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Ralph Barton Perry, The Moralist As Critic

by Ira S. Steinberg

Ralph Barton Perry took his undergraduate work at Princeton and his graduate work at Harvard where he was awarded the doctorate in the field of philosophy in 1899. During the first decade of the present century he gained recognition as a leader of the New Realism perhaps the most significant product of which was his "Ego-centric Predicament" published in the *Journal of Philosophy* in 1910. His most prominent publications were *Present Philosophical Tendencies*, 1912; *General Theory of Value*, 1926; *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols., 1935, for which he received a Pulitzer Prize; *Puritanism and Democracy*, 1944; and *Realms of Value*, 1954.

Throughout his career he was concerned, as a philosopher and as a member of the faculty at Harvard, with the criticism and development of educational policy and practice.

The concern of a critic of education may be more than a concern merely to complain, or to find fault, or to promote some particular objectives or practices. One may be concerned to understand education, to see what may be said sensibly about it, to see what sense can be made of what is said about it. Interest in understanding education may be primarily intellectual, an interest in understanding just for the sake of understanding. Such an interest is, on the other hand, of paramount practicality to one who would propose to influence educational practices and objectives. Whatever one proposes it is helpful to have some reason to feel that his proposal makes sense. Now, while it should seem obvious that the desire to understand education and the desire to influence education are two different sorts of desire, there is a peculiar fuzziness about practical proposals making sense that tends to obscure the distinction. There is the danger, if one is not careful, of packing prescriptions for education into the description of education. This is precisely what Ralph Barton Perry did in a most sophisticated way in his *Realms of Value*,¹ which accordingly provides an interesting source for illustrating the difficulty in question.

What makes *Realms of Value* such an interesting source is the fact that it was not intended as a general critique of education, but, rather, was intended as a general critique of civilization.² Perry sought to formulate the lines of criticism, or the criteria for the examination and evaluation of man's institutions and their respective sciences.³ In applying these criteria he devoted a chapter to "Education and the Science of Education."⁴ It should be remarked that Perry's views on education were not confined to one chapter in one book written toward the close of his career, but had developed through continued concern throughout his career.⁵ Only here they were presented in what appears to have been their most considered, carefully drawn, systematic version. And system was provided by the very endeavor to apply to education the lines of criticism he had fashioned for the general critique of culture.⁶ This approach, wherein the critic first elucidates his position as a critic on broad lines, commends itself, at least on first view, as in principle committed to a stance of impartiality with respect to the objects of his examination. It inspires a sense of confidence in the objectivity of the critic. Still, Perry had axes to grind and in *Realms of Value*, he ground them in two different ways — one way open and above board, the other way *sub rosa*. Each of these will be considered in turn and then Perry's contribution to the quest for objectivity in the examination of education will then be discussed.

I

A Moralistic Point of View

In his preface to *Realms of Value* Perry announced his intention of setting forth and applying a fundamental definition of value to the task of defining and evaluating institutions and their special branches of knowledge.⁷ He had developed this fundamental definition of value at great length in his *General Theory of Value*⁸

published twenty-eight years earlier and had fairly well stuck with it, although with some significant modifications in technical detail, as he set it forth in the publication under discussion. As shall be seen in the present section, there can be some quarrel with a philosopher's wanting to test out, as it were, his theory of value by considering its applicability in the various realms of human concern. There is, however, something more peculiar about the attempt to use it to provide the very structure of the individual realms of concern which are then to be evaluated. This latter problem will be discussed more fully in the following section. It is mentioned here only to point out that there appears to have been something odd in the way Perry conceived his task right from the outset of *Realms of Value*.

It will not be necessary for present purposes to go into his theory of value in any great detail. A thumbnail sketch is appropriate. Value was taken as any object of any interest. Interest was conceived as a disposition; positive interest was an attitude in favor of its object which was thereby good, negative interest an attitude of rejection toward its object which was thereby evil. Man had to take something as the object of interest, but interest and not judgment conferred value on objects. As man has many interests and these conflict for time, energy, and or the consumption of external resources, he must somehow organize them. Perry advanced the principles of harmonious integration of interests at the personal and inter-personal levels. At the personal level man was to develop enlightened self-interest in maximizing his goods. At the inter-personal level harmonious integration required that the self-interest of each man was to be colored by the benevolent interest in advancing the interests of others. Each man was to be committed to the procedure of reasoned discussion for the advancement of the maximum good for all people.⁹

It will not be possible, nor is it necessary, here to go into a detailed critique of Perry's theory. Suffice it to say that Perry attempted to argue for the basic definition of value as stemming from the nature of man at the same time that he advanced a procedure for comparing values which had to be implanted in man.¹⁰ Of more immediate relevance is the fact that, with suitable translations of terminology, Perry's theory of value was also his theory of morality. The "person" is one who does integrate his interests in the appropriate manner; the "moral person" is one who has developed a benevolent interest for the sake of harmonious integration. The moral good is harmonious integration of interests or harmonious happiness. So far it is clear that Perry was defining morality. Whether he recognized that he was merely stipulating the definition of morality or whether he thought he was doing something else is not important so long as it is recognized that if morality is thus a matter of definition, other "good" definitions are, at least in principle, conceivable.¹¹ At any rate, some notion has been provided as to what Perry had in mind when he approached the moral critique of institutions and of the sciences.

Now, so long as one is careful to specify that his stance is a moral stance and, moreover, to specify just what that moral stance is, there can be no legitimate complaint about his criticizing institutions and the sciences from the moral point of

view. Depending upon one's conception of morality political practices particularly efficacious in getting things done may, none the less, be morally repugnant. Good history on some topics may, indeed, by some standards seem better not done. Pornography and literary craftsmanship are not mutually exclusive. "Good" medical science may recommend morally repugnant experiments on human beings. The physical scientist faces moral questions when he is called upon to advance knowledge in the fields of mass destruction. It is difficult to think of an area of human concern to which no moral critique would be relevant. But, then, how would one go about testing the applicability of his moral stance to a particular area of concern especially if one is, as Frankena has put it, a definist?¹²

It will not do at this point to remind one's self that, after all, it was not the moral stance that was to be tested, but the fundamental definition of value. The very generality of Perry's definition of value makes it, in effect, impervious to the sort of test he had in mind. If, indeed, any object whatsoever has value by virtue of interest taken in it by anyone, then anything that anyone wants to do in any area of concern is *ipso facto* valuable. Perhaps Perry is to be commended for so defining value as to make it truly general in applicability, but its generality appears to have been bought at the price of trivializing the concept of value and the notion of evaluation. The fundamental definition of value, then, was not to be tested, but, rather, the developed conception of value which, as has been indicated, was tantamount to Perry's conception of morality.

To return, then, to the question posed, what sense can be made out of testing one's conception of morality by applying it to the realms of value? For the definist to show that people do in fact apply the criteria in question in such areas is not very helpful, for, in the first place, this would suggest the legitimacy of other conflicting definist criteria, and in the second place, neither establishes the correctness of common practice¹³ nor the primacy of his particular practice over others. One may even question the legitimacy of proposing as a test that criteria be general enough to cover all areas of concern. It may well appear desirable to permit some ambiguity in the applicability of the criteria of morality such that, for example, one might wish to leave religion and the morality of religion free from the "onslaught of secularism" as some might put it or to leave science free from the onslaught of the Inquisition as it has been known to operate.¹⁴

The chief trouble in presuming to test by applicability with definism in general and with Perry's definition in particular is that one is attempting, in effect, to gauge the quality of the lens through which one views the world by looking through that lens. Any other lens is rejected as not being *that* lens. There is the danger that the definist may not recognize that in defining morality as he does he may not be prepared to accept as a moral problem in some area of concern what may appear as such to someone looking through a different moral lens. To develop the ramifications of the principle of harmonious happiness may require and display a truly remarkable depth and breadth of knowledge; it may display brilliance of insight

and intelligence, but if it tests anything, it tests the endurance of the applier in sticking to the task he has set for himself and in so doing it attests to the constancy of his conviction in his moral stance. In essence, such a test might be viewed as a man telling himself "If I can go through such an exercise as this without thinking of some reason to question this stance, it must be pretty good."

This is by no means to be taken as a condemnation of such a procedure. Perhaps this is the best that one can do in the way of "testing" his moral principles. At the very least Perry has considered the ramifications of his principles more deeply and in a much wider context than most of us are likely to consider ours. But Perry did more than what has been suggested thus far; he went further and defined his moral principles into the structures of the areas of his concern. And with this we must now take issue.

II

The Moralizing Scientist

Perry looked at institutions as instituted by men for human purposes.¹⁵ However they might have developed originally, their maintenance and further development was taken to reflect a rationale for their maintenance and development to be drawn in terms of human interests. And, when Perry drew a rationale in terms of interest he drew a moral rationale. Indeed, his theory of society consisted in yet another translation of his theory of value which, it may be remembered, was by translation also his theory of morality. In view of the description of his theory of morality briefly though it was presented earlier, it should not be surprising that his theory of society consisted in an exposition of democracy and its defense on moral grounds.¹⁶ This, in capsule form, represents an example of how Perry loaded his moral stance into the very structure of political science, for it set the ultimate goals of political science as providing criticism in the name of and technology directed toward the creation of this ideal polity as he drew it.¹⁷

Perry divided what he called the cultural sciences into three groups: the moral sciences, including ethics, political science, jurisprudence, and economics; the non-moral sciences (but with moral implications), including science and aesthetics; the supra-moral sciences (having moral and non-moral aspects), including education and religion.¹⁸ The moral sciences and supra-moral sciences were such by virtue of the moral character of their respective institutions. The cultural sciences were characterized as having their normative, technological and explanatory methods, or better, methods of critique. The first involved criticism by comparison with some standard such as a goal to be achieved; the second involved the consideration of techniques for achieving a goal; and the third represented what one might normally think of as descriptive, or, perhaps better, as that not directly or indirectly prescriptive aspect of any science. The normative critique of institutions might be final or instrumental, i.e. in terms of its constancy in keeping to its proper or ultimate end (for a moral institution this would be its moral end), and in terms of the efficacy of its efforts

toward that end. Moreover, the critique of an institution might be internal or external, that is, essentially, in terms of its truth to *its* purposes, or as it relates to or effects the ends of other institutions.¹⁹ For immediate purposes it would appear that we are concerned with the final or the normative internal critique of education — the critique of education by what education is for. We must remind ourselves, however, that our concern is not so much with what Perry had to say about education as it is with how he wanted to talk about education.

Perry spoke of the ulterior purpose of education and, as nearly as can be determined, the ulterior purpose of education was intended by Perry as the internal normative purpose or final end of education. It was to include a moral dimension and a non-moral dimension. Here then is how Perry meant to apply his definition of value to the task of structuring a science. He was a definist to the core; he did not stop with defining morality but used his definition of morality to define education. As one would have expected, this moral component of the ulterior purpose of education was to prepare the individual for, and commit him to, a life of personal and inter-personal harmonious integration of interests. The other, or non-moral component was to develop the individual's intellectual and aesthetic interests to whatever Perry meant by their own intrinsic perfection.²⁰ A moment's reflection should lead one to realize that the so-called non-moral component of the ulterior purpose of education has, on Perry's conception of morality, distinct moral relevance for they determine the variety and level of the goods to be integrated.

But, then, what else could the final purpose of education be but moral? If it is now recalled that *any* institution exists by virtue, in effect, of its social utility and social utility was to be determined through the processes of harmonious integration, which is the moral procedure *par excellence*, then it is clear that all institutions are moral institutions, (the distinction between moral and non-moral institutions is questionable on Perry's terms) and that the final purpose of education must be the moral purpose. Any purpose whatsoever arrived at in accordance with the procedures of harmonious integration would be a moral purpose. The question, then, is: Where did Perry get his mandate for the particular purpose that he set forth?

To raise this question is by no means to argue that it does not make sense for him to set forth the ulterior purpose that he did. It is clear that, given his moral stance, it would have been surprising had he not considered the ultimate purpose of education to be to bolster and foster that stance. It is, nevertheless misleading of him to have talked about the ulterior purpose of education when, in fact, he had to mean the ultimate aim *he* would set for education. There is a difference between saying, in effect, "education means . . ." and "education ought to mean . . ." And, of course, there is the obvious advantage in obscuring this distinction of denying out of hand the legitimacy of positions derived from moral stances other than one's own.

Again, it is a perfectly respectable enterprise to consider the implications of one's moral position for education so long as one does not lapse into a form of

expression which suggests that he is finding his morality in education rather than putting it there. This must apply even to one who, like Perry, seeks to promote a conception of morality based on commitment to principles of rationality, impartiality, benevolence and objectivity. With this limitation in mind, it is now appropriate to consider Perry's contribution to the objective examination of education.

III

*Objectives and Objectivity*²¹

After the final, or internal normative purposive critique, it is not so difficult to deal with the other elements of Perry's framework for the critique of institutions as set forth earlier. Continuing with the normative the remaining categories under this head are internal normative instrumental, external normative purposive and external normative instrumental. Whatever one has taken to be the ultimate purpose of education the internal normative instrumental critique involves the endeavor to measure the success of the teacher or school in promoting it and involves the attempt to determine the progress of the student toward the goals stipulated.²² The external normative purposive critique serves as a wise reminder that there are all sorts of pressures put upon education by those who would judge education by its contributions to goals set from outside. It encourages one to recognize, for example, that education may be called upon to alleviate an economic difficulty for society and indeed may be criticized for the readiness with which people in education are willing to accept such a goal. At the same time it does not require construing this goal as intrinsically an educational goal.²³ The external normative instrumental critique would attempt to measure success in achieving a particular goal in terms relevant to that goal.

The explanatory method of educational science would be concerned with explaining the content of education as well as the process of education. It would, according to Perry, involve the special skills of all the sciences. It would involve the study by those qualified for the study of the social, political, economic and other factors influencing the content and organization of education as organized education has developed and as it operates in the present. It would require the study of factors influencing and impinging upon the developmental and intellectual growth of human beings by specialists not only in psychology but in all the natural sciences.²⁴ This, then, represents a plea for the development of knowledge of education on objective grounds by appeal to the talents of those committed to their disciplinary canons of objectivity.

The technological aspect of educational science, the technological critique or method of educational science, involves the development and evaluation of techniques of education. Perry viewed educational technology as neutral with respect to the uses to which it might be put as on analogy with, say, industrial technology.²⁵ Detail or content might differ depending upon the end but the technology involved in hav-

ing machines stamp out hub caps is essentially the same technology for having machines stamp out shell casings. (We shall return to raise questions about this in a moment.)

These various aspects of critique are not, of course, unrelated and Perry did go on to rough out, by example primarily, some of the relationships. Obviously, the explanatory method in uncovering factors impinging upon learning also was to provide insight into the factors to be taken account of in instrumental critique. Thus it is one thing to determine the extent of success in meeting a goal and another thing to explain that extent of success or to weigh judgments or responsibility, praise, or blame. Also, as knowledge of how humans do learn various sorts of things increases, the development and evaluation of technology intended to facilitate such learning may proceed more intelligently. This last statement may suggest some ambiguity in Perry's attribution of the neutrality of educational technology.

Perry was, in fact, not too clear on this point. His notion of technology was not so limited as to presume uniformity in fundamental procedure in all areas within a field, he just treated it so generally as to be uninformative as to what a more developed position might be. It does not appear, on the whole, inconsistent with his position on educational technology to suggest that different people might have to be taught a given subject in different ways or that different subjects might have to be taught to a given person in different ways. Yet he did leave himself open to some doubt on this question in suggesting as his example that educational technology is neutral as between education for peace or education for war.²⁶

If one takes Perry's stand on indoctrination into account his notion of neutrality appears even more confused. He argued quite forcefully for the indoctrination of the ideals of democracy.²⁷ Given his exposition of these ideals as including tolerance, objectivity, and scholarly integrity in all fields of interest, it must be clear that the techniques for the indoctrination of these ideals would not be quite the same as those for the indoctrination of blind acceptance of the dogmatic authority of state or church for the ultimate decisions on all questions. If Perry meant that indoctrination indicates a purposiveness to implant a doctrine, then indoctrination is, in that respect, neutral. If, however, he intended to suggest that indoctrination indicates a specific technique neutral with respect to the particular doctrines to be implanted, then his position would indeed be questionable. It would appear, then, that his position regarding technological neutrality was rather superficial and left much to be worked out, to say the least.

The problem does serve, however, to illuminate the tension in Perry's *Realms of Value* between his own commitment to objectivity and his commitment to the promotion of his conception of morality and the good society which it envisioned. The missionary interest tended to subordinate the scientific interest. It is difficult to develop objective analyses when one is bent on furthering a "greater" cause.

Notes

- 1 Ralph Barton Perry, *Realms of Value: A Critique of Human Civilization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954).
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. vii.
- 3 *Ibid.*, ch. xi.
- 4 *Ibid.*, ch. xxi.
- 5 See the following by Perry:
General Theory of Value: Its Meaning and Basic Principles Construed in Terms of Interest (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1926), pp. 552-625, 681-82.
Puritanism and Democracy (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1944), see especially pp. 192-93. 480-95 f., and 573.
One World in the Making (New York: Current Books, Inc., A. A. Wynn, 1945), especially ch. vii.
The Citizen Decides: A Guide to Responsible Thinking in Time of Crisis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1951), especially chs. v-vii.
The Humanity of Man, ed. Evelyn Ann Masi (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1956), *passim*.
- 6 It is not worth quibbling over the substitutability of culture and civilization in this context.
- 7 *Realms of Value . . .*, p. vii.
- 8 *Op. cit.*, *passim*.
- 9 See *Realms of Value . . .*, chs. i-v.
- 10 See Ira S. Steinberg "Ralph Barton Perry on Education for Democracy" unpublished thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Education, Harvard University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, 1963, ch. ii.
- 11 See William K. Frankena, *Ethics*, "Foundations of Philosophy Series" (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1963), pp. 81-85.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 See *ibid.*
- 14 I present these examples merely to suggest that there may be some question as to the value of generality but will not take the time to consider it here in depth.
- 15 See *Realms of Value . . .*, ch. x.
- 16 See Steinberg *op. cit.*, ch. iii.
- 17 See *Realms of Value . . .*, ch. xiii.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- 19 See *Ibid.*, ch. xi. I have omitted the moral sub criteria of liberality and universality.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 423.
- 21 This is not to be construed as an attempt to represent the full scope of Perry's thought on Education. It is merely a look at Perry's work from the vantage point indicated at the outset of this paper.
- 22 *Realms of Value . . .*, p. 423.

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23 *Ibid.* My example.

24 *Ibid.*, pp. 421-23.

25 *Ibid.*, pp. 423-24. My examples.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 424.

27 *Ibid.*, pp. 425-28. See also Ira S. Steinberg, "A Brief Note on Indoctrination and Ideals of Democracy," *Phi Delta Kappan* (vol. xlv, no. 2, November, 1962), pp. 66-68.

