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Richard Pring's View of Education as a Moral Practice

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ABSTRACT: Richard Pring (1938–2024) was the first holder of a Chair in Education at the University of Oxford and the Editor of the present journal from 1986 to 2001. This article pays tribute to his legacy in the field of educational philosophy. After reviewing briefly some well-known recurring themes in Pring's educational philosophy, such as his busting of 'false dualisms', the article focuses on his specific view of education (and teaching) as a moral practice. This view is considered both in light of his more general conception of the aims of education and his latter-day writings about moral or character education more specifically. The article elicits the novelty of Pring's position, especially in some of his less discussed works, and highlights his lasting legacy as a stalwart of early academic philosophy of education in the U.K. The article confirms Pring's self-ascription as a Deweyan, albeit exclusively in the context of Dewey's more systematic writing. However, Pring brought a unique take to most of the topics he discussed, defying any simplistic identification with a specific school of educational or philosophical thought.

Keywords: Richard Pring, philosophy of education, Dewey, education as a moral practice, moral education

1. INTRODUCTION

The locutions 'a force of nature' and 'a larger than life character' are overused in the English language, not least in obituaries. However, if there is someone to whom these descriptions would be correctly attributed it is Richard Pring (b. 1938), the holder of the first-ever Chair in Education at the University of Oxford, who passed away on 6th of October, 2024, and to whom this article pays tribute. Pring was Director of Education at Oxford from 1989 to 2003, where he has something of a legendary status, as evidenced by the departmental café having been named *Pring's* in his honour. He was previously Professor of Education at the University of Exeter. Richard was the Editor of the present journal from 1986 to 2001. All the academic honours bestowed upon him would

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fill half an article, and I leave those to interested readers to look up for themselves.

The first word that comes to mind when I think of Richard (as I am affectionately inclined to refer to him) is ‘formidable’. He was a formidable instructor, a formidable conference presenter, a formidable academic writer, and had a formidable persona. He also had an incredible aura of energy that enabled him *inter alia* to run full marathons into his seventies (27 in total, I believe). Unfortunately, as I was never his student or academic colleague, I did not get to spend as much time with Richard as I would have liked. However, such time as we shared in one another’s company, at scholarly retreats (esp. Villa Palazzola, one of his very favourite places and where he had stayed as a young seminarian) and at academic conferences has furnished me with sufficient material to write a ‘formidable’ article based on the stories he told me about his life and the ragtag of characters, within and outside of academia, with whom he had become acquainted. Richard was a born story-teller – and the same stories got better each time one heard them. However, when the Society for Educational Studies asked me to write an article about Richard’s educational theorising for the present journal, this is probably not what they had in mind.

That said, I cannot resist the temptation to recount one significant conversation we had which remains branded on my memory. This is when he told me that in his early years as professor at Oxford he had suffered from serious imposter syndrome. Why? Because he kept being asked by professorial colleagues whom he met at formal dinners: ‘Chair in *Education*: is that an academic subject?’ Now, insofar as imposter syndrome indicates a lack of self-confidence, the latter is not a quality that one would have easily ascribed to Richard. ‘Boisterous exuberance’ would be closer to the mark, as witnessed for example by the uncanny similarity of his outward appearance, mannerisms, and raconteur’s sense of fun to the flamboyant British actor Simon Callow (as noted by John Haldane, see Arthur, 2024). The self-ascribed syndrome in question tells us more about the ‘symbolic capital’ of Education than about Richard; I hope that such a question would not be posed in any learned company today.

Richard was – partly by interest, partly by necessity – an educational jack of all trades. He was equally comfortable discussing the minutiae of the English secondary-school curriculum as he was analysing obscure passages in Aquinas (in Latin) or Dewey. However, just as it would be unfair to claim that he was equally competent or productive in all his ‘trades’, it would be blatantly unfair to say that he was a master of none of them. There are certain areas of educational thought where Richard indubitably played a leading role in the late twentieth century and beyond. As giving an overview of all his contribution to Education in the U.K. would be beyond the scope of any single article – and some of the topics covered would find me seriously out of my scholarly depth¹ – I have decided to focus in this article on his output in the field of *educational philosophy*, fairly narrowly construed. However, even within that circumscribed

sub-field, Richard was no one-trick pony, so some further narrowing down is needed.

After giving serious thought to various ways in which this article could be written so as both to benefit readers of this journal and do justice to Richard as an educational philosopher, I decided to focus specifically on one aspect of his educational philosophy that perhaps has not yet been studied in sufficient detail: his view of education (and teaching) as an inherently moral practice, within but mainly beyond what is normally called ‘moral education’. This is also a topic to which he returned with some vigour towards the end of his life after he had been awarded an honorary position within the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham (see esp. Pring, 2014, 2018; although his most well-known inroads into this topic date back to Pring, 2001²).

The remainder of this article will be organised as follows. The following [Section 2](#) gives a very brief overview of some topics within educational philosophy to which Richard made a significant contribution. Most of those have already been canvassed in such great detail – especially in the fairly recent festschrift to Richard (Hand and Davies, 2016) – that the treatment has already reached its saturation point; and there is not much that I am able to add in terms of novel commentary. [Section 2](#) comprises, thus, largely a selection of citations, and a laundry list of topics and authors, reviewed in the service of those readers who are not already familiar with Richard’s work. [Section 3](#), however, adopts a zoom lens, focusing more narrowly on his views of the aims of education in general and, more specifically, his view of education (and teaching) as a ‘moral practice’. [Section 4](#) focusses in, even more closely, on some of his latter-day writings in which he engaged more directly with moral or character education as a distinct curricular aim. [Section 5](#) ends with some closing remarks about his legacy.

Unapologetically, given the scope of the Pringian corpus versus the length limits of the current article,³ I will need to revert to some sweeping generalisations that would need more detailed support. Moreover, I allow myself to be more personal than is common in academic articles. This is both because the person Richard and the academic Pring are difficult to separate out, especially for those who knew his very much non-poker-faced self (and he was sometimes best at explaining his views in informal conversations), but also because of his own constant worry that educational research gets ensconced in esoteric journals where opaque, inaccessible scholarly language prevents it from finding resonance with ordinary readers, teachers, and parents (see, e.g., Pring, 2000, p. 156). When trying to do justice to Richard as an educational philosopher, one had better stick to informal, everyday language. Once when he thought I had become too technical in a presentation, he commented that everything that mattered in education could (and should) be couched in language understandable to the average

pub-goer. One may wonder, however, whether the crowd that frequented the Rose and Crown on North Parade in Richard's time represents the average person in the street.

2. SOME RECURRING THEMES IN RICHARD PRING'S EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

I could not fail to notice when sifting through the many obituaries that were written to celebrate Richard's life and career how many of them seemed to refer to him as an 'educationist' or 'educator', even as 'public intellectual', rather than a 'philosopher of education'. While this view of Richard as some sort of an educational generalist is understandable, given his wide interest in all things educational and his long-time leadership of the Education Department in Oxford, it misses the extent to which Richard's own education and mindset were always inherently philosophical. Richard did his doctorate with the father of analytical educational philosophy in the U.K., R. S. Peters, and he also studied 'pure' philosophy under A. J. Ayer and Stuart Hampshire at UCL. Peters had the same pioneering and towering status in educational philosophy in the U.K. as did Israel Scheffler across the pond, and obviously Lawrence Kohlberg in the adjacent field of moral psychology/education.

In Richard's early work, including his very first article, which was tellingly published in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* on 'Philosophy of education and educational practice' (Pring, 1970), one can sense the spirit of Peters hovering over his writing. However, Richard gradually distanced himself from the style and substance of doing educational philosophy that continued to inform the work of other members of the flock of Peters' disciples and colleagues, such as John Wilson, Paul Hirst, John and Patricia White, David Carr, and Robert Dearden. It is noticeable how rarely he invokes the work of those contemporaries (although he hardly ever criticises them either), and although he never departed explicitly from the IOE way of doing educational philosophy, as did Paul Hirst, he simply did not share the interest of, say, John White in student 'wellbeing' and radical curricular change or David Carr in teacher professionalism and characterological development. Academics tend to swim in schools like fish, but Richard was never cut out for school-swimming. As he continued his academic journey, shedding the influence of Peters and other members of his school, Richard became very much his own man as an academic and an educational thinker, with his distinct way of doing things, while increasingly heeding the call of John Dewey as I explain presently.

This gradual, if mostly implicit, departure from the early influence of British analytic philosophy did not mean that Richard's approach to education became less philosophical and more 'generalist'. This can best be brought out by citing work that Richard wrote explicitly for a non-philosophical readership, such as his (Pring, 2000) introduction to the philosophy of educational research,

apparently aimed at postgraduate students commencing research in education. This is a brilliantly executed introduction, far removed from the cliché-ridden style and dichotomous approach that often characterises textbooks of this kind. I would go as far as saying that it should be mandatory reading for all aspiring educational researchers.

Richard begins by admitting that the reputation of educational research is ‘awful’ (Pring, 2000, p. 3, citing Carl Kaestle). He identifies the problem in insufficient attention being paid to the theoretical-philosophical underpinnings of such research or, when any such underpinnings are invoked, those are only vaguely grounded in any respectable philosophical position. What is needed is much more rigorous attention given to the underlying ‘logic’ of the educational discourse, and how it is grounded is diverse ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions (Pring, 2000, pp. 6–11). This need can only be satisfied by a philosophical inquiry into such key concepts as ‘reality’, ‘objectivity’, ‘causal explanation’, ‘truth’, and ‘knowledge’ (Pring, 2000, p. 58). Even if the underlying philosophy turns out to be faulty, this must be demonstrated by moving the faults from the opaque category of ‘disguised nonsense’ to the transparent one of ‘patent nonsense’ (Pring, 2019, p. 8, drawing on Wittgenstein). The crucial point here is that philosophy should not be seen as just one more intellectual discipline, alongside psychology and sociology, that aids and enriches educational research; rather philosophy defines the quality of the very activity of thinking that constitutes such research (Pring, 2019, p. 27).

Much of the bulk of the (2000) textbook is spent obliterating, through careful philosophical and historical analysis, some of the ‘false dichotomies’ that tend to haunt introductory courses on educational research. Richard explains better than anyone else I have read how the positions that are often considered to be vying for supremacy in the field of educational research (and, indeed, social science research more generally), such as qualitative versus quantitative research, and social constructivism versus positivism, are just caricatures of well-known philosophical positions and, if understood in that simplistic way, present little more than warped mirrors of each other’s methodological stances. While being no particular devotee of either positivism or quantitative research, Richard presents, for example, a much more ‘subtle and charitable’ (2000, p. 44) understanding of both those approaches than one typically comes across in current method textbooks in social science. Similarly, while acknowledging some fundamental insights from the opposing ‘camp’ about the social and, in some cases, personal nature of knowledge, he argues that any such methodologies also need to be grounded in a certain ‘realism’ about the world in which we live, in order not to become self-defeating in a Platonic sense. This is because ‘the social construction of the physical world depends upon a real world’ (and the existence of real persons *qua* objects in that world), ‘independent of that construction and constraining what construction is possible’ (Pring, 2000; an idea harking back to Pring,

p. 52; 1972⁴). As Richard rightly stresses, however, not all realism is naïve realism (Pring, 2000, p. 53), and there is no reason to go straight from the relativistic frying pan into the hard realist fire. In sum, the polarisations he criticises bear little resemblance to the complexity of educational practice and its objects of inquiry, and the firebrand advocates of binary thinking in the educational field are simply storming non-existent or already abandoned philosophical forts while their presumed adversaries have long since (e.g., post-Wittgenstein and Popper) gathered behind more defensible philosophical lines.

Hand and Davies (2016, p. 2) identify ‘a dominant philosophical instinct’ in Richard’s work: namely, that of challenging polarisations, through his inclination ‘always to give weight to both sides of an argument, to, hold contraries together, to balance and synthesise’. What needs to be highlighted here is that this Pringian stock-in-trade is more than a display of his academic even-handedness, or what he himself calls the importance of ‘philosophical puzzling’ (Pring, 2004, p. 3), or even a search for an Aristotelian golden mean in every conflict. He genuinely believes that various kinds of unnecessary and unhelpful dualisms are holding educational research back and – far from being just academic obstacles – are compromising efforts by well-meaning theorists to improve the lives of young people. Given the strength and fecundity of this belief, which goes beyond anything he will have picked up from Peters’ tutelage, one’s mind turns immediately to that proverbial dualism-buster John Dewey; and, lo and behold, that is exactly where Richard himself locates the provenance of his critical but conciliatory approach.

There is hardly any book or article written by Richard in which he does not express his scholarly indebtedness to Dewey (see, e.g., Pring, 2000, pp. 12, 33; 2019, 70, 74; and of course his 2007 book about Dewey). Somewhat surprisingly, Richard refers more frequently to Dewey’s earlier works (Dewey, 1897 and esp.; Dewey, 1916), which many people see as anything but conciliatory, than to his famous 1938 (Dewey, 1938) refutation of various ‘either-or’ dichotomies in educational thought, where Richard would perhaps have found a more natural ally. I say a bit more about that later. First, it is instructive, however, to explore briefly the most explicitly critical contribution to the 2016 festschrift, which is David Carr’s scathing attack on Richard’s own proposed theoretical link between himself and Dewey. Spurning all restraints of academic charity, Carr provides a host of reasons why Richard is completely mistaken in the identification of his own academic genealogy. Before suggesting that Richard may not be as far off the mark as Carr argues and that his developmental narrative deserves a more thorough hearing before being sent to the gallows, let me note that Carr’s article is one of the most beautifully and passionately written of any contributions to the field that I have read. In fact, I always recommend it to new doctoral students as a *tour de force* in how to write an insightful academic article. However, the stylistic fireworks aside, the problem

seems to me to be that Carr is unable to square his deep overall admiration of Richard's work and career with his visceral distaste for anything Deweyan.

Carr (2016) argues, among other things, that a) many of the binaries, such as that between theory and practice, to which Dewey objected are in fact to be found in Richard's writings, b) Dewey's pragmatism, to which Richard often overtly ascribes, is in fact a by-product of the very kind of relativism that Richard took to task already in his 1972 critique of Michael Young's work on the sociology of education, and c) Richard's reconciliation of the dichotomy between liberal education and vocational skills is a radically different 'reconciliation' than that proffered by Dewey. There is no space here to discuss all these grievances in detail, but I propose to raise just one general point that relates most directly to b) but indirectly to a) and c) also. There is, as is often claimed, not just one Dewey but many Deweys, and when one considers his enormous scholarly output as a whole, it is full of internal inconsistencies and elliptical arguments. Many of the inconsistencies could be explained away sympathetically as examples of progression in Dewey's own thought, but Dewey was notoriously reluctant himself to acknowledge any significant shifts in his own views. All in all, the Deweyan cookbook has always been better for its starters and desserts than the main courses. A case in point is Dewey's espousal of pragmatism. To put it simply, Dewey was never interested in developing a rigorous epistemology of pragmatism, let alone an anti-realist ontology about 'the real' being simply 'what is useful to believe in', to put it crudely. In other words, Dewey was not a pragmatic philosopher in the same sense as Charles Peirce or even William James. His espoused pragmatism was more of a methodological nature than an epistemological or ontological one. The Deweyan point was simply that educationists and educators should suspend all judgements about ultimate knowledge or realities and simply focus on finding solutions to common-sense problems in classrooms or college halls: solutions that are conducive to student 'growth' (although Carr finds that concept vacuous also). This is the point that Richard seems to be granting (see, e.g., Pring, 1989, 2019, p. 29); nothing more.

A smaller but related consideration is that Richard's original (Pring, 1972) harsh critique of social constructivism was not a plea for a return to any hard realism, let alone positivism; it was simply a reminder not to accept the radical relativism about knowledge and truth implied by social constructivism. The sort of realism with which Richard much later associated himself, namely 'critical realism', is very much epistemologically at least, if less so ontologically, an agnostic view of a world that we can never fully grasp as such (Pring, 2019, pp. 16–26, 75). What is more, I would not be surprised if Dewey, at least in his post-1938 work, would have happily endorsed the same view. Carr does have a point, however, in that the 'progressivism' that Dewey espoused in his early works Dewey (1897, 1916), to which Richard most frequently refers as ideally dualism-busting,

is difficult to reconcile with any intermediary ‘critical realist’ position, or with a pragmatism that is merely methodological, not ontological. In those early works, Dewey seems to want to discard theory, rather than synthesising it with practice, and foreground skills at the expense of education’s intrinsic value. This is why I commented above that Richard would probably have been better advised to rely on Dewey’s truly conciliatory 1938 book, which is also (implicitly) highly critical of Dewey’s earlier self. In fact, I sometimes wish Dewey had not written anything educational prior to 1938, but that is another story.

After this brief attempt at deflecting some of Carr’s scepticism about Richard as (albeit somewhat uniquely) Deweyan, it behoves me to rehearse some of the dualisms that Richard actually tried to bust. As his writings about those topics are perhaps the best known and most often cited parts of his corpus, and effectively summarised and discussed in the 2016 festschrift, I will just list some of them briefly. At the top of the list would have to be his obliteration of the crude distinction between subject-centred and child-centred education (Pring, 1989). As applies also to the other topics mentioned presently, Richard’s method here is his standard one of showing, through rigorous philosophical and historical analysis, how the presumed binaries contain hidden complexities and incorporate various sub-positions, some of which may be reconcilable with assumptions of the suggested opposite camp. For example, to claim that all education should be organised in terms of the interests of children can mean many different things, ranging from a) what the children are interested in, b) what the children would be interested in if inducted into the relevant discourse, c) what the children are not and would not be intrinsically interested in, but are still in their interest to know, etc. Another classical theme is the distinction between vocational training and liberal education, helpfully discussed by Winch (2016). The third potential dichotomy addressed by Richard is between teaching as a practice of ‘common sense’ versus a theoretically driven enterprise (see Davies, 2016). The most philosophically meaty argument is perhaps the previously mentioned one launched by Richard against social constructivism as a radically binary position (Pring, 1972). Somewhat remarkably, but in a gracious display of academic charity and honesty, Michael Young, at whom the original critique was directed, has now (Young, 2016) taken on board the basic insights of Richard’s critique, which he claimed made him see the light. This is perhaps a prime example of Richard’s persuasiveness and the strength of his argumentation.

The previously mentioned festschrift (Hand and Davies, 2016) contains many more examples and discussions of the dichotomies that Richard attacked, as well as other aspects of his educational theorising, to which I happily direct readers. However, what I have said already hopefully suffices to show that Richard was not amiss in his self-ascription as a follower of Dewey – although I repeat the earlier point that Richard always gave a unique personal touch to all

his argumentation, which cannot be assimilated easily to any particular school of thought.

3. THE AIMS OF EDUCATION AND ITS STATUS AS A MORAL PRACTICE

My favourite Richard Pring paper has always been his 2000 Glasgow Kohlberg Memorial Lecture (Pring, 2001) on education as a moral practice. I have often wondered why it has not attracted more scholarly attention, including in the aforementioned festschrift, apart from a side-argument about ‘moral seriousness’ that I discuss later. One of the reasons could be that the paper is set in a certain discursive tradition about the ultimate aims(s) of education, and at the turn of the century the consensual position on that question was still firmly grounded in the Human Capital Theory from the 1960s-70s – for instance, informing OECD policy-making and their PISA testing – according to which the main aims of education, in an international context, are economic: GDP growth for nations and financial security for individuals. While constantly challenged by other international institutions, such as UNESCO, it was not until the early 2020s that the OECD began to lean towards a new, morally informed, flourishing paradigm about the aims of education (Stevenson, 2022). It would be interesting to know what Richard would have thought about this new paradigm (Curren *et al.*, 2024; Kristjánsson and VanderWeele, 2025) and whether it would have reinforced or somehow altered his (2001) view. However, in Richard’s heyday, an instrumentalist, managerial mindset was still on the rise in education-policy circles, and his energy in this area was expended on fighting that mindset, and various increasingly business-oriented conceptions of education, rather than thinking beyond it to a more classical conception of flourishing.

That said, Richard does mention flourishing (*eudaimonia*) in a few places, but those are mostly confined to a late period in his career, after he had developed an interest in virtue or character education as a distinct curricular element (Pring, 2014, 2018). For example, in his 2014 article he defines *eudaimonia* as ‘an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue (amongst other things)’ (p. 39): a standard Aristotelian rendering. Prior to this belated neo-Aristotelian turn, the Aristotelian influence on his thought had appeared scant, except insofar as the historic Aristotle can sometimes be glimpsed through the prism of Aquinas, for whom Richard always had deep affection, harking back to his days as a seminarian in Rome.⁵ The glimpse of a broadly Aristotelian/Thomistic view of the aim of education that comes explicitly to the fore in his latter-day writings can be enlarged by rehearsing some general comments that Richard made earlier in his career about the nature and aims of education. I would argue that if we synthesise those comments and read them in conjunction with the (Pring, 2001) paper on education (and teaching) as a moral practice, the natural progression of this synthesis is already heading in the

direction of a neo-Aristotelian turn, rather than us seeing that turn as an unexpected latter-day aberration.

One cannot define the aims of education without an account of what education really is. For Richard, it ‘refers to those activities, on the whole formally planned and taught, which bring about learning’ (Pring, 2000, p. 16). As his argument about what comprises ‘worthwhile’ learning unfolds, we see that it has to do with nurturing the distinctively human ‘life of the mind’. This life includes intellectual and moral virtues, knowledge and understanding, imagination, self-reflection, and political engagement/sense of community (Pring (2000, pp. 12–20; cf. Pring, 2019, p. 40). We already notice here a distinct similarity to the components that are typically seen as making up flourishing on current conceptions (Curren *et al.*, 2024; Kristjánsson and VanderWeele, 2025). As correctly pointed out by Carr, however, in a different context (Carr, 2021), ‘flourishing’ can act as a bland and vacuous term, simply referring to a ragbag of values most people like, unless it is defined with sufficient specificity to exclude certain value candidates. Richard takes up that challenge by arguing, for example, that a commonly invoked aim of education, *autonomy*, fails to pass muster because it is, as such, amoral and also (insofar as it is inspired by Kantian ethics) denuded of any connection to human emotions, which for Richard counts as an unforgiveable sin in any account of the aims of *human* education (Pring, 2014, p. 48).⁶ In his earlier work, Richard avoided the term ‘character education’ about the development of the virtues that constitute ‘worthwhile learning’, but he did use the term ‘personal formation’ (Pring, 2000, p. 20), which has more of a Thomistic than Aristotelian tincture.

While ‘moral virtues’ already featured as one of the aspects of good education, in Richard’s earlier work, his (Pring, 2001) piece on ‘moral practice of education’ (and teaching⁷) solidifies more explicitly his moralised view of education. As already noted, I am at a loss why this paper has not received the attention that it deserves and richly repays; it was after all chosen by Richard himself as the first chapter in his 2004 collection. One reason could be that it was delivered to a different crowd than the philosophy-of-education one that used to listen most carefully to what Richard had to say.

The first thing to note is that Richard uses the term ‘practice’ here in an everyday sense for any institutional activity; he does not invoke MacIntyre’s famous technical definition of the term. Moreover, while the paper begins with a respectful nod to Kohlberg, as befits any Kohlberg Memorial Lecture, and especially his work with the so-called ‘Just Community Schools’, this is not a contribution to the kind of deontologically inspired account of moral education and development to which Kohlberg subscribed. Indeed, this is not a paper about ‘moral education’ at all, in the narrow sense of the term; Richard is wary of the trend to silo moral education within a specific curricular subject on the school timetable.⁸ This is, rather, a plea for understanding the whole of education as a moral practice and to categorise it under the umbrella of ‘humane studies’, or the humanities, instead of social science. That is a very bold

claim, which would, for one thing, mean a radical rearrangement of the way university faculties are carved up between different categories of study. In any case, the very boldness of this claim should put it close to the top of any agenda of studies into Richard's thought.

Richard laments the way in which the moral nature of the aims of education has become diluted in educational discourse and often conflated with questions about the effectiveness of delivery, which is an amoral, technical concern. This has led both to the sidelining of subjects like the arts and history in school curricula and to a reshuffle of the content of what remains of those subjects towards a desiccated focus on technical and factual aspects, rather than their potential for the moral formation in which students learn to understand their own humanity and the values through which that humanity is defined. Richard waxes uncharacteristically nostalgic in his vision of previous eras and past educational theories that gave teachers space to share their common humanity with their pupils as well as their common existential uncertainty. These observations offer him the chance to extend the remit of his argument from education *qua* practice to teachers *qua* professionals, arguing in a similar vein that teachers must understand themselves as moral agents, sharing in a moral enterprise of inherently value-based initiation of students into worthwhile activities. Richard worries that even the teachers themselves have become mesmerised by the business-oriented language of efficiency that has polluted educational policy discourse. He does glimpse a ray of light in ideas about a new secondary-school subject of *citizenship*, but this optimism is mitigated by the concern that this will just become one more isolated unit in the timetable, not informing the whole of school practice.

At the close of the paper under discussion, Richard invokes a concept he frequently mentions elsewhere: that of 'moral seriousness' (see also 1997 and various other places⁹), understood as the capacity that students should ideally develop to think seriously about their relationships, their future, their loyalties, and their commitments. Richard (Pring, 1997) talks about this as a 'moral perspective', as distinct from one of the mere cleverness, and seems to think that this will be an outgrowth of a more comprehensive ideal of the school and university as sites of a moral practice. Yet Richard is unusually and unhelpfully vague about what this term involves, motivating his former doctoral student, Michael Hand, to offer some clarifications. Hand (2016) argues in a well-turned chapter that what is needed for 'moral seriousness' to develop is initiation into (and learning to care personally about¹⁰) various forms of practical inquiry: vocational, relational, moral, and political. Hand is slightly ambiguous about whether his aim is to correct errors Richard may have made in his specification of 'moral seriousness', as simply making curricular content more personal and intimately relevant, or to flesh out an essentially Pringian, but badly missing, account of the required specifics of the concept. At all events, I do not see anything in Hand's suggestions that Richard should have objected to in principle. However, those additions bring home to us the fact that, given the ambitious sweep and radical content of Richard's (Pring, 2001)

paper, it is something of a pity that he did not follow it up with more detailed analyses of what understanding education and teaching as a moral practice and highlighting the development of students' 'moral seriousness', really amounts to in practical terms. Yet even if the visionary and slightly romanticised nature of the paper leaves something to be desired in terms of specifics,¹¹ it already counts as a significant stepping stone towards the ideal of the aims of education that was to develop 20 years later under the heading of a 'flourishing agenda'.

4. THE LATE INTEREST IN MORAL AND CHARACTER EDUCATION

Although Richard was fairly consistent in his academic interest and theoretical preferences during his career (different, for example, from Dewey), it would be amiss to fail to mention here two papers that he wrote towards the end of his academic life that seemed to signal a slight change of compass. This is his defence of virtue or character education in 2014 and his sympathetic review of moral education in the United Arab Emirates in 2018. Perhaps characteristic of the tradition of analytic philosophers in the U.K., who never followed the social-science practice of referencing 'the kitchen sink', but also of Richard's own declining years (in terms of energy rather than acuity), these two papers do not contain many references to the abundant contemporary literatures on moral and character education; he mostly relies on philosophical staples like Aristotle, Hume, and Kant. It is, therefore, difficult to situate Richard's apparent about-face in the context of academic developments in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

What is not difficult to detect, however, is that Richard has now departed somewhat from his idealistic vision of moral concerns informing all aspects of school practice to acknowledging the role that a specific subject might also play in the personal formation of students. Richard acknowledges that the word 'virtue' (as in 'virtue education') may have an odour and an historical baggage that puts some people off – not least, presumably, left-leaning ones like himself. Nevertheless, Richard now argues that the elision of virtues from school agendas opens the door to a dangerous emphasis on autonomy as a moral ideal, although (as he already pointed out much earlier) autonomy is essentially an amoral ideal that can be executed in the service of both exemplary and pernicious ends. He discusses the standard topic of the universality versus locality of virtues, concluding that although most virtues (such as justice, courage, and honesty) have universal appeal, different societies and times may rank them differently. He then highlights the Aristotelian (and essentially anti-Kantian) point that the virtues must be accompanied by the appropriate emotions, although 'appropriateness' is of course 'a tricky term' (Pring, 2014, p. 43). Furthermore, he anticipates the later interest that practically minded virtue ethicists and character educators have developed in *phronesis* (McLoughlin *et al.*, 2025) by pointing out the need for an intellectual virtue that keeps the

moral ones ‘in balance’ (Pring, 2014, p. 44). Richard does not say explicitly in this paper that character education should be introduced as a school subject, but he rues the impoverishment of moral education in school curricula and argues that moral education must be character-based: namely, ‘help the young to be strengthened in [their existing] virtues, or to acquire them where they are deficient’ (Pring, 2014, p. 46).

The 2018 review of moral education in the UAE is more practically oriented, looking in detail at different local school practices and programmes. It is noticeable how precise and specific Richard’s observations and recommendation are, although this was one of his last papers and his health was already deteriorating. He had visited six schools in May 2018, and his suggestions are based on his notes from those observations, as well as the general tenor of the government’s edict to include moral education in the curriculum of all UAE schools. Although some of Richard’s text is too context-specific for the present article, he also makes it abundantly clear that the general ‘basis’ for moral education must be virtue ethics. Moral or character education, when seen as an incarnation of such ethics, must foreground both habitation and deliberation – the latter being practised in the context of autonomous decision-making, although ‘autonomy’ here needs to be constrained by moral concerns. Mindful of his earlier emphasis on the intimate link between the arts and moral development, Richard particularly recommends the excellent children’s stories written by Jubilee Centre researcher Liz Gulliford as examples of books that can be taught in the service of virtue literacy.

All in all, these two late articles serve as a fitting finale to the journey that Richard began with his Kohlberg Memorial Lecture (Pring, 2001), in which he carves out a view of education as an inherently moral endeavour.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

It has been a sheer pleasure to revisit Richard Pring’s work in order to pay homage to it. It does help that I find myself in broad, if sometimes uneasy, agreement with most of Richard’s views, especially in his post-2000 publications.¹² Whatever quarrels I might have picked with the particularities of some of his writings, if I had constructed this article as more of a critical review, those would always have been intellectually rewarding rather than academically frustrating. Often held in thrall by Richard’s wit, story-telling magic, and erudition when I met him, I now wish I had spent more time in dialogue with him about his educational and moral theorising.

With Richard being a foe both of paltry provincialism and ivory-tower abstractness in exploring educational themes, it is easy to fall in love with his no-nonsense, common-sense approach and practically oriented recommendations. To use Kafka’s well-known phrase, Richard’s work serves remarkably well as an axe for the frozen sea inside us, with regard to educational matters, although he stays systematically away from any wild exclamations, in terms of either substance or style. In this

article, I have tried to give a broad, if brief, overview of his educational philosophy, but I have spilled most ink on one of his hyper-concerns, the idea of education as a moral practice, not least because it has not attracted as much scholarly attention as it deserves. It also serves as a useful prism through which to view the whole Pringian corpus. As an aside, I have defended Richard's own view of himself as influenced, in his relentless bridging efforts, by Dewey. The invocation of Dewey always evokes strong emotions among educationists. Yet whether one loves or loathes the Deweyan aspects of Richard's thoughts, there is no denying his place among the most influential and respected educational philosophers of his generation in the English-speaking world.

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10. NOTES

1. For example, I am not able to comment on the extent to which his Catholic faith (he originally studied for the Priesthood) influenced his educational thought, nor his own impact on Catholic educational thought and Religious Education more generally. I do acknowledge the point made by James Arthur (2024), however, that Richard's Catholic faith was no doubt inseparable from his overall world-view, and that includes his educational thought (cf. also Carr *et al.*, 1995). For example, some of his first works were clearly written from within the tradition of Catholic teachings about education, where he attacked Thomism under the influence of R. S. Peters (a position from which he later retreated). In addition to this aspect of his thinking, which is outside of my area of expertise, the review he did, post-retirement, for the Nuffield Foundation on education and training for 14–19 year olds (Pring *et al.*, 2009) would deserve a separate article.
2. His 2001 article stems from the Kohlberg Memorial Lecture that he gave at the Association for Moral Education conference in Glasgow in 2000. Each year some distinguished academic is invited to give this lecture in honour of the memory of Lawrence Kohlberg, the father of contemporary moral psychology.
3. I am obviously only able to cite parts of that large corpus in this article.
4. In that work, Richard expresses the same idea less diplomatically: 'That we distinguish between cats and dogs may be due to certain social conditions; that we *can* so distinguish has something to do with cats and dogs.'
5. For example, I see no indication that Richard's conciliatory instinct was motivated by Aristotle's view of the golden mean of action or reaction (flanked by extremes of deficiency and excess) and the ideal of a psycho-moral homeostasis. Yet see Pring (2014, p. 44) for a positive nod to the golden mean.
6. This is one of the few places in which Richard actually chastises some of his fellow analytical philosophers from the same era: here John Wilson and Richard Hare for their Kantian assumptions.

7. Compare also his view of the moral nature of educational *leadership* (Pring, 2019, pp. 109–111), although I do not have space to elaborate upon that here.
8. He developed a more balanced view about that later (see Pring, 2018). Yet he still endorses a ‘whole school approach to moral education’ (p. 306). See also [Section 4](#) below.
9. See a list of textual references in Hand (2016), p. 48.
10. Richard refers sympathetically to the care ethics of Nel Noddings (2019, p. 49).
11. Some of those details may perhaps be elicited from other Pring papers (esp. 1997 and 1999). However, those are also fairly general in their recommendations.
12. I might want to exclude here some passages in his 2007 book on Dewey (Pring, 2007), although my antagonism to that book runs nowhere as deep as Carr’s (2016).

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