

Russell and Chomsky as Advocates of Humanistic Education

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This article shows how Bertrand Russell and Noam Chomsky's approaches to humanistic education are grounded in the concepts of growth, knowledge, language, freedom, and social justice. Despite their epistemological differences, Russell and Chomsky agree on the need for educating the public to abuses of power. Their own practice of education is a source of inspiration for intellectuals, who wish to counter the current discourse in schools and universities by upholding the value of academic freedom.

The influence of Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) and Noam Chomsky (1928-) on the disciplines and practices of philosophy, mathematical logic, linguistics, and social and political theory has been considerable. Their lives, which span almost one hundred and fifty years from the Victorian age to the present day, have been rich sources of discussion not only in academe but as examples of public intellectuals' engagement in practical affairs. Yet their contributions to education and its philosophical underpinnings are perhaps less well known than their opposition to war and the struggle for peace and social justice.

This article shows how both philosophers contribute to an understanding of humanistic education enabling the creative impulse for growth. Russell (1926), for example, expresses the hope that a generation of children “educated in fearless freedom” could build a better world (p. 248), whereas Chomsky (1987a) believes schools should be places, where “children were encouraged to pursue their interests ... [and avoid] intense competitiveness and regimentation” (pp. 6, 7). Since the current trends in educational discourse have moved in precisely the opposite direction, an examination of Russell and Chomsky's accounts, far from being arcane, can serve as a counter-balance to the constrictive ideology dominant in schools and universities today.

In order to make this argument, I begin by explaining the meaning of humanism and its relation to education and go on to analyze Russell and Chomsky's organic conception of education. Having discussed contrasts and similarities between their work, I then examine their different epistemological frameworks. I consider how both philosophers have been involved in educational practice and then connect their work with other philosophers in the humanist tradition and its relevance to schools and universities today. In conclusion, Russell and Chomsky agree that academic freedom is central to the work of all intellectuals who speak truth to power.

Humanism and Education

The tradition of humanism in the Western world has its roots in the Enlightenment. As Carrington (2014) points out, a variety of thinkers, critical of the scholastic tradition of transmitting speculative theology to passive students, proposed an alternative account concerned with “studies of human beings living well in the world” (p. 293). Humanism brought a fresh approach to education in which the personal relationship between teacher and student became its primary focus. The goal of education included the acquisition of knowledge, but the emphasis was now upon enabling students to learn in ways that enhanced their own capacities for life in the family and community. To this extent, a humanistic approach is consistent with the true meaning of education, which, as its Latin root *educare* suggests, is to cause to grow (McMurtry, 1988; Reboul, 1992).¹

Copson (2015) provides an account of the dynamic history of humanism and shows that,

By the dawn of the nineteenth century, ‘humanist’ denoted not just a student of the humanities – especially the culture of the ancient European world – but a holder of the view that this curriculum was best guaranteed to develop the human being personally, intellectually, culturally, and socially. (p. 1)

Although the meaning of humanism evolved, it was consistent with the idea that education should enable the capacities of the human being as a whole rather than focus exclusively on their intellectual development. The complexities of humanistic education are underlined by White (2015), who argues that despite its apparent emancipation from religious beliefs it shares some of the same presuppositions:

most humanists in present-day Britain and similar countries ... [have an] antipathy towards indoctrination, [because of] their belief in people being critical thinkers and making up their own minds on controversial issues. Many, perhaps most, religious believers in our society also share their liberalism. (p. 235)

An opposition to indoctrination and a belief in critical thought are aims that Russell and Chomsky believe are vital to their secularized conceptions of humanistic education.

Russell and Chomsky’s Humanistic Conceptions of Education

Chomsky (2000) agrees with Russell that the humanistic conception of education is,

¹ The concept of organic growth is central to Rousseau’s (1911/1992) educational thought, according to which early childhood is best served by a “negative education ... [that] consists, not in teaching virtue or truth, but in preserving the heart from vice and from the spirit of error” (p.57). Russell (1932/1980) is critical of Rousseau’s negative theory of education, which “while it has many important elements of truth, and is largely valid so far as the emotions are concerned, cannot be accepted in its entirety as regards intellectual and technical training” (p.29); Robinson (2015) agrees and considers negative education as “less about communicating truths and facts to children and more about safeguarding an open learning environment” (p.99); Barrow (1978) finds Rousseau’s concept of nature ambiguous, while Barrow and Woods (1975/2006) question Rousseau’s claim, “that children cannot be ready to read literature until the age of fifteen ... since children can read – and understand – literature before that age (p.133). Martin (1981) objects to Rousseau’s using the guise of the dictates of nature to educate Sophie to be subservient to Emile; Oelkers (2014) believes that “Rousseau is read because he defines the problems [of education] not because he provides the solutions” (p.724).

the idea that education is not to be viewed as something like filling a vessel with water but, rather assisting a flower to grow in its own way ... providing the circumstances in which the normal creative patterns will flourish. (p.38)

As we shall see, Russell adopts this same metaphor of providing the right kind of soil in which the young plant can grow as illustrative of the pedagogical relationship. In doing so, he conceives of education as an organic process that enables the child's innate patterns of growth to flourish.² By rejecting the view that education is a matter of filling empty vessels with information, both he and Chomsky pave the way to a critique of the mechanistic practice of standardized testing, which will be examined towards the end of the article.

Russell (1916) reemphasizes the organic basis of humanistic education in the following terms:

The impulses of men and women, in so far as they are of real importance in their lives, are not detached from one another, but proceed from a central principle of growth, an instinctive urgency leading them in a certain direction, as trees seek the light ... The utmost that social institutions can do for a man (sic) is to make his own growth free and vigorous: they cannot force him to grow according to the pattern of another man. (p. 21)

In defining the principle of growth as the unifying source of both pre-conscious impulses and conscious desires, Russell compares human development to the natural growth of organisms, thereby acknowledging that humans are biological beings. At the same time, Russell recognizes that "this intimate centre in each human being ... differs from man to man (sic) and determines for each man the type of excellence of which he is capable" (p. 21). As a result, social institutions, like education, should aim for the liberation of the child's potential for growth rather than the inculcation of fixed and determinate patterns of development. And he is clear that this task applies equally to physical and intellectual education, for "there is in human beings, as in plants and animals, a certain impulse of growth, and this is just as true of mental as physical development" (Russell, 1917/1963, p. 13). In order to grow in constructive ways, the child needs to acquire a self-discipline that gives them a sense of purpose, since externally imposed discipline deadens growth and the spirit of inquiry (Woodhouse, 1992).

The channeling of children's impulses in constructive directions depends very much on the environment in which they are educated. Russell (1916) emphasizes that expressions of the principle of growth can be restricted by such environmental factors as "beliefs ... material circumstances ... social circumstances, and ... institutions" (pp. 39-40). As long as social institutions do not "outlast the circumstances which made them a fit garment for instinct," they can enhance children's freedom (p. 42). At the same time, he does not regard this as a matter of allowing an unstructured *tabula rasa* to thrash about in a random manner to achieve autonomy. Rather, his conception of freedom is based upon the view of individuals as forging their nature in ways that further their own paths of development. Only within the context of a unifying principle of growth at the core of instinctive impulses, can this process take place successfully. Unfortunately, those institutions inherited from the past that tend to block creative impulses, force them into destructive channels and crush growth are "the state, private property,

² Russell's colleague, Whitehead (1929/1957), also believes that the child is "a living organism which grows by its own impulse to self-development ... For all your stimulation and guidance, the creative impulse comes from within, and is intensely characteristic of the individual" (p.39); for an analysis of Whitehead's educational philosophy, see Woodhouse (2014).

the patriarchal family, the churches, armies and navies. All of these have become in some degree oppressive, in some measure hostile to life” (p. 42). For Russell, the goal of education is to educate children in ways that challenge these life-blind institutions founded on hatred and fear.³

A vision of education capable of freeing children from these stifling emotions requires Russell (1916) to introduce what he calls the “principle of reverence.” Since some form of adult authority is unavoidable in education, there is need for adults to treat children with particular care: “In the presence of the child the adult feels an unaccountable humility – a humility not easily defended on any rational ground, and yet somehow nearer to wisdom than the easy self-confidence of many parents and teachers” (p. 147).

Reverence implies a deep respect on the part of the teacher/adult for the principle of growth at the core of each child’s life. Reverence for the child builds a loving relationship between the adult/teacher and the young individual.⁴ Reverence also enhances the scope of liberty, an essentially negative principle, which “tells us not to interfere, but it does not give any basis for construction,” especially in the educational sphere (p. 228).⁵ In contrast, reverence implies more than a simple non-interference on the part of adults, an active caring for the well-being and freedom of the young so that they themselves can actively channel their impulses in creative ways. This process, which “is subtle and complex, it can only be felt by a delicate intuition and dimly apprehended by imagination and respect,” requires an intuitive understanding that reaches out to each child in ways that strengthen their emotional growth (p. 25). An education based upon the principle of reverence also “provide[s] encouragement or mental food or opportunities for exercising mental faculties,” enhancing their intellectual growth, a goal which Russell considers especially important, as we shall see (Russell, 1917/1963, p. 13). The harmonious development of these twin aspects of children’s patterns of growth enables them to become subjects capable of determining how best to lead their own lives without the interference of “any kind of force, whether discipline or authority or fear or the tyranny of public opinion” (p. 13).

Chomsky (1971) acknowledges his debt to Russell in lectures delivered at the University of Cambridge after the philosopher’s death, published as *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom*. The source of their agreement lies in their shared belief in “the humanistic conception of man (sic)” (p. 54). Chomsky believes the knowledge and freedom comprising the basis of education are a function of innate principles of mental organization that place limits upon what can be known. Freedom and creativity have meaning

³ For a recent analysis of the ways in which corporate capitalism is life-blind, see McMurtry (2012): “At the doctrinal level, economic thought is in principle incapable of recognizing what has gone wrong. In the dominant ‘neo-classical doctrine,’ a life-blind value system is built in” (p. 6).

⁴ Russell’s principle of reverence can be compared to Noddings’ (1984/2003) conception of a caring relationship, whose logic implies not only that the adult care for the child but that the child reciprocates with a feeling of open, receptive attention, which she refers to as “engrossment” (p. 60). Noddings (1992/2005), however, parts company with Russell when she proposes the reorganization of schools around themes of care in the place of a curriculum founded on a liberal education.

⁵ Berlin (1967), makes a distinction between positive and negative freedom, decrying the former as potentially oppressive; however, Bay (1958) argues for a strong conception of freedom that includes both aspects, while Woodhouse (1983; 1992) analyzes the relationship between freedom and Russell’s principle of reverence. Chomsky’s emphasis on freedom (2006a) is framed within the context of an anarcho-syndicalism, whose goal is “a system of decentralized power and free association ... [that] can serve to maximize decent human instincts” (pp. 63, 67). Russell (1918/1985) also sees the potential of syndicalism to effect “a fundamental reconstruction, a sweeping away of all the sources of oppression, a liberation of men’s (sic) constructive energies” (p. 76).

only in relation to biological principles that form the internal core of human beings: “The principles of mind provide the scope as well as the limits of human creativity. Without such principles, scientific understanding and creative acts would not be possible” (p. 50).

Innate structures of the human mind enable both scientific understanding and artistic creation by placing limits upon their creative expression. Elsewhere, Chomsky (1975) argues that neither activity would be possible without these “conditions and constraints,” since otherwise “someone who is throwing paints at a wall in an arbitrary fashion is not acting creatively as an artist” (p. 210). Similarly, a scientist who systematically ignores the established rules of the experimental method would, by acting “in an arbitrary fashion,” be transgressing the bounds of their discipline. For Chomsky, then, “some system of constraints and forms and principles and rules is presupposed as a basis for any kind of creative action” (p. 211).

It is Chomsky’s study of language that provides the conceptual framework for the freedom and creativity at the core of his humanistic approach to education. Chomsky (2006c) believes that “creativity is an aspect of the ordinary and daily use of language and of human action in general” (p. 133). This creativity is shown by most young children who are able to learn their first language despite the complexity of its syntax and phonology. Traditional theories, emphasizing meta-morphological knowledge as fundamental, prove inadequate in their attempts to explain language learning. Rather, according to Olson (2016), the process involves “a conceptual shift [which] is required to shift attention from meaning to the underlying form that expresses that meaning” (p. 92). This underlying form is provided by the syntactic structures of the human mind, not the paucity of stimuli provided by the environment. If behaviorism were correct and environmental factors were the only ones involved, it would remain a mystery how the child could learn so much from so little external stimulation (Chomsky, 1980).⁶

For Chomsky (1987c), the ongoing attempt to explain how the operations and development of human language are made possible by “a system of generative processes rooted in innate properties of mind but permitting ... an infinite use of finite means” is intimately related to his view of education (p. 154). Only where the inherent capacity of children for language learning is presupposed as an open-ended, organic potentiality capable of generating new and creative sentences, can an adequate theory of education begin to take shape. Indeed, when writing of the relationship between language and freedom, Chomsky argues that,

There are, I think, a few footholds that seem fairly firm. I like to believe that the intensive study of one aspect of human psychology – human language – may contribute to a humanistic social science that will serve, as well, as an instrument for social action. (p. 155)

In other words, his hope is that the discipline of linguistics, which pays full attention to the psychology of a creative human nature is capable of spawning a humanistic social science consistent with liberatory social practice. While this speculative claim includes psychology and the other social sciences,

⁶ Hacker (2013) takes issue with Chomsky’s account of language learning, stating that “the problems ramify widely, reaching deep into questions in philosophy of language. It should be evident that mistaken answers to questions on one orbit affect the whole model, distorting the metal bands and jamming the cogs” (p. 100).

the practice of education is consistent with the kind of social action, which Chomsky believes could benefit from insights that afford systematic ways of interpreting and changing the world.

Contrasts and Agreements

Despite the agreement by both philosophers about the value of a humanistic conception of education, there is at least one significant difference in their approach. On the one hand, Russell (1916) proposes the principle of growth as “an instinctive urgency,” unifying the impulses and desires of men and women, so they can engage in free and constructive and creative activity (p. 21). While, on the other, Chomsky (1975) considers the “system of constraints and forms and principles and rules” that comprise the organizational structures of the mind to be the source of freedom (p. 211). Whereas Russell is concerned with educating children in ways that liberate their emotional lives in constructive ways, Chomsky (2006a) is more concerned with understanding the processes that generate the creativity of human language. One proposes an educational philosophy that recognizes the need for children to experience the full expression of their emotions in the learning process; the other conceives of linguistics as the major discipline for understanding how human beings acquire language through an interplay of the universal principles of mind and the learning environment.

Nevertheless, Russell’s emphasis upon children’s emotional growth does not preclude him from recognizing the importance of intellectual education. And here, there is some agreement with Chomsky. Russell (1916) finds that state-run schools too often deny the freedom necessary for the natural curiosity of children to flourish, thereby stunting their intellectual growth. They do this by a process of indoctrination, which involves not only passing on false beliefs but “the conviction that some particular creed is the truth” (p.107). The kind of extreme nationalism that led to the First World War and the willingness with which the citizens of all sides embraced the conflict was the source of Russell’s opposition to the indoctrination propagated by state-run schools. These dangers can be avoided where teachers provide an environment in which children become open-minded and adopt beliefs in proportion to the available evidence and be willing to revise them when there is sufficient counter evidence (Hare, 1987; 1995). Russell (1950a) believes that a pedagogy based on a scientific frame of mind gives rise to beliefs that are held “tentatively . . . instead of being held dogmatically,” which is consistent with the fact that “science is empirical, tentative, and undogmatic” (p. 15). The scientific outlook, then, provides the key to an education in which children become enlightened adults, capable of weighing the evidence supporting competing knowledge claims and avoiding the dogmas of religion, patriotism, and other forms of indoctrination (Irvine, 2001). Russell (1950a) goes further, claiming that an education that emphasizes an empiricist, scientific method is consistent with “the essence of the liberal outlook,” because it too avoids dogmatic and fanatical belief systems (p.14). Indeed, since “the only philosophy that affords a theoretical justification of democracy, and that accords with democracy in its temper of mind is empiricism,” an education that combines both empiricist and liberal perspectives would provide future citizens with the very framework needed to bring about a just and peaceful world (p. 14).⁷

⁷ However, Russell’s account of the scientific method includes the a priori sciences of logic and mathematics as integral to his empiricism; for an account of the relationship between “scientific philosophy” and his educational thought, see Woodhouse (1985) and Winchester (2001).

Chomsky (1987a) agrees with Russell about the need to avoid indoctrination, a practice that he, too, finds predominant in state-run schools, where there is a period of regimentation and control, part of which involves direct indoctrination, providing a system of false beliefs. “But more importantly, I think, is the manner and style of preventing and blocking independent and creative thinking and imposing hierarchies and competitiveness” (p. 7). Schools engage not only in the inculcation of false beliefs, but the stifling of creative thought and the imposition of a hierarchical system in which competition with others is encouraged by means of the “ranking of students” (p. 6). The very capacity for the creative use of language, which Chomsky believes is innate in human beings, is crushed by an emphasis on competition for success based on test results. It was only when he attended an elite high school that Chomsky experienced this kind of regimentation imposed by the grading system in which he, nevertheless, excelled.

All of this contrasts with Chomsky’s early schooling, which he (1987a) describes in quite different terms,

I was sent to an experimental progressive school from infancy, before I was two, until about twelve years old ... [It] was essentially a Deweyite school and I think a very good one, judging from my experience, there was a tremendous premium on individual creativity, not in the sense of slapping paints on paper, but doing the kind of work and thinking you were interested in. (p. 6)

In the context of this “lively atmosphere,” he was able to engage in creative, rule-bound thought processes and the kind of work that expressed his own interests (p. 6).⁸ Even though Chomsky believes that “schools could be run quite differently,” there is a fundamental problem that “any society based on authoritarian hierarchic institutions would [not] tolerate such a school system for very long” (p. 6). While a more democratic system “might be tolerated for the elite” as a place where they learn to think creatively, the “mass of the population” requires indoctrination to persuade them to accept their place in the oppressive economic and social structures of capitalism. This is why the “roles that the public schools play in society ... can be very destructive” (p. 7).

Epistemology and Education

What Chomsky writes about the dangers of schooling is familiar. However, when he considers the epistemological basis of an education that gives rise to creative thinking, he appears to part company from Russell. Chomsky (2006a) re-emphasizes that the child’s linguistic creativity, in which “he (sic) very quickly knows the language ... as an act of normal intelligence” must be understood as stemming from the innate organizational principles of the human mind (p. 23). As a result, he sees the need for “discarding entirely behaviorism” with its pseudo-scientific account of language development, and goes further, wishing to jettison “*the entire empiricist tradition from which it evolved*” (p. 35, italics added). The rationalist tradition spearheaded by Descartes is far more conducive to the scientific method as he interprets it. In particular, Chomsky (2006a) is attracted to “the move of Descartes to the postulation of a second substance [of mind],” which he compares to Newton’s postulation of action at a distance. Each

⁸ For Dewey (1916/1966), “the value of recognizing the dynamic place of interest in an educative development is that it leads to considering individual children in their specific capabilities, needs, and preferences” (p. 130).

scientist was engaged in a pursuit where they were “moving into the domain of something that went beyond well-established science and ... [were] trying to integrate it with well-established science by developing a theory in which these notions could be properly clarified and explained” (p. 12).

The connection between the two lies in their shared attempt to move beyond the scientific knowledge of the time and show that the objects of their inquiry could be integrated within new theoretical frameworks. Even though Chomsky (2006a) agrees that “Descartes ... was unable to lay the groundworks for a mathematical theory of mind, as achieved by Newton and his followers,” he believes the Cartesian goal of reaching “a precisely articulated, clearly formulated, abstract theory which will have empirical consequences” is worth pursuing (pp. 12, 13).⁹

Chomsky clearly takes issue with the empiricism espoused by Russell (1950a), who, as we have seen, considers it “the only philosophy ... that accords with democracy in its temper of mind” (p. 14). Nevertheless, Chomsky (2006b) agrees that education should enable future citizens “to look at the facts with an open mind, to put simple assumptions to the test, and to pursue an argument to its conclusion” (p. 70). But he believes that this ability “to follow a rational line of argument” stems from “Cartesian common sense, which is quite evenly distributed,” and despite the indoctrination propagated by schools and the media, at least some citizens do exhibit a critical open mindedness in their consideration of “social and political issues” (p. 70). He attributes this awareness to Cartesian common sense rather than to any “special esoteric knowledge ... required to explore these ‘depths,’ which are non-existent” (p. 70). In other words, Chomsky believes in the capacity of ordinary citizens to understand how power operates in favour of the wealthy even if they are unable to change the ways in which society currently operates.

Chomsky (2006c) clarifies the concept of Cartesian common sense when he criticizes Russell’s attempt to overcome “the inadequacy of the empiricist approach to the acquisition of knowledge ... [by proposing] various principles of non-demonstrative inference” (p. 128). These principles were introduced by Russell (1959) in his later philosophy as a way to strengthen both deduction and induction as reliable sources of scientific knowledge:

I realized that all the inferences both in common sense and in science are of a different sort from those in deductive logic and are such that, when the premises are true and the reasoning correct, the conclusion is only probable. (p. 237)

Chomsky (2006c), however, is skeptical towards this attempt to strengthen probability, arguing that even though the principles “are added one by one to the principle of induction,” they are inadequate (p. 128). What is needed is a “radically different approach ... which is quite remote from empiricist presuppositions,” one that furnishes the basis, “not only for scientific knowledge ... but also for what we can call the constructions of ‘common-sense understanding,’ that is, for our ordinary notions concerning the nature of the physical and social world” (p. 128).

A Cartesian approach to knowledge provides the basis for a common-sense explanation of both the laws of nature and an understanding of the workings of society. Chomsky’s emphasis on Cartesian common sense as a key notion in his epistemology allows him to trust in the judgement of ordinary

⁹ Foucault (2006) challenges Chomsky’s reliance on Descartes for whom “the mind was not so very creative” (p.13). Rather, he suggests that Leibniz is a better source, for he expresses “the idea that in the profundity of the mind is incorporated a whole web of logical relations which constitutes, in a certain sense ... the not yet clarified and visible form of the reason itself” (p.14).

people in their understanding of science and society.¹⁰ An education that furnishes the young with common sense and a healthy skepticism enables them to recognize injustices in the world.¹¹ Despite differences in their philosophical approach to knowledge, Russell and Chomsky share a belief in the need to educate ordinary people about social and political affairs. Sperlich (2006) believes both men see their task as “established scientists who cannot be ignored ... [to] find out the truth and tell the people” about abuses of power, which negate freedom and justice, in language that can be readily understood (p. 75). Their work as public intellectuals is an integral part of their humanistic approach to education.

Educational Practice

While it is beyond the scope of this article to consider in any depth Russell’s Beacon Hill, an alternative school he established with his second wife, Dora Black Russell, it is pertinent to his educational practice (Gorham, 2005).¹² Chomsky’s practice (2000b), meanwhile, emerges primarily from his experience of schooling, some of which we encountered in the previous section, as well as from his commitment to educate for “ordinary skepticism” in his public lectures (p. 71).

In order to put some of their ideas into practice, Bertrand and Dora, founded Beacon Hill School in 1927, which they established initially as a place fit for the education of their children, John and Kate. Several years before the opening of the school, they co-authored *Prospects of Industrial Civilization* in which they express their hopes for an education that would encourage free thinking among the young and avoid the carnage of the First World War. The Russells (1923) reiterate the familiar metaphor characterizing the humanistic approach to child rearing introduced by Rousseau (1911/1992) in *Emile*:¹³ “The humanistic conception regards the child as a gardener regards a young tree, i.e., as something with a certain intrinsic nature, which will develop into an admirable form, given proper soil and air and light” (pp. 274-275).

The proper soil, air, and light necessary for the child’s constructive growth require an atmosphere in which their intrinsic capabilities can be integrated into a cohesive whole by an open educational process. The atmosphere for enabling the child to grow constructively is far more subtle than finding the right

¹⁰ According to Ayer (1982), Russell’s epistemological stance was quite different: “If the attitude of common sense is represented by naïve realism, the theory that we directly perceive physical objects much as they really are, then Russell’s opinion of common sense was that it conflicted with science: and in such a context he thought science ought to be given the verdict” (p. 33).

¹¹ As mentioned, Chomsky (1987d) rejects Skinner’s behaviorism, whose “claims dissolve into triviality or incoherence under analysis” (p. 160). In his later educational philosophy, however, Russell (1927) believed that behaviorism is “the only valid method for the study of animal and child psychology” (p. 314).

¹² Among the many, often conflicting accounts are those of Dora herself (1980), Hemmings (1973), Tait (1975), Bruneau (2003), and Gorham (2005). In 1931, Russell believed the school to be a success, “It was an experiment on my part. I wrote a book on education and wanted to try out my own theories. To my surprise the theories have worked out well” (cited in Hemmings, 1973, p.80). Later, however, Russell (1960) changed his mind, “For various reasons, unconnected with educational theory, it [Beacon Hill] was not a success.” Among the unstated reasons were the number of “problem children” the Russells accepted at the school, and the favoritism he and Dora showed towards their own children (Hendley, 1986/2012, pp. 65-66).

¹³ Rousseau (1911/1992) anticipates Russell’s concept of reverence, “Hold childhood in reverence, and do not be in any hurry to judge it for good or ill” (p. 71).

soil and light for a young tree. Educators must maintain a reverential attitude towards the human sapling so their potential can be realized. Otherwise, the child will bend in directions determined by others, thwarting the organic principle of growth and denying their search for the nourishment of a free environment.

Russell (1980), in particular, believes free movement and expression should be matched by an inner freedom that enables the “use [of the child’s] ... own imagination ... [to] find its own way” (p.14). The delicate balance between the inner and outer impulses for freedom can best be achieved in a school, where each child is “free to come into classrooms and work and learn, or not to do so ... [and to work] in his (sic) own time and at his own pace” (p. 16). Dora, then, advocates “greater freedom for children,” capable of deciding whether to engage in the creative arts that strengthen their imagination, pursue subjects like history and science that enhance their intellectual growth, or simply play (p. 25). Like A.S. Neill’s Summerhill, students at Beacon Hill were not required to attend classes though if they disturbed others, they were asked “to leave and occupy themselves outdoors or in the playground” (p. 16).¹⁴

Sperlich (2006) believes that Chomsky’s “Deweyite primary schooling ... in many ways was the type of libertarian Beacon Hill school that Russell had set up in England” (p. 76). Both schools emphasized a freedom of inquiry in which children engaged their interests by working individually or in a group. This appealed to the young Chomsky (1987a), because there was a feeling “that everybody was doing something important” (p.5). From an early age, his parents acquainted him with Hebrew language and literature, and by the time he entered high school he learned about anarcho-syndicalism from his uncle, who introduced him to a “lively” group of “European emigres” (p. 11). Indeed, he describes “the Jewish working-class culture in New York ... [as] the most influential intellectual culture during my early teens” (p. 11). What Chomsky learned from this experience was the importance of self-education, since many of the intellectuals he met were autodidacts who had learned about anarcho-syndicalism through their own reading and discussion with others.

Another way in which Chomsky (1987a) puts his educational ideas into practice is through the many public lectures he gives on American domestic and foreign policy. His opposition to the Vietnam War during the 1960s marked the beginning of this activity, and it,

meant speaking several nights a week at a church to an audience of half a dozen people ... [and eventually] meant participation in demonstrations, lobbying, organizing resistance, civil disobedience and arrests, endless speaking and travel, and the expected concomitants: threats of a fairly serious nature. (pp. 54, 55)

Although his ongoing commitment to exposing “any system based on lying and deceit” has at times taken him away from important work in linguistics, “there are numerous compensations ... and accomplishments that give much satisfaction, however small they may be,” including the people he has met as well as aspects of life he would not otherwise have experienced (pp. 49, 55). Chomsky’s approach (2006b) to this form of public education is that of a scientist who has a responsibility to show how “a propaganda system ... attempts ... to fix the limits of possible thought ... [and deny] independence of judgement” (p. 111). His activism is consistent with that of Russell, who was imprisoned for six months

¹⁴ A major difference with Neill’s Summerhill was that “he placed more emphasis on handwork in his school, while the Russells seemed more interested in thought and ideas” (Hendley, 1986/2012, p. 44). Nevertheless, like Summerhill, Beacon Hill had a Council, which, was “the true essence of the school ... [allowing] discussion and agreement between the children and grown-ups ... [who were] empowered to discuss anything” (Russell, 1980, pp. 27, 28).

for his vocal opposition to the First World War and for one week when he was eighty-nine years old for incitement to civil disobedience, in support of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (Ayer, 1982).

Educational Implications for Today

The questions raised by Russell and Chomsky are of concern not only to philosophers in the tradition of humanistic education but also to the practice of schools and universities today.

The concept of growth at the core of Russell's educational philosophy, for example, is not unlike that of Dewey (1916/1966), who writes that, "Since in reality there is nothing to which growth is relative save more growth, there is nothing to which education is subordinate save more education" (p. 51). Similarly, Whitehead (1929/1957) considers the process of learning as proceeding through "periods of mental growth, with their cyclic recurrences, yet always different as we pass from cycle to cycle" (p. 17).¹⁵ Meanwhile, Gorham (2005) believes that Beacon Hill School deserves a place in the history of the progressive educational movement, not least because it anticipates the concept of the hidden curriculum articulated in Illich's (1970) *Deschooling Society*: "Paradoxically, Dora Russell's Beacon Hill, just because it was a 'failure' as an institution—it was small, unstable, and precarious for much of its history—may have succeeded as a 'deschooled' school" (p. 75).

Chomsky's contributions have been no less significant. Ross (2014) argues that his theory of language as the function of a universal generative grammar made possible by the creative organizational principles of the human mind "sparked a paradigmatic revolution in the field" of linguistics (p. 127). This has enabled Chomsky (2006c) to engage constructively in discussions of the philosophy of language proposed by Quine, Goodman, and others. Human creativity at the core of Chomsky's humanistic education was stimulated by his early childhood education, which he finds actively suppressed in the hierarchical school system.

McMurtry (1988) agrees with Chomsky that schools are authoritarian institutions,

where there is no right of appeal to the authority of evidence and argument to what may or may not be taught. The matter is decided by authorities external to the subject discipline itself, and they normally caution against or rule out whatever might be perceived as a challenge to prevailing opinion and power. (p. 38)

The ultimate authority for what is taught lies in the subject matter and methods of inquiry that constitute knowledge, as well as the evidence and argument justifying them. Where external authority, whether government dictate or other powerful forces, override these established norms, the result is indoctrination rather than education for critical thought. McMurtry (1988) argues, further, that "the education system, in short, ... [should be] governed by its own disciplines of research and expression, not by special interests and demands, or it is not education" (p. 41). This, in turn, relates to the meaning of education, which, as mentioned above, is to enable the growth of "*a more inclusive range of thought, experience, and action*" (p. 39).

¹⁵ For a comparative analysis of Russell, Dewey, and Whitehead's concepts of growth, see Woodhouse (1983).

Schools, however, are becoming anti-educational not only as a result of greater competition for grades as decried by Chomsky, but, as Westheimer (2015) points out, by “the relentless focus on testing and ‘achievement’ [which] means that time for in-depth critical analysis of ideas has been diminished” (p. 18). Standardized tests consist of pre-packaged questions to be answered by students, whose thought process is determined by companies that manufacture tests for private profit. Learning is reduced to a programmed hierarchy of assembly line questions, the answers to which are determined by prescribed outcomes. Learning then becomes a mechanistic ritual rather than an organic process freely engaged in to maximize the range of understanding. Students are required to acquire the skills and competencies necessary for the workplace (Ruitenbergh, 2019). Instead of promoting a process of inquiry, teachers pass on inert material over which they have no control, being forced to comply with the demands of externally imposed standards of evaluation. As Collins (1998) points out, the pressures on teachers from government agencies to ensure that their students are “winners” in the race for grades has meant that, “the deskilling of teachers occurs as the curriculum becomes more standardized and as their worktime is more strictly arranged to meet bureaucratically conceived specifications of what education should be about” (p. 33).

The result is an attack on teacher autonomy by an overarching regime whose anti-educational directives are imposed from above. This is precisely why Russell and Chomsky are opposed to the mechanistic conception of education that defines the teacher’s role as that of filling empty vessels with isolated bits of information. Russell’s and Chomsky’s respective views thus necessitate a robust commitment to academic freedom for K-12 teachers.

The subjugation of critical reason is not confined to schools, however. Universities, are, in Chomsky’s words (1987a), “committed to the needs of the powers that dominate these institutions, primarily the government, the major corporations, and so on” (p. 47). The goal of education to advance and disseminate shared knowledge is undermined by the opposing goal of the corporate market to maximize private monetary profits (Woodhouse, 2009). Russell (1935/2006) understood this tendency as early as the 1930s when he wrote of the “cult of efficiency” that measures everything in terms of money and the speed with which goods can be produced (p. 11) “The contemplative habit of mind” necessary for understanding the world in a dispassionate way becomes redundant, as knowledge is no longer considered as valuable in itself but only as an instrument for increased power over others (p. xxvi).¹⁶ As a result, academic freedom, which is a necessary condition for the advancement of knowledge is threatened, since research and teaching are increasingly conducted in ways that enhance private wealth (Woodhouse, 2017; 2019).

Russell (1957/1983), himself, originally considered the question of the value of academic freedom in 1940, “in a world distracted by war, tormented by persecution, and abounding in concentration camps,” and he immediately answered that “it is part and parcel of the same battle” (pp. 131-132). The reason he gave was the following:

Let it be remembered that what is at stake, in the greatest issues as well as in those that seem smaller, is the freedom of the individual human spirit to express its beliefs and hopes for mankind, whether they be shared by many or by few or by none. (p.132)

¹⁶ For further analysis, see Woodhouse (2001; 2006).

Academic freedom, then, is crucial to the ability of human beings to express their beliefs, however unpopular or heretical they may be to those in power. As part of the free expression of the human spirit, it is necessary for building a better world. And Russell (1950b) was clear that teachers should have the same kind of freedom to express their views as their university counterparts: “There ought to be a great deal more freedom than there is for the scholastic profession. It ought to have more opportunities of self-determination, more independence from the interference of bureaucrats and bigots” (p. 158). Unless teachers have greater independence from external authority to determine what and how to teach, they will be unable “to instill in the young the habit of impartial inquiry” on which critical thinking and the scientific method depend (p. 151).

Nor is this a utopian idea. Clarke (2001) argues there is no logical reason why academic freedom should be limited to university teachers simply because they engage in scholarship and research. After all, “Public school teachers can still encourage their students to pursue knowledge and truth by stoking the fire of critical and creative thinking which stimulates and challenges students” (p. 64).

Education at any level involves “moving learners beyond their present epistemological boundaries,” enlivening critical thinking among them (p. 64). It could, however, be argued that creative teachers are able to cultivate this capacity without the protection of academic freedom. Where teachers manage to achieve this, their efforts are often supported by school administrators committed to the same educational goal.

Hare (1990), however, argues that this situation should not just be an occasional privilege accorded by thoughtful administrators; he claims that teachers should have the right to such freedom:

The common assumption is that academic freedom has application only in the university system. But if an open forum of discussion is appropriate at any level, then progressively there must be an anticipation of the practice during earlier stages of education. A rigid division between different levels is arbitrary. (p. 380)

He refers to this mistaken belief as “the fallacy of the magic transition” (p. 380). As long as it continues to hold sway, schools will fail to provide students with the kind of open discussion of the marketplace of ideas that defines education. And Hare (2001) believes that Russell would object to this fallacious reasoning as anti-educational.

Nevertheless, it might be objected that teachers should not enjoy the full scope of autonomy granted to university faculty, because they are in need of guidelines from government in terms of curriculum and pedagogical methods. The objection presupposes the very point at issue, namely that the intervention of external authority can be used to override the subject matter and methods of inquiry that constitute the core of education. For the sake of argument, however, let us suppose that this kind of intervention can, in principle, be justified.¹⁷ For example, if a teacher were systematically denying all the evidence that the holocaust took place, and encouraged anti-Semitic attitudes, resulting in derogatory comments about Jews by students in their written work. Interestingly, as Hare (1990) points out, this is precisely what actually happened in the case of Alberta teacher Jim Keegstra in the 1980s.

¹⁷ Maxwell *et al.* (2018) propose four principles defining free speech in the classroom: curricular alignment, even-handedness, avoiding inflammatory speech, and age appropriateness “as a relatively common sense set of criteria that can be referred to” when there is disagreement about the teaching of controversial issues (p. 202).

Yet a closer examination reveals that the Keegstra example actually violates the limits of academic freedom. There are two necessary conditions for a knowledge claim to be protected by academic freedom, whether in teaching or research. First, that one engages in a critical examination of the evidence supporting it; and second, that one respect the right of those who hold opposing views to do so (Woodhouse, 2009; 2017). In terms of the conditions necessary for any knowledge claim to be protected by academic freedom, Keegstra fails on both counts. First, he refused to take into account the overwhelming amount of counter evidence to his claim that the holocaust did not take place insisting that it was further proof of a Jewish conspiracy. Nor did he respect the right of his students to hold opposing views by entering into a dialogue with them. Rather, he misused his authority by giving poor grades to any written work that ran counter to his own preconceived notions.¹⁸ One can safely infer that, for these reasons, Keegstra was engaged in indoctrination, not education.

Nevertheless, Hare (1990) concludes that “it would be a pity if confusion resulting from the Keegstra case gave undeserved support to the idea that teachers *must* remain neutral on controversial issues” (p. 384). Neutrality stifles debate and contravenes one of the main aims of education: the development of the capacity for rational understanding. As Hare puts it: “If it is true now that people are not particularly good at distinguishing truth from falsity, it is especially important for schools to look for ways in which this ability can be developed” (p. 386). If, and only if, schools enable students to examine the evidence supporting any knowledge claim, can they perform a major function of education, which, as Russell (1950b) puts it, is “to instill in the young the habit of impartial inquiry” (p. 151). Neutrality on the part of teachers can hinder student engagement in discussing ethical views about which there is considerable disagreement. It is far preferable, argues Russell (1939), that students make up their own minds by being exposed to a variety of teachers with strong opinions and “the most vehement and terrific argumentation on all sides of every question” (p. 529).

In conclusion, it can be seen that Russell agrees with Chomsky (1987b) that *all* those who enjoy the right to academic freedom have a “responsibility ... [as] intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies” (p. 60). This, it seems to me, is bedrock for the humanistic approach to education espoused by both philosophers.

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¹⁸ The full details of the Keegstra case are carefully analyzed by Hare (1990). For a different case where a teacher's freedom of expression was wrongfully violated, see Waddington (2011).

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