

Education and ‘Thick’ Epistemology

Ben Kotzee

School of Continuing Education
Birkbeck College, University of London
26 Russell Square
London
WC1B 5DQ

b.kotzee@bbk.ac.uk

Education and ‘Thick’ Epistemology

1. ‘Thick’ and ‘thin’ concepts

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Bernard Williams first draws his influential distinction between ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ concepts in ethics. Drawing the distinction formed part of a rethinking by Williams of the distinction between fact and value in ethics and was ultimately meant to provide a defence of cognitivism over expressivism. For Williams, ethical talk expresses not just pure evaluation (as expressivism holds) but also descriptions of ethical states of affairs that are capable of being true or false. More importantly, Williams’s turn to ‘thick’ concepts in ethics flowed from a general disquiet about the nature of ethical theorising: Williams was of the opinion that ethical theorising focussed too sharply on merely ‘thin’ concepts to the exclusion of ‘thick’ concepts.

What are ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ concepts? The distinction is best made clear by considering an example of each. Take the concept ‘sleazy’, for instance as used when we express a thought like ‘Amsterdam is sleazy’¹. By describing Amsterdam as ‘sleazy’ one aims to describe that city as being a certain way – one describes it as being a little bit run down, a little bit disreputable, a place where some immorality takes place and so-on (I make no claim that Amsterdam is in fact sleazy). However, more than stating a fact about how Amsterdam *is*, in calling it sleazy one also conveys a value judgement about the place: one conveys that one thinks Amsterdam is a bit corrupt, a bit contemptible and expresses a degree of disapproval of the place – in calling Amsterdam sleazy, one generally advances the idea that Amsterdam *should not* (quite) *be* as it is. The point is that ‘sleazy’ is a descriptive and an evaluative concept at once; as such it qualifies as a ‘thick’ concept in Williams’s terms. Examples of other thick concepts are, for instance, ‘treacherous’, ‘brutal’, ‘brave’, etc. – all indicate both *how* something is and whether we *approve* of it or not.

Contrasted with thick concepts like these are purely descriptive or non-ethical concepts on the one hand and ‘thin’ concepts on the other. Take concepts like ‘green’, ‘flightless’ or ‘lunar’: by saying that something is green, cannot fly or has to do with the moon one really is only describing something as being so and not expressing an evaluation about it. Such concepts are non-ethical. Also contrasted with thick concepts are thin ones like ‘good’ or ‘ought’; by saying that something is good or that it ought to be done, one is *only* evaluating, not describing: one does not say how Jack really is at all if one says just ‘Jack is good’, one expresses a pure evaluation of how Jack is without further description of how he is.

Let us turn back to thick concepts. We are all familiar, I think, with thick concepts (even though it requires a touch of sensitivity to realise that what one sometimes think is a purely descriptive matter really also contains a value judgement). Expanding on the basic sort of example, one may say that thick concepts are relatively specific concepts and are objective to the extent that their application is determined by what the world is actually like. That means that it is to an extent a matter of fact (a matter of how the world is) whether some thick concept really applies to a case. Take this example of how we apply thick concepts: Nelson, one can say, was ‘courageous’ (a thick concept). That he was courageous is not just pure evaluation: what really occurred in the world – his successful actions in the face of formidable opposition at the Nile, at Copenhagen and at Trafalgar – speak for his courage. This is not to say that one cannot *disagree* that Nelson was courageous; someone may hold,

¹ The example (without the filling in about Amsterdam) is Elgin’s (2008).

for instance, that he was not *courageous* at Copenhagen, just *foolhardy* (the old telescope to the blind eye) and that in his personal life he was *disloyal*. Whether or not one agrees that Nelson was courageous, the point is that it is not just a matter of pure preference or pure taste whether one thinks Nelson was courageous: the matter is capable of discussion *in terms of what actually went on in the world* and is partly settled on the basis of what Nelson actually did and did not do. In Williams's terms, application of the concept 'courageous' is *world-guided*. The world-guidedness of thick terms means that, in contrast with matters of pure taste, there is typically a degree of agreement between people about the application of specific thick concepts to particular cases and that thick concepts (like 'courage') are capable of sustaining objective-style agreement and disagreement about whether they really apply to specific cases (like Nelson's conduct).

At the same time as being world-guided, however, thick concepts are also 'action-guiding'. If a thick concept (like 'courage') really applies to an action, this provides one with a reason for performing that action: all being equal, if, say, jumping in and saving the baby is genuinely the *courageous* action to perform, this provides one with at least one reason to perform that action... Again, one can disagree whether jumping in is really courageous, but if it is, one has a *reason* to jump in (this reason can, admittedly, be over-ridden by others). Calling an action 'courageous' signals how one thinks a person should act at the same time as describing an action and the same is true for other thick concepts: they are *both* world-guided and action-guiding. Thin concepts, in turn, are merely action-guiding – calling an action 'good', for instance, signals that one thinks it should be done – but they are not descriptive of the world ('world-guided'): calling an action 'good' does not describe it in the sense that calling it 'brave' does; saying it is merely good is making an abstract evaluation and not saying something about *how* it is that people can agree (or disagree) about.

2. *Thick and thin concepts in epistemology*

It is commonly accepted that ethical theorising focuses on the thin; indeed, it was Williams's contention that moving from considering thin to thick concepts leads to a different, and preferable, conception of ethics.² A similar distinction between thick and thin concepts suggest itself within epistemology and traditional discussion within epistemology also seems to focus on the thin. The question of a parallel suggests itself: can one distinguish between thick and thin concepts in epistemology and can shifting focus from thin to thick concepts lead to an alternative and/or preferable epistemology?

The contributors to a recent edition of the journal *Philosophical Papers* considered the importance of the thin/thick distinction for epistemology. As is the case in ethics, most held that one can distinguish between thin concepts in epistemology, like 'justified' or 'warranted' and thick epistemological concepts, like 'intellectual curiosity', 'trustworthiness' and 'open-mindedness'. Just like with ethical concepts, one can distinguish between when an epistemological concept only signals an evaluation of a belief – calling a belief 'warranted', say, signals only that one thinks that it should be held – and when an epistemological concept *describes* as well as evaluates. Calling a belief 'open-minded', for instance signals that one approves of it at the same time as saying something about how the belief is: a belief that is open-minded is unbiased, tolerant, patient and so-on.

² See Scheffler (1987) for a thorough discussion of the thin/thick distinction and an influential criticism.

Disagreements about the sharpness of the distinction aside³, Jeremy Wanderer and I have held (Kotzee and Wanderer, 2008) that a shift of focus from the thin to the thick in epistemology may have a number of consequences: prominently, holding that thick concepts are central to epistemology breaks down further the fact/value dichotomy in epistemology and shifting focus from the thin to the thick implies a value pluralism in the subject.

The first consequence is obvious: if epistemology's central concepts are at once descriptive and evaluative, the subject is not value-free, it is normative. While many already hold this view, in analytic philosophy the normativity of epistemology is a contested subject with especially philosophers aligned to naturalism rejecting it. According to most naturalistically-minded philosophers, whether something is 'knowledge' depends on whether it is (I generalise) a true belief that is justifiably held and the questions whether something is a belief, is true and is justified to hold are all purely *descriptive* matters. Showing that one of these elements is not descriptive, but normative, is one way to show that epistemology is not value-free, but another is to show that a focus on the analysis of knowledge as justified true belief is too thin. If you can show that epistemology *needs* thick concepts besides (the thin) 'justified' 'true' and 'belief', that renders the subject (part-) normative too.

The second consequence, that believing has more goals than just to be true, is less obvious. Reasons for it, however, are similar to the ones motivating an expansion of epistemology beyond just a consideration of the nature of justification, truth and belief.

Elgin (2008) puts the case well. Thin epistemology, she suggests, considers our epistemic lives 'a giant true/false test'. On a thin conception of the subject, what is taken to be epistemically valuable is little more than having true beliefs: the *aim* of forming beliefs or even the *aim* of thinking as such is to have true beliefs. The view is easy to understand: ultimately, we want true beliefs about how the world is because true beliefs enable us to act successfully in the world; aiming at having many true beliefs and avoiding having false beliefs even seems to describe pretty well what we ultimately do whenever we think about things. While, on the traditional analysis of knowledge, true beliefs must also be *justified* in order to be knowledge, on the thin conception of epistemology, justification in beliefs is not valuable in itself but only *instrumentally* valuable (because justification increases the likelihood of a belief's being true).⁴ In fact, the point has been made that justification figures in the traditional analysis primarily to rule out epistemic luck (lucky guesses are true beliefs, but do not constitute *knowledge*, so just plain true beliefs cannot count as knowledge), so the fact that a certain belief is justified is not valuable in itself, but is valuable only because it increases the likelihood that the belief is also true. The attitude that true belief is the basic or only real aim of forming beliefs (the idea that there is only one thing of *value* in epistemology and that is true belief) has been called 'veritism'.⁵

The questions that arise at this point are the following: is *truth* in belief the ultimate cognitive good or is *justification* perhaps independently cognitively valuable? More than that, are there perhaps *other* features of beliefs that make them worth having besides just truth and justification? Elgin, drawing heavily on Williams's work, holds that there are other epistemic phenomena that we value and that, while they are all *connected* with truth, they amount to more than just being truth conducive. The examples Elgin cites are truthfulness in speech

³ Vayrynen (2008), notably, holds that the distinction between thin and thick concepts in epistemology is not sharp. His concerns to an extent mirror those of Scheffler (1987) about thin and thick in ethics.

⁴ For an example of this attitude, see Goldman (1999).

⁵ See Axtell and Carter, 2008.

(this is Williams's own example) and trustworthiness in belief (her own). Both go beyond a simple preoccupation with truth.

A first thing to understand is that anyone is liable to make mistakes: it is crazy for us to demand of any thinker or speaker that they always believe the truth and/or always speak the truth. If I were ever allowed to introduce one axiom into philosophy it would be this: everyone makes mistakes. The axiom might be common-sense, but it is useful: if it is a given that people are always liable occasionally to believe falsehoods or to say something false (because they believe a falsehood or because they mis-speak) then it really *is* too much to demand of any person always to think and speak the truth. The point is this: if epistemic agents – *people*, the only epistemic agents we know – are in principle fallible, what sort of epistemic character can we realistically demand of them? The answer is that we will demand not simply that they have a lot of true beliefs and have no false beliefs or that they will speak the truth and will speak no falsehoods, but that they will *mitigate* in the light of their fallibility (and ours) their propensity to make the occasional mistake. What we value in the thinking ability of any real person we know is not how well they do on the giant true/false test, but that they are epistemically responsible. Epistemically responsible people try to have true beliefs and try to avoid false beliefs, sure, but this is not all that there is to it. Epistemically responsible people also take into account their own and others' fallibilities when they form and communicate beliefs.

Why is such responsibility more valuable than just having true beliefs or speaking the truth? Consider the following: for any *real* person you know, you probably appreciate it when they speak the truth and deplore it when they say something false, but this goes only up to a point. Elgin (2008: 373) points out that just speaking the truth is not quite as valuable as also (1) not misleading while speaking the truth – say, by leaving something out and (2) not saying too much – say, by speaking uncomfortable or irrelevant truths. (2008: 373) When the time comes for any of us to rely on the information a real other person provides it is not entirely satisfactory to us if that person simply says what she believes to be true, we want a more nuanced attitude. This attitude, Williams (2002) calls 'truthfulness'. While connected with speaking the truth, truthfulness is more than scoring highly on how many truths one communicates and how few falsehoods, it is being a good, responsible communicator.

Of *believers*, Elgin (2008) advances, we also demand a more nuanced attitude than just believing many truths. It is not just that real people try their hardest to believe truths and disbelieve falsehoods; what we want is for people to believe things that we can trust – people's beliefs must be 'trustworthy'. Trustworthy beliefs are not only the ones that are ultimately true or even the ones that are strictly *justified* (and so, *most likely* true), trustworthy beliefs must also be 'solid', 'secure', 'robust' and 'stable'. Elgin gives each of these terms a technical meaning and while I cannot go into the detail here (except to wholeheartedly recommend her article) the basic point is that, if one is not just going to act on a belief oneself, but instead, pass that belief on to another so that they can act on it, what is valuable is more than just that one has available justification that that belief is true. One wants for the justification itself to be of a certain kind – not likely to shift, not vulnerable to one little piece of evidence turning out wrong, not being too specific and so forth. I would even add that, just to act on a belief oneself, one not only wants that belief to be justified but one wants for it to be relevant, of the right level of detail, arrived at quickly enough and so-on.

Elsewhere, Elgin (2004) explains that strict falsehood is not always a bad thing in a realistic set of beliefs. In our whole understanding of the world, there features some things that are not

strictly true: take for instance the rough generalisations, idealisations, *ceteris paribus* claims, stylised facts and so on that help us – even in the most respectable science – to make our grasp of the world manageable. Any realistic person believes many little helpful fictions, that, while not strictly true seem perfectly OK to believe, yet would, in the cold light of veritism, be cause to be marked down on the giant true/false-test. Can a realistic epistemology, that *knows* that people need these little fictions, genuinely condemn them for having them? Elgin holds not. It is not truth as such that matters in beliefs but being *true enough*. While connected with truth, the trustworthiness that we want in belief is both more and less than just being true.

3. *Is 'educated' an epistemic concept? Is it a thick epistemic concept?*

The question whether belief aims at the truth or aims at something different arises, in a different guise, in thinking about the aims of education. The question is related not only to whether epistemology should be a thick subject, but also to how *education* can figure as a concept in epistemology.

Siegel (2008) considers whether 'education' is a thick epistemic concept; he asks firstly whether 'education' is an epistemic concept at all and, secondly whether it is thick. Siegel advances the following broad reason as to why 'education' can be considered an epistemic concept at all: education has an epistemic aim. The most obvious aim of education is to inculcate knowledge in children; the standard picture is that children arrive at school knowing little and that it is the task of the teacher to ensure that they leave knowing more (whatever that more is about). Educationalists see their job as an epistemic one, especially if one employs the right concept of knowledge: it is not fashionable to encourage children to memorise facts any longer, but to think for themselves, to understand, to handle evidence correctly and so-on – in short, to become good independent knowers. One might say that this explains why 'knowledge' – or 'epistemology', even – is a concept in education.

Epistemologists, too, would object little to calling education an epistemological concept. Besides interest in explaining what knowledge is when one has it, epistemologists are interested in matters like how one becomes a knower in the first place. This question has an evolutionary element: 'if the apes or, further back, lizards or ooze that we are descended from did not know anything, how did it come about that *we humans* can know things?' and a developmental element: 'how do very young children that at first know nothing *begin* to know things?'. Especially as to this second question, education must obviously play a part, so education is clearly a concept in epistemology. One may remark not just (as Siegel does) that education is a concept in epistemology, but that knowledge is a concept in education.

More interesting by far is Siegel's conclusion that 'education' is a *thick* concept. Siegel remarks the following on the matter:

'Education' and 'being educated'... seem in general less abstract, and more dependent on real world descriptions, depictions, values, and social practices. Whether or not an activity or social practice counts as educative or a person as educated seems to depend, similarly, on nuanced understandings of real world practices.' (2008: 465)

and:

‘Whether someone is ‘educated’ or whether some social practice counts as ‘education’ is not solely a question of description or of value; it is at once a matter of description and of value and, as such, the concept seems to have the dual character that Williams (1985) thinks holds for thick ethical concepts (like ‘courage’).’ (2008: 466)

Siegel’s remarks here deserve to be fleshed out. In common with other thick concepts, he holds that considering something an ‘education’ or a person ‘educated’ not just describes a practice or says something about the history of the person in question, but also conveys an evaluation of that practice or person. Take the example of a person being considered ‘educated’. ‘Educated’, as used in saying something like ‘X is well educated’ conveys that X is learned, well-read, knowledgeable, sophisticated, erudite, scholarly... even cultured or liberal (as in ‘liberal education’). All of these things are generally admired in a person. Even more markedly, calling someone ‘uneducated’ is a definite sign of disapproval. Admittedly, some cases exist of disapproval of people who are considered too educated (someone can be ‘over-educated’ for a job, say, or have too much ‘book-learning’) and of approval of people who have little formal education (someone may have gone, instead, through ‘the school of life’), but really what is at issue in cases like these is not disapproval of education as such, but disapproval of too much of what someone considers the wrong sort of education. That calling some practice an ‘education’ conveys an evaluation is perhaps somewhat less clear, but consider saying something like the following: ‘playing cricket provides a real education’. Calling cricket an education paints it positively; that it is an education even provides a (admittedly defeasible) *reason* to play cricket, making it action-guiding in something of the sense that Williams intended. That something is truly educative provides a reason for taking part in it.⁶

But what does that buy us, the idea that education is a thick epistemic concept? One point of interest is that there is a difference between the concepts ‘education and ‘educated’ and other potential thick epistemic concepts like ‘intellectual curiosity’, ‘gullibility’, ‘open-mindedness’, ‘trustworthiness’ and so-on. The latter are all character traits or lasting features of a person – they are intellectual virtues. While Siegel (2008: 460 – 1) calls ‘being educated’ a virtue, I wonder whether it can be so described: ‘being educated’ refers more to a feature of a person’s history than to a character trait and even if one could stretch ordinary usage to call ‘educated’ a virtue, one certainly could not stretch so far as to call ‘education’ a virtue – an education is either something that a person partakes in (‘Ben’s continuing education’), something about his history (‘Ben’s early education’) or a social institution (‘English higher education’). It would be an interesting point about thick epistemic concepts that they are not all virtues, but this in itself (as Siegel and Elgin hint independently) won’t change the subject epistemology by much.

In order to show what more concrete change there can be, we need to make some distinctions. Firstly, I said that education is a concept in epistemology. This is something that those interested in education and in epistemology (even the cautious ones) will concede relatively easily. It is not hard to be a concept in a field. Concepts from different fields can be concepts in each other; different subjects can even be concepts in each other. Consider that ‘global

⁶ It is interesting that ‘education’ does not have a clear opposite, as ‘educated’ has ‘uneducated’. Perhaps ‘miseducation’ comes closest, but it is unclear whether a miseducation is a bad education in the sense of being an ineffective education that leaves someone no more educated than when they started or a ‘bad education’ that leaves someone positively worse off than they would have been, had they not started it.

warming' can be a concept in such diverse fields as oceanography and economics, or that 'pandemic' can be a concept in medicine and in politics; 'micro-biology' (the name of a field of study) can be a concept in another field – say medicine – and so-on. That epistemology and education are bordering fields, sometimes interested in the same things and sometimes talking about each other, is not news. That seems to be the line that Siegel takes, besides making the point – with which I agree – that the fields of epistemology and education can cooperate far better.

Siegel, however, pulls back from making the conclusion either that education is an *essential* concept in epistemology, or that knowledge is the essential concept in education. He holds that in order to explain knowledge, it is not necessary to involve education:

'...there seems to be no problem imagining (or pointing to actual) people who become, through their own efforts, able to know and justifiably believe as well as those who have been educated. So the case for the thesis that being an educated person, or having been educated, is a necessary condition of being a knower or justified believer is far from being made. On the contrary, it seems not to be such a condition. (Siegel, 2008: 460)

The thought seems to be that, just to be a justified true belief, there is no need that either the person having the belief is an educated person, or that the belief in some sense issues from an education. The thought is that just to have knowledge – to have a justified true belief in something, as the classical formulation says – does not require that one went through anything that we would call a (formal) education; the cavemen, for instance, could not have, but that is not to say that they did not know anything and there is nothing to say that the most uneducated person today cannot have knowledge.

Siegel also stresses:

'...education is subject to constraints of manner—a teacher may aim to get her students to know that P, but only certain ways of getting them to know it are acceptable, educationally. For example, brainwashing and indoctrination are at least arguably ways of getting students to know, but these ways are unavailable to the educator. It is not clear that the simple question whether someone knows something is subject to the same constraint...' (Siegel, 2008: 464)

It is conceivable, Siegel holds, that one may *know* something even if one were brainwashed or indoctrinated into knowing it (what one 'knows' would, of course, have to be true, justified and believed), but we don't educate like this, so education aims *not just* at knowledge. For Siegel, while education has epistemological aims the aims of education are not only or firstly epistemological. There are moral and socio-political reasons for educating children besides the epistemic (Siegel, 2008: 461 and therefore no priority for the epistemic aims of education from amongst its aims.

One might say that, for Siegel, education is a concept in epistemology and epistemology a concept in education but that the connection is no tighter than this. How tight can – and *should* – the connection be?

4. 'Education' in a thicker epistemology

Siegel holds that education is not necessary to justified true belief. The position is understandable, but should this be the last word on the matter? I think it only is if one is secretly guilty of having a *thin* conception of epistemology in the first place.

To explain, I have to return to the question of what thin and thick epistemologies are and why one might prefer a thicker epistemology. Recall the point made above that moving from a thin to a thick epistemology is partly a turn away from 'veritism' – from the focus on true belief as the only valuable particular in epistemology. If one is a veritist, as we have seen, *how* someone has come to hold a belief pales into insignificance compared to *that* someone's beliefs are true. It is easy to see how a veritist may see an education as a potentially very handy way to believing truths, but as in the end inessential: if it is just the case that one happens to have lots of true beliefs without having had an education, that trumps having had a great education but not believing so many truths in the great cognitive true/false test.

If one takes seriously Elgin's point above, though, that beliefs are things that we share with others and that, as such, a different kind of care needs to be taken in forming and communicating them – we should be on the whole *trustworthy*, rather than merely having true beliefs and we should speak *truthfully*, rather than just saying what we believe – it is far easier to see how being educated in the broadest sense (and that includes self-education, as Siegel makes clear) can be part of this story. To repeat, for Elgin (and conceivably for Williams) beliefs are not just there to act on individually, they are there to share with other people and, as such, a subtly different requirement on beliefs than pure truth or likely truth enters the picture. Philosophers from Wittgenstein to Davidson have held that language and thought are social in that they can only be acquired in a social setting; it is obviously also the case that language is there *for* communication, but that knowledge is 'intersubjective' (as Elgin holds) not only in how it is acquired but in what it is *there for* is a very interesting possibility. If one further pays attention to what Elgin means by trustworthiness – a reliability in how one handles and presents beliefs to people, paying attention to the solidity, security, robustness and stability of the beliefs one presents to others – that is exactly the sort of thing that an education fosters and that one is unlikely to develop otherwise. Indeed, while Elgin makes amply clear that the *point* of trustworthiness is social, a gap exists in explaining how one becomes trustworthy (or becomes more trustworthy) or how trustworthiness increases in society. The concept 'education' is exactly what is needed to fill this gap.

On a thin conception of epistemology, it does not much matter how one came to have a particular justified true belief, just that one does have it. But on a *thick* conception of epistemology, according to which it is not just the truth, but the overall trustworthiness of the belief that matters, how it was arrived at conceivably matters much more. The point is that in a *thin* epistemology, one probably does not need to mention education, but in a thick epistemology one probably does.

5. A thicker approach to education

As I indicated above, to the epistemologist just the idea that there are thick epistemic concepts (not just that education is one) is potentially important; it may even signal a rather different way of doing epistemology (some may hold already that it is already there in the mould of virtue epistemology) focussing less on the analysis of concepts and more on the

states of people and societies that are actually conducive to knowledge. But it is my judgement that the thickness of the concept ‘education’ (or the difficulties in disentangling facts and values in education) is not news to philosophers of education. It certainly isn’t news to the educational mainstream, in which the *value-ladenness* of education is emphasised to such a degree that it sometimes paralyses educators in making decisions regarding how to educate children: if it is just a matter of *value*, teachers ask, that we teach children geometry and geography instead of yoga, how can we *justify* teaching geometry rather than yoga at all? It also does not seem to be news to philosophers writing on the aims of education. In different contexts, both Siegel and Elgin have argued against the idea that the point of *education* is fostering true belief: Siegel (2005) has held that the aim of education is not truth, but critical thinking and Elgin (2007) has held that the aim of education is understanding. Regardless of differences in how they see epistemology, both Siegel and Elgin seem to conceive of education thickly already (as most philosophers of education probably do). Of what use is talking of a thicker conception of what ‘education’ or ‘being educated’ is to educationalists already convinced of its thickness?

Seeing both education and epistemology in thick terms seems to show the following advantages. Firstly, recall Siegel’s point that the epistemological aims of education are just *some* of the aims of education. His point was that education has *moral* and *socio-political* aims besides the epistemic so that the subject epistemology could not describe fully the aims of education.⁷ Seeing the epistemic aims of education as *thick* however – and therefore as part-descriptive, part-moral – renders the distinction between the epistemic and the moral aims of education far more fluid. If, that is, what we attempt in giving children a good epistemic education is partly a matter of inculcating certain values (like open-mindedness, fairness, trustworthiness and so-on), then how is that so very different from the values (like open-mindedness, fairness and trustworthiness, amongst others!) that we try to inculcate in the ‘moral’ part of the curriculum? I make no claim that the epistemic and moral aims of education are the same, nor (obviously) that the one can be reduced to the other. However, seeing epistemology as thick at least leaves open the possibility that the epistemic and moral aims of education can be thought together. If one insists on seeing this in one set of aims being reduced to the other, it is at any rate an open question whether the epistemic aims of education will be turned into moral aims or *vice versa*: a thickening of epistemology for education may count equally easily as a cognitivisation of ethics or a moralisation of epistemology.

Secondly, it is a common-place that analytic philosophy’s concepts of ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ have had a frosty reception in education; the pre-occupation of educationalists (not only in this country) with constructivism, social relativism and a politicisation of the idea of knowledge and science attests to this. A thicker epistemology that acknowledges that our knowledge claims describe and evaluate at once may do the trick not only to bring teachers back to analytic epistemology, it may also provide the sort of (thicker, softer) language in which they can more confidently express a trust in truthfulness, trustworthiness, accuracy, sincerity, good evidence and all the intellectual virtues against the relativist.⁸ Likewise, seeing education explicitly as a thick notion opens up the possibility that we may see the question of what is a good education as a world-guided matter, capable of objective discussion, without giving up on the idea that it is also a question of value.

⁷ If it did, we might have had a reason for viewing education as a sort of sub-field of epistemology, or, to see it as being prescribed to by epistemology as physics, in a sense, prescribes possibilities that engineering finds ways to implement.

⁸ This seems to be the project that Young (2007) is engaged in, again inspired by Williams (2002).

Bibliography

- Axtell, G. and Carter, J.A. 2008. 'Just the Right Thickness: A Defense of Second-Wave Virtue Epistemology'. *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 413-434.
- Elgin, C.Z. 2004. 'True Enough'. *Philosophical Issues*, vol. 14, pp. 113-31
- Elgin, C.Z. 2007. 'Education and the Advancement of Understanding'. In Curren, R. (ed) *Philosophy of Education*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Elgin, C.Z. 2008. 'Trustworthiness'. *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 371-387.
- Goldman, A. 1999. *Knowledge in a Social World*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Kotzee, B. and Wanderer, J. 2008. "A Thicker Epistemology?" *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 337 – 43
- Scheffler, S. 1987. 'Morality Through Thick and Thin: A Critical Notice of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*'. *Philosophical Review*, vol. 96, no. 3, pp. 411 – 434
- Siegel, H. 2005. 'Truth, Thinking, Testimony and Trust: Alvin Goldman on the Aims of Education'. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 71, no. 2, pp. 345 – 66.
- Siegel, H. 2008. 'Is Education a Thick Epistemic Concept'. *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 455-469.
- Vayrynen, P. 2008. 'Slim Epistemology with a Thick Skin'. *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 37, no. 3, pp. 389 – 412.
- Williams, B. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Williams, B. 2002. *Truth and Truthfulness*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Young, M.F.D. 2007. *Bringing Knowledge Back In*. London: Routledge.