'mature science' to the prospects for growth in our own discipline, the sociology of education, however, is not unproblematic. It should give all of us pause for thought that perhaps the two most influential theorists in the sociology of education since Durkheim, Bourdieu and Bernstein, were both rather pessimistic as to the prospects for growth in sociology. Nevertheless, as one of us has argued (Moore & Muller, 2002; Muller, 2006, 2008), against their own stated views on the matter, the theoretical trajectory of their work can be seen to take a fractal but evolving form, perhaps a different form of growth to that commonly found in natural science, but growth nevertheless. We completely agree with Balarin, therefore, that accounting for the growth of knowledge is critical to our collective endeavour. How else would we otherwise be able to identify the 'powerful knowledge' (Young, 2007, 2008a) that should form the bedrock of the common school curriculum? We will return to this point.

Balarin's second theme is that a non-relativist approach to issues of knowledge and truth can be more adequately based on post-empiricist epistemology (PEP) and Derrida's post-structuralism (PS). Balarin brings together the ideas of fallibility and demarcation criteria from PEP and the idea of 'différance' and its ethical implications from Derrida's PS as an alternative to the relativism of social constructivism. Derrida, she argues, by showing the impossibility of definitive closure, offers a way of re-introducing questions of ethics and power into debates about knowledge and the curriculum which, for her, our social realist approach precludes.

The issues that Balarin raises are important and complex and it is valuable to have them made more explicit. The arguments that she draws from PEP are largely consistent with our own approach as we have said above, but in making claims for Derrida's concept of ethical

responsibility, we can discern little more than a reworking of Sartre's socially and morally empty existentialism. Somewhat crudely, this can be summarised as 'because we are never certain about anything, even ourselves, we must be inescapably responsible and open to others'. This means little, however, until we can say something about these responsibilities.

In drawing the attention of sociologists of education to the work of Quine and Lakatos among others, Balarin's argument is an insightful complement to our own, though it would be wise to include the whole range of contemporary philosophers who are making important contributions to the realism debate; these include Dummett, Kripke (sophisticated anti-realists), through Putnam and Davidson, to the robust defenders of realism like Boghossian and Norris (Boghossian, 2006; Norris, 2006).

Most of the contemporary anti-realists have, like Derrida and the post-Saussurian post-structuralists, taken the 'linguistic turn' (which insists on the linguistic, schema or framework dependence of truth claims) which they see as the surest bulwark against logical empiricism. But how then do we decide on anything? The recourse to instrumentalism or pragmatism, as seen in Rorty (1978), is one prominent terminus of those who have taken the linguistic turn. However, the debate has moved on from those who, like Derrida, spend much time on re-showing the impossibility of absolute closure on which logical empiricism is premised.

In a number of papers, Rob Moore, working with similar ideas to our own, explicitly draws on PEP as a way of going beyond the sterile pro- versus anti-positivism debates in the social sciences (Moore, 2006, 2007, for example). The distinction that Balarin draws from Lakatos between judgemental and foundational relativism we also find useful. It makes clear that while claims to absolute truth are untenable, this does not rule out the possibility of demarcating between 'good' and 'not so good' theories. Her position in this part of the article is consistent with the stance that we and Moore take as it relies on a regulatory rather than absolute notion of truth, and in the spirit of C.S. Peirce, an inescapable *ontological* realism. This is not, we would argue, a trivial return to some kind of foundationalism. It should rather be seen as a version of 'structural objectivity', as Daston & Gallison (2007) would call it; this is a view that theories succeed others on the basis of their greater conceptual or explanatory (Lakatos's 'heuristic') power. Under this rubric would fall not only Peirce, Cassirer and Lakatos, but also Einstein and Poincare. We are quite happy to shelter in this lee.

Where we differ from Balarin, and from those who conclude from Quine that conceptual relativism is inescapable, is that we do not think that this demonstrates that the force of corroborative or disconfirming evidence is thereby ruled out. As Balarin makes clear, for some PEPs after Quine, if 'there is no final correspondence between ideas and evidence ... [only] the pragmatic consequences of an argument will determine its truthfulness'. Or as Shapin & Shaffer (1985; quoted by Boghossian, 2006, p. 3) have put it, 'it is ourselves and not reality that is responsible for what we know'. Quine himself didn't believe that, as his textbooks on science make clear. We agree with the view that Quine was making a purely logical point, against the logical positivists, with the argument that in principle, the evidence is formally consistent with more than one theory. That doesn't mean that it is *rationally* consistent with more than one theory (Hacking, 1999). Or as Nagel, quoted by Boghossian (2006, p. 127) says, 'Certain revisions in response to the evidence are reasonable; others are pathological'. Those in the know can tell which is which.

Our argument, which we draw from Durkheim, is that Balarin's, of pragmatist conclusions of many PEPs, arises only because they refuse to accept that truth and knowledge are fundamentally *social* categories – theories and facts about the world based on the best evidence and the most powerful theories as rationally arrived at by what Collins & Evans (2002, 2007) call the 'core-set' or the inner community of scientists who can legitimately contribute to the rational consensus. Science (or more broadly theoretical knowledge) is always located in what Peirce called 'communities of enquiry' (Peirce, 1931). However, although 'community of enquiry' refers to where trained rational judgement is in constant interaction with the best theory and evidence, for Peirce, 'communities of enquiry' are a logical proposition not an empirical one. It is in a similar sense that Bertrand Russell, Einstein and others spoke about the necessary 'communicabilty' of logical structure (Daston & Gallison, 2007, p. 295) in a 'cosmic community' (p. 297). And it was in this sense too that Quine developed his thesis of translatability, which blamed Whorf's theory of

cultural relativity on bad translators. Recourse to a different logic – that is, to differential truth conditions – would always be the least likely reason for incomprehension (Norris, 2000).

Our argument for the *social* reality of knowledge is linked to our argument about powerful knowledge (Young, 2008a). Together with our argument above about realism it provides grounds for identifying 'better' decisions about the curriculum, and the conditions for the transmission of knowledge and the terms within which they are debated. Contrary to Balarin's claim, it is precisely on this basis that we *can* make the links between a social realist theory of knowledge and issues of distributive educational justice.

As Balarin points out, one major achievement of post-empiricist epistemology was to demonstrate that theories are always under-determined by the evidence. However, this conclusion can lead in two very different directions, with very different implications for the curriculum. The epistemological point about the indeterminacy of theories and the fallibility of knowledge provides a cautionary warning about all tendencies to dogmatism; however, it has few direct implications for the curriculum. The point is extended by Balarin via Derrida's post structuralism to reassert the ethical moment involved in moving from indeterminacy or hesitation to decisions. It is through her focus on this 'moment' of decision in all action, she claims, that Derrida moves from ethical to political responsibility and hence to addressing issues of power in the curriculum (and of course elsewhere). However, by focusing on the indeterminacy of all knowledge (in the curriculum and elsewhere), it really doesn't matter what knowledge is included in the curriculum because for her the really important issue is that even the most reliable knowledge has to recognise the elements of its indeterminacy – that there is always an otherness, a 'something else' that contradicts its basis. We can agree that the principle of indeterminacy characterises even the most reliable knowledge, but we cannot agree to the significance that Balarin assigns to it, at least not with regard to decisions about the curriculum. It can best be seen as a more elaborate expression of the fallibility thesis which, when pressed too hard does, despite her denial, end up with a relativist position on knowledge. Besides, from our viewpoint, the issue of indeterminacy fades into insignificance in the context of the weak and fragmented assumptions about knowledge that dominate educational studies and much curriculum policy.

A specific example will illustrate this last point. The subject content of school science (such as the periodicity of the elements) in the National Curriculum is currently being reduced in England on the grounds of making it more inclusive and extending its relevance (see Perks, 2006; *The Guardian*, 25 June 2007; Young, 2008b). The implicit and unexamined assumption of this change is that knowledge contents and their structures are not important. We would agree that chemical concepts such as the periodicity of the elements are fallible and at some point lead to undecidable propositions. However, this does not mean that knowledge content is an unimportant curriculum issue or that scientific concepts are not related to each other in some kind of coherent way that is different from common sense or everyday concepts.[1] It is only by acquiring such concepts that it is possible for a student to make sense of what their undecidability might mean. To take this point further, it is only when we have a more adequate understanding of the role of curriculum content in enabling students to acquire 'powerful knowledge' (Young, 2008a) that the issue of undecidability and its possible ethical implications for the curriculum arise. To focus on the ethical implications of this undecidability in contemporary curriculum debates, as is suggested by Balarin, can lead, inadvertently or not, to the uncritical acceptance of the claim implicit in the new curriculum policy that knowledge content is not important.

Our charge against constructivism is not only that it rejects the idea of knowledge growth *in principle*, but it encourages students and educational researchers to neglect the 'realist' traditions of social theory established by Durkheim and Weber a century ago and the concepts that they and their successors such as Bourdieu and Bernstein generated. It is in this tradition that we can find the basis for social theories of change and knowledge growth that Balarin claims we lack.

Balarin claims that our approach runs the risk of developing: 'a foundational form of knowledge that will very likely leave no space for the particular, for otherness and difference and for alternative conceptions of the world that stem from the latter'. This is in her response to our introduction of Ernst Cassirer's work as a way of overcoming some of the problems which we identify in Bernstein's concept of hierarchical knowledge structures. As a result, Balarin suggests, we 'overlook issues of power in the definition of knowledge ... and leave the authors' [our] social

justice concerns unresolved'. This is both wrong and contradictory. It is wrong in not understanding how Cassirer's theory of knowledge explicitly retains human subjectivity in his analysis of forms of subsumption, and therefore the role of the particular in differentiating the forms of possible objectivity that are appropriate to the natural sciences and humanities (which for us include the social sciences). Without such a differentiation of forms of objectivity one is left with only two possibilities. Either the social sciences make unsupportable claims for objectivity or they are no more than weak versions of scientific knowledge. Balarin's critique also neglects the extent to which key sociological concepts, such as 'organic solidarity' and the 'sacred' in the case of Durkheim, and ideal types for Weber, explicitly build in the possibility of alternatives and the space for particulars.

Balarin's own position is contradictory in implying that if we adopted the Derridian concept of 'différance' we would somehow be able to avoid the incursions of power and ideology. It is as if the theorist of undecidability had, at the same time, a more objective claim to knowledge, even if the form that this takes is never revealed. Power and ideology are conditions of social and educational life, whatever our theoretical stance. Our argument is that a social realist theory of knowledge provides the best challenge to reductionist and instrumental stances towards the curriculum that can only lead to the increase of educational inequalities and injustice.

To return to the question of knowledge growth, a point both Balarin and ourselves think is the crux of the matter, we feel a strong affinity with the way that Collins & Evans (2002, 2007) make the case for a 'third wave' of science studies, where the first could broadly be called the 'autonomy of science' wave, and the second the 'constructivist' wave. In making their plea, Collins & Evans point out that the reason for the second wave's emergence was because the endogenous theories and explanations of the first wave faced new questions it was not conceptually equipped to answer. Similarly, the constructivist wave is unable to answer questions about legitimate expertise that for these authors go to the heart of responsible, ethical decision making in science policy today. This is just why we turn to what we call 'social realism' in addressing question of knowledge and curriculum.

We find an additional similarity between our position and that of Collins & Evans. In depicting the successive waves, they bring out with some delicacy the fact that the waves do not really confront one another head on, nor do they cancel one another out in a knock down sort of way. Instead, by expanding the questions the field is able to address, the field 'grows'. This account has echoes in Moore & Muller's (2002) account of how, as proposed by Abbott (2001), social science knowledge progresses fractally – in other words by partial incorporation, and then splitting to reintroduce the same debate at a different theoretical level. The effect is a spiral that nevertheless progresses. That is just what we feel about educational constructivism; it has outlived its heuristic potential, there are just too many questions which, because it cannot recognise them as legitimate questions, are left unaddressed. It is particularly true in relation to questions with ethico-political weight, which we call 'social justice' questions, that constructivism fails to address. That is why we may agree to tarry at the point of undecidability, but we cannot tarry too long. The same aim of social justice that took us into constructivism in the first place demands that we attend to the burning questions which only a realist approach to knowledge now allows us to address.

Notes

[1] It is impossible to have, for example, an informed debate about HIV-AIDS in school science without some understanding of what a virus is.

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The Right to Knowledge *and* the Right to Philosophy

MARIA BALARIN

I appreciate Young & Muller's response to the critique I made of some of their arguments. I will only briefly take this further here, highlighting some points that I think remain untouched in their response. What motivated my initial article was a reaction to what appeared to be an act of erasure. In their recent work, Young & Muller (Young & Muller, 2007; Young, 2008) seemed to erase the

traces of some of the philosophical ideas that have influenced the often ill-defined area known as social constructivism (post-structuralism, phenomenology, etc.) They did so by accusing such philosophies of an untenable anti-realism, and then moved on to propose the reality of the social (as well as of the natural) realm and to discuss how this could provide a solid basis for bringing knowledge 'back in' to the curriculum.

In my view, their position missed important points made by some of the philosophies they dismiss, in particular post-structuralism as seen in the work of Jacques Derrida, and their implications for issues of knowledge and the curriculum. I also suggested that in doing so Young & Muller ran the risk of falling back into a foundational understanding of knowledge that, among other things, failed to provide a suitable account of knowledge growth in the natural and social sciences.

My strategy was not to defend anti-realism – a task I believe very few, if any, of the so-called anti-realists would endorse – but to show that the alleged anti-realism of Derrida's philosophy is not such, or at least not in the knowledge-undermining way feared by Young & Muller. I did so by discussing the (critical) realist tenets of post-empiricist philosophy and by showing that its notion of reality, and its distinction between foundational and judgemental relativism, is not all that incompatible with Derrida's. Having cleared out the misunderstanding –or having tried to– I attempted to draw some positive implications of Derrida's philosophy for curriculum theory. I suggested that the 'ethics of deconstruction' can provide valuable ideas in relation to the handling of knowledge (ethics in relation to theory choice) and the development of epistemic values (ethics as openness to otherness that is the consequence of an understanding of knowledge as difference). These, I suggested, are as crucial when thinking about knowledge and the curriculum as definitions of what knowledge to include in curricular frameworks.

In their response to my comments, Young & Muller have focused mostly on the issue I raised about the foundational risks of their position. They have clarified their views and shown their overall agreement with the post-empiricist understanding of reality and knowledge, and have discussed their understanding of how knowledge grows. The act of erasure that initially motivated me, however, seems at times to remain intact. This refers particularly to the way in which, having accepted fallibilism, they expect that we can somehow avoid confronting its implications. As they state towards the end of their paper, 'when pressed too hard' the fallibility thesis ends up with a relativist position – and they consider that Derrida, and post-empiricists more generally, indeed press it too hard.

While Young & Muller seem willing to accept some of the claims made by post-empiricist philosophers, when it comes to face post-structuralism their position is different. They keep referring to Derrida and 'the post-Saussurian post-structuralists' as 'contemporary anti-realists', and suggest that the ethical responsibility that is central to Derrida's work is 'little more than a reworking of Sartre's social and morally empty existentialism'. They also question Derrida's emphasis on undecidability and the impossibility of closure, usually without considering Derrida's equally strong emphasis on *decision*. In what follows I will try to further clarify some of these issues and to extend on what I consider to be (at least partly) the relevance of Derrida's thought to discussions about education and the curriculum (a task already undertaken by others: Biesta & Egéa-Kuehne, 2001; Trifonas & Peters, 2004).

I think the claim that Derrida presents us with a socially and morally empty reworking of Sartreian existentialism already reflects some of the fears that might be motivating Young & Muller, and shows the problematic understanding of post-structuralism that lies at the heart of their position. They want a socially and morally 'full' notion of knowledge capable of grounding an equally solid curriculum dominated by good (true) knowledge. Their claim ignores the explicit distance that Derrrida established between his and Sartre's thought. In 'The Ends of Man', Derrida (1969) launched a critique of the kind of anthropologism that, he argued, was dominant in Sartre, and which led him to an essentialising idea of human beings and to a consequently prescriptive set of practices through which individuals were to free themselves from the weight of the cultural and ideological systems to which they belonged. Derrida accuses the Sartreian way of considering the effects of the system –which he describes as a decision 'to change ground, in a discontinuous and eruptive manner, by stepping abruptly outside and by affirming absolute rupture and difference' (Derrida, 1969, p. 56) – of nothing less than 'blindness'. Such attempts ignore what for Derrida is

fundamental: that 'language continually relocates the "new" ground on the older one' (p. 59), so an absolute break with the system is fundamentally impossible.

Derrida's critique of existentialism, then, somewhat echoes some of Young & Muller's (2007) original claims against social constructivism. By attempting to overcome relations of power, social constructivism overlooks the fact that any critique already inaugurates new forms of such relations. Moreover, it often resorts to the same kind of essentialising strategy that Derrida criticised, which is to elevate the cause of the powerless as if it constituted the supreme essence of justice. Constructivists thus operate on the basis of a 'genetic fallacy' that presumes that a causal explanation of beliefs (the link between knowledge and 'the powerful') necessarily invalidates such beliefs (Keat & Urry, 1975, p. 205). Such recourse to a primordial authenticity in need of restoration could not be farther from Derrida's ideas. As he acknowledges, 'It is precisely the strength and the efficacity of the system which regularly transforms transgressions into *"false sortie"*' (1969, p. 56). And the social constructivist transgression, like Sartre's, in Derrida's view, indeed appears to be one such 'false exit'.

Young & Muller are critical of such an essentialising notion of justice or of just causes (as social constructivists propose), and they soundly point to its potentially disempowering effects. What they propose, however, seems a contrary, but equally essentialising view of knowledge, where true and strong forms of the latter can be arrived at by communities of specialists with enough authority to establish what knowledge is indeed good, bad or appropriate for the curriculum. So while I agree with the starting point of their critique, I still find the proposed outcome problematic. As I tried to explain in my initial article, such recourse to a community of specialists becomes a new form of foundationalism, which seeks to grant the truth of knowledge in relation to the natural and the social world. Young & Muller thus find in the community of experts the limit to fallibilism and to the foundational relativism that the latter openly gives rise to.

By linking the knowledge of 'experts' to the kind of 'objective' Knowledge (with a capital 'K') that they seek for the curriculum, Young & Muller seem oblivious of the links between epistemology and politics. They fail to recognise that 'the most significant power of the professional is lodged in basic conceptual categories of thought and language ... [theories and beliefs]' and the fact that experts 'produce truth', 'in the sense that they supply systematic procedures for the generation, regulation, and circulation of statements' (Fischer, 2003, p. 39). This follows from post-empiricist fallibilism when its consequences are fully assumed, and is an idea equally emphasised by critical theorists and post-structuralists, who therefore tend to link their understanding of knowledge to ideas about democracy and democratic citizenship.

Together with issues of knowledge and politics, the relation between knowledge and pedagogy is also largely ignored by Young & Muller. The emphasis on core curricular knowledge seems to overlook differences in learning styles and the possibilities of different groups to access the highly codified knowledge of the curriculum – and could lead to the (hopefully unintended) consequence of proposing a differentiated curriculum against a comprehensive one.

It is in relation to such matters that the idea of difference and the role of ethics become prominent. With no final foundation on the basis of which to decide, normative considerations have an important role to play in discussions about knowledge in general and curricular knowledge in particular. The curriculum frames knowledge in ways that should be open to ethical and normative consideration. But Young and Muller want an epistemology that is not bound to such relativism, one which can provide sound and stable guidelines for the selection of core curricular knowledge. And it is to be one that endorses the reality of the social as well as of the natural world. They accuse Derrida (and postructuralism in general) of anti-realism in both respects.

My initial response to their work attempted to suggest otherwise. Derrida does not question the reality of the social.

> However much Derrida can, and is willing to, account for the heterogeneity and complexity of a situation, 'when it is necessary', he recognizes that there are times 'when an urgent and binary choice' is called for in a specific instance; he believes that it is then his 'duty to respond in a simple [straightforward] fashion,' when it is necessary to take a definite stand, as 'in the case of Apartheid in South Africa […] or on the death penalty. (Egéa-Kuehne, 2004, p. 20)

Nor would he, I presume, question the reality of physics or chemistry or the right of school children to have access to such knowledge – as he indeed claimed people's 'right to philosophy'. What his ideas emphasise is that knowledge, and language in general, are always read, proposed and inscribed within cultural and ideological practices that very often exclude other readings, and this, for him, is not only an epistemological condition but an ontological one. The 'right to philosophy' that Derrida (2002) so intently claimed points precisely towards people's right to learn *about* knowledge. Thinking of school, and the curriculum more specifically, Young & Muller seem to advocate for the supremacy of one reading of the social and natural sciences over others, that which is sanctioned by the community of specialists, and which should, therefore, constitute the core curriculum – as against other particularistic readings.

The main problem I find in this position is that, while it might rightly restore the centrality of knowledge – which has an internal structure and can therefore generally resolve internal disputes as to the suitability of some knowledge claims against others – it is a vision of the curriculum that seems to provide few clues as to how education can address issues of multiculturalism, different learning styles and indeed some pressing social and political issues that now confront us, and for which the structural capacity of knowledge to resolve disputes might not be so strong, making ethical considerations necessary. Is there a solid and definitive ground from which to determine how to address deepening global inequalities, catastrophic climate change, international terrorism, religious wars, or indeed, long-standing questions about social, cultural and gender inequality? How do we decide on such matters and how does education contribute to equip citizens with the resources that would allow them to engage with such important questions? Partly, and in this I agree with Young & Muller, this is a matter of knowledge. But engagement with such issues often requires dispositions that go beyond the realm of pure knowledge; not in the sense that they do not require well-informed judgements, but in the sense that facing them demands a kind of responsibility that cannot be reduced to a knowledge-based decision. And this is Derrida's ethical point: 'from the knowledge to the decision, a leap is required, even if one must know as much and as well as possible before making a decision' (Derrida quoted in Egéa-Kuehne, 2004, p. 24).

The reality of the social is hardly univocal. Building on the example that Young & Muller put forward, of course some understanding of what a virus is will be crucial for engaging in an informed debate on HIV-AIDS. But so will be the knowledge about the processes through which HIV-AIDS sufferers are stigmatised, or about the economic and political dynamics that often place limits on access to medical treatment for HIV-AIDS sufferers.

The ethics of deconstruction stems precisely from the recognition that in human matters – and therefore in knowledge matters in general – there is no definitive ground from which to decide, but that decisions need to be made anyway. When faced with such limits, Derrida follows the Levinasian tradition, in which 'ethics occurs as the putting into question of the ego, the knowing subject' whose natural (spontaneous) attitude is 'to reduce all otherness to itself' (Critchley, 1999, p.5). In my initial article I suggested that incorporating some notion of epistemic values into the curriculum could serve this purpose of putting the knowing ego into question when learning – something that addresses people's right to philosophy, to learn about knowledge, as well as to the substantive knowledge of the disciplines.

The particularistic curriculum of social constructivists seems to elevate every ego – or at least that of the dispossessed – to an absolute knowing subject, and in so doing it has, as Young & Muller rightly pointed out, often failed to truly empower the dispossessed by not equipping them with the kind of knowledge that they would need to address real-world issues. Young & Muller's alternative, however, seems to take us back to a universalistic and vertical curriculum that suggests the possibility of a privileged knowing subject – or a 'cosmic community' of experts – capable of defining what should and what shouldn't form part of the curriculum, and thus leaves very little space for alternative views.

By entirely dismissing the contribution of post-structuralism and other philosophies that have influenced social constructivism and which have raised the cultural, historical and institutional nature of knowledge, as well as its ontological differential structure, Young & Muller contribute to an unnecessary dualism between the social constructivist curriculum and the sound objectivist curriculum that they propose. In doing this they resort to the strategy of setting up a 'strawman'

social constructivism which allows them to go back to the universalistic curriculum of yesteryear (see Peters, 2004).

My question is whether there is a legacy of social constructivism, or of the philosophies that have influenced it, that might be worth retaining, and whether a curriculum of the future should somehow embrace a recognition that there are multiple knowledges and perspectives while at the same time granting access to the powerful knowledge that Young & Muller so rightly defend? Is there indeed a powerful knowledge *about* knowledge (i.e. philosophy) that should also permeate the curriculum?

The authority of the curriculum is like the authority of any text. But the reading proposed by an educational curriculum will be fundamentally exceeded by reality, by the multiplicity of meanings and experiences that reality necessarily engenders. What Derrida proposes is not that we go beyond the text, to destroy it or replace it by a myriad particular readings, but rather that we add to the straightforward reading of the text a second destabilising reading in an attempt to show 'the other' of the proposed interpretation – what such an interpretation necessarily leaves out. So while the curriculum needs to keep proposing the knowledge that is central to function in today's world, some disposition to question those stable truths would be equally important. Such a curriculum would need to address both the right to knowledge discussed by Young & Muller *and* the right to philosophy that Derrida so emphasised.

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