Booknotes

What politicians like to call 'investment in education' has increased dramatically over the past few decades in most Western democracies, and 'cuts' notwithstanding, is hardly likely to fall substantially in the near future. Yet, in the view of most objective observers (and participants), standards in anything that could properly be regarded as education have not risen. In Britain and the USA in public education, even levels of basic reading and maths have risen very little, if at all, despite copious rhetoric, drum banging and fiddling with assessment. And it is not that performance monitoring and target setting have not been introduced for teachers; they have, and with a vengeance, at all levels of education, from early years teaching to university research.

It is the view of Jane Green, in *Education, Professionalism and the Quest for Accountability: Hitting the Target, but Missing the Point* (Routledge, 2011), that there is no paradox here. Leaving investment aside, it is precisely because politicians and educational bureaucrats have imposed on teachers management models wholly unsuited to the educational enterprise that things have (only) got worse. And, if her view is correct, they can only continue to deteriorate unless there is a radical change of heart. In a way her subtitle says it all. It is seeing education in terms of externally quantifiable targets that is the root of our malaise. This mania for target setting and performance management, as it is called, is firmly embedded in a model of management which has governments and, as a result, all of us in its asphyxiating grip.

The management model itself, which Green refers to as 'New Public Management', actually has ancient philosophical roots, deriving ultimately from the Socratic–Platonic goal of making everything explicit, and drawing heavily on seventeenth century rationalism. What is at its core is a misplaced drive for explicitness, the belief that rational activity is activity for which explicit reasons can be given by the agent and usually in advance of the action, and success or failure ticked off accordingly. Anything which does not conform to this model of explicitness is then, by definition, irrational; further from the point of view of those managing and funding the activity, it will be unaccountable because its results will be too indeterminate to measure and quantify.

Against this form of rationalism Green wages an exhaustive and largely successful Aristotelian campaign, enlisting in her support

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not just Aristotle himself, but also such figures as Polanyi, Wittgenstein, Bernard Williams, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Michael Oakeshott. Actually she might have drawn on Oakeshott rather more than she does, as his *Rationalism in Politics* remains the most subtle modern diagnosis of the ills she is contesting, but, reasonably enough, it is to Aristotle himself, and his analysis of practical reasoning that she principally turns. Her book is worth consulting for that alone, for it shows the relevance of Aristotle to our present concerns. Without doing anything like justice to the account here, what stands out in both Aristotle and Green is the thought that practical reason (under which the activity of educating will naturally fall) is concerned not with *theory*, but with *action*. It is as she says (quoting Elijah Millgram) a matter of 'figuring out what to do'. It is the way in which we bring what matters to us to bear on particular situations in which we find ourselves, and this, crucially, is not a matter of scientific deduction. Our goals are not specified in advance, nor can any of us give an exhaustive account of what matters to us, nor should we be expected to; some things are simply too deep and too pervasive for any non-vacuous justification or formulation. Further, we may only discover what our ends are or modify them as we go, *in medias res*, so to speak, judging each new situation in terms of our whole battery of background concerns. There is no pre-existing calculus telling us in advance how to weigh the various considerations that might bear on a given situation, and while we can give reasons for what we do, not only does reason giving quickly run out, as Wittgenstein was so fond of telling us, but some of the most important reasons may ever remain implicit, rather than explicit. They are in the realm of what Polanyi called tacit knowledge, attitudes we imbibe in our culture and in the institutions we live with, as part of that living. In the life-world, rationality is a matter of each of us, drawing on the wisdom of judgement we (and others) may have acquired in our experience and practice, which is not susceptible to any great degree of verbal formulation, but which requires on the part of the agent watchfulness and attention in the light of what deep down he or she knows and cares about. The rationality involved in Aristotelian practical reasoning will certainly not be the sort of thing that can be measured or demonstrated in Cartesian mode.

All this will be anathema to those (such as our educational masters) who think in terms of targets, learning objectives and what is now called 'pedagogical knowledge' (= precisely the ultimately unavailing attempt to transform the knowing-how of the activity of teaching into a corpus of propositional knowledge-that, against which your practice can be ticked off – very important these days if your teaching is being

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inspected by those concerned to micro-manage the process). Green says rather poignantly at one point that the new managerialists will read what she has to say 'with mounting indignation'. They won't, because, so convinced are they that their way is the only way to produce results, they won't read her at all (the normal way our masters deal with criticism). If, unlike the head of Tony Blair's 'Delivery Unit' (!), who apparently actually believes that Britain is on the road to a 'world-class education system' (the way these people speak!), a new model manager actually admits to a failure in management (or outcomes), the remedy will always be more managing, more 'joined-up' regulation and box ticking, more interfering with the detail of the day to day activities of teachers.

Green could concede that talk of learning objectives, of fixed goals in advance of the activity and of targets may be reasonable where the inculcation of a specific skill is at issue, where one needs such a skill for the exercise of some capacity or for the fulfilment of some task one has (e.g. the skill of typing and word processing for what I am doing now). Moreover there are some skills involved in becoming educated as pre-conditions, as it were (e.g. the deciphering of written letters into sounds for reading, the knowledge of arithmetical tables for calculating bills or of the correct conjugating of irregular verbs for speaking passable French). But the acquiring of skills of these sorts (which are actually woefully neglected in most modern education) is not the aim of education. In a sense we all know what education is because it is the sea in which most of us swam in our schools - and which might be seen in terms of Newman's cultivation of the true enlargement of the mind as an end in itself, or of Arnold's immersion into the best that has been thought and known, or of an Oakeshottian entry into the conversations of mankind. All these are, of course, open-ended, never-ending processes without any fixity of outcome, and inherently unquantifiable and unamenable to the management philosophies Green is fighting against. So – a point Green does not make – it is no coincidence that alongside the take-over of public education by new public managers has come an increasing tendency to see education in terms of the acquisition of skills, what in the old days would have been called training as opposed to education, and which has little to do with education in the sense of Newman, Arnold and Oakeshott.

So far, so good. Many readers of *Philosophy* will appreciate the importance of what Green has to say in attacking the philosophical basis of new public management. But her remedy – to leave accountability to the professionalism of the teaching profession – is less happy. After all, the reason that the managers took over from the

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late 1970s onwards, is that far too many children were leaving school knowing virtually nothing and being able to do very little. It is true that in 2011 far too many children are still leaving school knowing virtually nothing and able to do very little – so clearly two or three decades of new public management has not provided the answer. But neither did teacher professionalism on its own in the 1960s and 1970s. Too many teachers then as now were wedded to ideologies of dubious educational value (envisaging even very young children 'negotiating their own meanings', advocating group activity and the 'skill' of 'learning to learn' in place of pupils actually being taught worthwhile things and learning them things, endlessly repeating the mantra that they teach children rather than subjects, etc., etc.). As a result too many of the children they taught or rather failed to teach were left in the lurch, actually having learned very little. Parents who queried any of this were routinely told that they did not know what they were talking about. But unfortunately too many of the parents knew only too well that their children were not learning to read properly, that they were unable to do simple sums, that they were learning virtually no history, etc., etc., but, unless they could pay for private education, they were unable to do anything about it. They were blocked by a malign combination of inflexible state bureaucracy and so-called teacher professionalism where the profession was to a considerable degree wedded to suspect ideas about what they were doing.

Despite Green's doubts on the point, there really was (and is) a 'secret garden' in education, and prior to new public management, and even to-day to judge by its spokesmen and women, the teaching profession seemed far more concerned to preserve its own privilege and position than to account to the public for its performance. The fact that new public management has done little better (and is likely to squeeze out what vestiges remain in public education to the great tradition of learning to which Newman and Arnold spoke) does not mean that faith in teacher professionalism on its own is the answer.

And while Green clearly does not like the market, which she seems to hold responsible for the management models she rightly criticises, she might look to see where education in the liberal sense does largely flourish. It is precisely in a significant proportion of those schools which are independent of the state – and so, being free of state micro-management, are able to foster and retain some of the professional ethos of a truly liberal education. But they are also accountable in the most direct way possible. If the parents, whose children they were educating, did not like what they were paying for, the

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schools would (and do) close in very sort order. Green might ask herself whether a good professional ethos and the discipline of the market are as mutually antithetical as she supposes, and also whether the modern populist democratic state will ever again be capable of not attempting to micro-manage what it has taken responsibility for. If the answer to both these questions turns out to be 'no', then perhaps Green would be ready to consider whether the professionalism and accountability she seeks – and the 'point' of her title that the targets miss – might best flourish in an education system wholly independent of the state, but directly accountable to the parents it serves.

If Green, appropriately enough, takes Aristotle for her mentor, she might also like to think that she would get support from Confucius. That Confucius is in his own way propounding a doctrine of practical wisdom not too far from Aristotle's emerges strongly from Paul R. Goldin's admirable introduction, *Confucianism* (Acumen, 2011). Like Socrates, Confucius wrote nothing; Goldin speculates that part of the reason for this was that writing might have seemed incompatible with two of Confucius's central doctrines, that people need to think for themselves and also that no two situations were ever alike enough to be easily discernible by appeal to a universal principle. Wisdom and judgement of a type not reducible to verbal formulation are required. Add to that the stress laid by Confucius and his followers, such as Mencius and Xunzi, on the need both for individual self-cultivation in a moral, ethical and even aesthetic sense, and for a well-ordered hierarchical society, and we have a 'management' model (if one might so put it) about as far from the meritocratic busyness of the new public management as it is possible to envisage. But it is one which would fit well with the form of professional ethics appropriate to education in its full sense.

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