

Completing Creation through Education

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A Classical Iconoclast

The story of Leon Roth on education, like his ethics, his politics and his Judaism, begins with an appreciation for the classical and skepticism toward, if not a denigration of the contemporary. What is different about Roth on education from the other disciplines is that he translated his theory into practice, or to put it less boldly, he moved further in the application of his theories than in any other domain. Ever the eclectic philosopher, Roth drew upon Plato, particularly the Socratic elements within Plato, even more than Aristotle, whose educational philosophy was subsumed under his Politics. The most dominant recurring theme in Roth's educational philosophy, that education is uniquely responsible for making worthy human beings, was predicated upon Socrates refutation of the Sophists' claim that education is primarily responsible for making good citizens. This was Leon Roth's philosophy of education; the rest is commentary.

Roth formulated his own educational philosophy out of the Socratic idiom. Roth's relationship to Plato was complex, resembling his relationship to Descartes, in that he showed much more respect for his philosophical method than for its content. For example, he held the deliberative rigor of Socrates in high esteem, but the pure intellectualism of Plato in great suspicion. While Roth was willing to consider Plato as the base for building an educational model, he devoted much effort to chiseling away at the base, creating a Plato in his own, that is, Roth's image. Roth modeled his own pedagogy on the Socratic method of inquiry and endorsed the religious humanism that animated Plato's philosophy of education. Nevertheless, by the time Roth finished articulating his own philosophy of education, in the spirit of Rabbi Akiva citing Moses, Plato would probably not have recognized himself in it until he heard himself authoritatively quoted.¹

Roth's educational thinking was decidedly religious, and indeed, particularly Jewish. In describing the educational ideal as a *Torat Hayyim*, Roth did more than make a rhetorical point; he stated his philosophy in consonance with the very heart of Jewish tradition. He sought to evoke an element of the divine in education, predicated on the proposition that education continued the process of Creation. To engage Leon Roth's educational philosophy is to accept the proposition that an uneducated person is incomplete, not just illiterate. As an unrelenting and unrepentant champion of Greek classicism in education, Roth's educational thinking flowed against the prevailing theological and ideological currents.

Most of the twentieth century was dominated by two schools of educational thought: American pragmatism and European existentialism. John Dewey (1859-1952) cast a defining shadow of the shape of educational philosophy and policy throughout the world in the twentieth century. He changed the focus of educational thought from the imparting of knowledge by an expert to the collective experiences of the learner. Dewey's pragmatism and naturalism were not confined to education, but there they received prominent, if not preeminent attention. Dewey applied 'experimentalism' to social experiences in general, and to education in particular.

What is characteristic of my theory is simply the emphasis placed upon the knowledge mode of experience, defined in terms of competent inquiry, as that which accomplishes these functions; an emphasis which goes so far as to say that intelligence, as the fruit of such knowledge, is the only available instrumentality for accomplishing them. The contrast is with those theories which hold that transcendent a priori principles, rational institutions, revelations from on high, adherence to established authorities in state and church, inevitable social revolutions, etc., are the agencies by which experienced values are to be made more secure and more extensively enjoyed.²

The above message reveals Dewey's pragmatism and represents a repudiation of Aristotle, among others, who rejected the claim that experience can be self-regulating and self-authenticating.

Dewey sought a unity, or a communion of subject and object, knower and known, the experiencer and that which is experienced.

I believe that the individual who is to be educated is a social individual and that society is an organic union of individuals. If we eliminate the individual factor in society we are left only with an inert and lifeless mass. I believe finally, that education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience; that the process and the goal are one and the same thing.³

Dewey wrote with passion and conviction about a dynamic, fluid curriculum, responsive to the problem-solving capabilities of each child. He understood education at its best to be the confluence of a science and an art, leading to a life of healthy growth – intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, social, ethical and spiritual. His overarching philosophical tendency was to blur the distinction between knowing and doing. This makes his philosophy of education decidedly unclassical. When applied to moral education, Dewey's thinking retains its elasticity, refusing to be either deontological or utilitarian, thereby proposing an alternative to classical notions in ethics.

I believe that there is, therefore, no succession of studies of the ideal school curriculum. ...The progress is not in the succession of studies but in the development of new attitudes towards, and new interests in, experience. Education must begin with a psychological insight into the child's capacities, interests and habits.⁴

In 1897, Dewey staked out a learner-centered, experiential alternative to classical, teacher-centered educational thinking. 120 years later the debate rages on – including here and now at this conference.

Across the Atlantic, on the side most familiar to Roth, existentialism exerted a growing influence on educational thought. One of its preeminent exponents, who crossed pens with Roth, was Martin Buber. Buber made aliyah in 1938, at the age of 60, and was immediately appointed professor of social philosophy at the Hebrew University. He shared with Roth the deep-seated belief that the Jews were not a nation like any other, and therefore, a Jewish state could not be a state like any other. But over the content of Jewish particularity and the method of its expression, the two philosophers radically diverged. Buber's philosophy passed through a Hasidic prism; Roth's bypassed it. Buber's philosophy of education concentrated on process; Roth's on content.

Existentialism emerged as a response to a rationalism that was blamed for contributing to the political and moral decay in Europe, especially in Germany, beginning in the late nineteenth century and ignominiously on into the twentieth. Thinkers called into question the basis for the Idealism of Hegel, and for the unrealized belief in the power of the intellect to know and do and make 'right'. In this philosophical context, Buber's existentialist orientation profoundly affected his perspectives on education.

Buber rejected the conventional conceptions that viewed education in terms of the acquisition of knowledge or the transformation of the inner life of the individual. For Buber, the goal of education is to alter the ways in which persons relate to one another. By nurturing our capacity for direct, dialogical relationships, education has the potential to counteract the power of alienation.⁵

According to Buber, the defining human characteristic inhered in the capacity to enter into mutual dialogue. The teacher-student dialogue is the fulcrum that levers Buberian educational philosophy. In Buber's educational scheme, the teacher, rather than being a scholar or a disciplinarian or a moral exemplar, is a catalyst, an enabler or dialogue.

The educator gathers in the constitutive forces of the world. He distinguishes, rejects and conforms in himself, in his self which is filled with the world. . . The educator educates himself to be their vehicle.⁶

The Buberian educator is one who embodies the curriculum and becomes the text - not only the teacher. This places a daunting responsibility on the educator, not only to know the subject, but to be the subject for his/her students. The educator cannot expect mutuality from the students, and consequently, must be ready to respond to the dynamic needs of the learners, attentive to their growth, and all the while, learning him/herself. The educator must be willing to give up control of the classroom in order for education to occur. In Buber's **Between Man and Man**, the key word in the title is 'between'; the essence of human life lies in the dialogue between people. Similarly, the essence of education lies in between the teacher and the student.

By relying on rational discourse as its major vehicle, education runs counter to its goal. Insofar as it removes us from the immediate, concrete situation, rational discourse, rather than serving as the vehicle for relation, actually has an estranging effect, separating us from other persons.⁷

As a philosopher of education, Martin Buber offered a clear alternative to the rational, intellectual dialogues of Plato: the relational, existential dialogues of an 'I' seeking to meet a 'Thou'.

Engaging Leon Roth's philosophy of education means coming to terms with the synchronic context in which he thought and taught. He chose to swim upstream rather than follow the tide of either the pragmatic or existential mainstreams. Roth's educational thinking reflected a profound optimism in the ability of people to behave ethically as the direct consequence of education. Roth's humanism was not that of the positivist school, not limited to the scientism of Comte, not envisioning the eclipse of religion. Rather, it was committed to living within the bounds of Judaism, within which he included not only the Torah of Moses, but also the Politics of Aristotle and the Ethics of Spinoza. Roth's humanism was born out of his progressive conviction, the premise that since Creation, the overarching human mission has been to recapture a kinship with the divine. Education, slowly but surely, would lead us to that end.

Roth was not alone in his resolute pursuit of an education system that would recreate itself. Alfred North Whitehead in The Aims of Education (1929) sounded an alarm to which Roth was among the first responders.

We enunciate two educational commandments, 'Do not teach too many subjects,' and again, 'What you do teach, teach thoroughly.' . . . [T]he problem of keeping knowledge alive, of preventing it from becoming inert. . . is the central problem of all education.⁸

Roth's major work in educational philosophy, החינוך וערכי האדם, Education and Human Values, presented a sustained argument for the authority and relevance of a classical educational method devoted to intellectual rigor and moral integrity. Distilled to its essence, education, as Roth understood it, is more a formative process than an informative one, with the product being a good person. Roth's ultimate objective was to nurture good human beings, not to develop good Israelis, or even good Jews, aims that he understood to be parochial and even propagandistic. Instead of tying education to any particular culture or people, Roth linked it to universal human nature.

2

Educational Goals

In his brief but pithy introduction to Education and Human Values Roth spelled out the task he set for himself. Noting that education in the 20th century veered from its original course, he purported to reestablish its mission.

There is a goal in education, and this goal is worth of clarification. This goal entails imparting standards and creating the power of judgment and evaluation; it is acquired through imitation. In particular, good standards are acquired by imitating the good. A teacher teaches a child and not only a discipline, and that teacher's task is to shape a person. It is completely impossible to educate without determined values, and therefore, the content of studies is no less important than their form. Even though it is generally acknowledged that education is for the sake of living, in another sense, which is perhaps no less significant, living is for the sake of education – ideas such as these are of timeless worth, especially timely in our generation.⁹

The categorical nature of Roth's introduction may seem jarring, but not so when understood in the context of a philosopher whose belief in the rational and the universal was unshakable. The security and almost defiance of Roth's educational stance engage the reader immediately. "There is a goal in education" may not be the boldest of Roth's educational postulates, but even *it* is controversial. Indeed,

the claim that education has a goal is precisely this issue which plagued Dewey, who argued for education as a continuous growth process, akin to life itself, without a fixed end product, and Buber, who resolutely refused to determine educational goals that would limit the potential for dialogue.

Having declared an educational axiom, Roth proceeded to state its content and method. "To create the power of judgment and evaluation"; that is the purpose of education. Roth understood education to be an essentially ethical endeavor. He wrote of the need to focus on 'why' and not 'what' questions that foster liberal thinking rather than formulaic responses. To teach people what to think is indoctrination. To teach people how to think is education.¹⁰

Roth argued that education alone is capable of implanting and nurturing the power to distinguish between good and evil. People do not possess ethical standards innately, nor are they acquired as passive recipients of instruction. They emerge from active engagement with worthy ideas and models. Roth believed that morality is teachable, absolutely and universally. Indeed, morality is teachable because of its universality.¹¹

The worthy exists in and of itself in opposition to the common; the good is good not because it is efficient or because it brings pleasure or because it is accepted, but only because it is good.”¹²

According to Roth, ‘good’ has one essential modifier, person. An educated person was a good person, one who possessed the requisite knowledge to recognize the good, the requisite courage to strive towards it, and the requisite perseverance to achieve it. The part of a person that Roth believed needed to be educated most is that part that comprises the essence of a person, namely, the soul. Roth cites Socrates in Plato’s *Apology* as the educational paradigm.

The soul is the only thing in our world that has absolute value. . . Our entire task in life is to purify this soul. That is our religious obligation, our moral obligation and our civic obligation.¹³

In the predominantly secular environment of the twentieth century educational thought, Roth proclaimed an inextricable link between religion and education. He defined the soul as ‘the ethical and intellectual personality which constitutes the essence of a human being.’¹⁴ ‘Religious education’ is a redundancy; there can be nothing else. By embedding education in religion, Roth spoke a completely different language from the overwhelming preponderance of his contemporaries. While the behaviorists concentrated on action, the cognitivists on thought, the psychotherapists on emotion, and the existentialists on interaction, Roth focused on character. Without being an atavist, Roth believed that contemporary issues could best be addressed by classical methods. Leon Roth’s educational vision caused him to look for what was timeless more than timely.

Ultimately, Roth believed that the advancement of a philosophy of life subsumed all other educational goals. Without such a philosophy, Roth claimed, a society could not survive. The overarching responsibility of education consisted of nothing less than developing within each student a vision of life’s purpose. Through education, each member of a society grew to understand and accept his reason for being, his relationship to a shared past, present and ideally, a shared future.

The task of education is to open up before the student the treasures of tradition, for without tradition the society will not survive. But it is incumbent upon the student to accept the tradition as a living organism, accessible to his understanding. If not, the tradition and the society will degenerate and eventually become extinct.¹⁵

3

Imitation: The Sincerest Form of Pedagogy

Roth’s philosophy of education rested significantly on a learning process called ‘imitation’. It is fundamentally a religious ideal, not the behaviorist theory of modeling.

There are levels to achieve perfection, and that which raises a person through these levels is the aspiration to be perfect, which is ultimately, the imitation of God.¹⁶

We are to apprehend and assimilate that which is divinely worthy, to aspire to become through nurture that which only God already is through nature. Roth understood imitation to be both desirable and possible. We ascend the educational ladder by honing our powers of judgment so that we can recognize what is worthy and integrate it just as we can distinguish what is vile and purge it. Each good piece of literature we read, each elegant proof we understand, each good game we play and each good story we tell contribute to the overall goal of living as good human beings.

We must understand the word ‘imitation’ in another way, one which is more wide ranging. Imitation can be not only of what is real, but also of what reality can and ought to be.¹⁷

Roth drew upon artistic license to justify this claim. Relying upon Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Roth argues that art has the capacity to stretch reality beyond its appearance, to teach us what reality could resemble. In this way, art transcends reality and provides us with a goal worthy of imitation. Art rises above the mundane particular to the sacred universal. “Art passes over the transitory and rests upon the enduring”²⁷ Roth interpreted ‘imitation’ not as a slavish reproduction of reality, but as a liberating, creative activity of the artist.

There are two paths of education, the path of science and definition, and the path of art and imitation. But the former is good only for angels, to whom everything is clear and the supreme stage is precluded to human beings, science in this sense cannot serve as a correct example for education. Education is always 'on the path'; it is ascending the ladder, and for the sake of this ascent, the only means is imitation. The learner imitates the perfect; and through this imitation approaches [perfection] according to his potential and capability.¹⁸

Roth's concept of imitation resembled the Platonic and Aristotelian idea of mimesis, the artistic representation of reality. Applied to education, mimesis and imitation both place a prodigious responsibility upon the teacher. The teacher must not only know the subject matter at hand, but also be capable of making qualitative judgments about its inherent worth. A teacher must select the curricular material for the students. This selection process requires knowledge and wisdom, since the teacher must decide what literature, for example, is worthy of imitation.

The teacher, as the artist, must know what is desirable and what is possible to expect from his/her students. A teacher needs to be able to see the student not as he or she actually is, but what potential he or she possesses in relation to an ideal standard. Through imitation, a teacher enables a student to develop and to find his/her own voice. There is a self-revelatory dimension to learning. The teacher cannot learn for or even along with the student. Rather, the teacher has the perspective to recognize both the student's reality and the educational goal or ideal. The imitative process involves the teacher as a catalyst, an enabler, a motivator. The aim of imitation is not only truth or apprehension of the facts, but insight, imagination and control over the facts.¹⁹

Imitation is not of books, but of people, and it is not passive but active; it is reviving their spirit in our spirit.²⁰

Roth feared an approach that made education the mechanism of state building instead of creating human beings who regard individual freedoms as sacred. Roth's educational philosophy was at least as prescriptive as it was descriptive, at least as much an educational program for the future of Israel as a sustained argument about the ultimate worth of classicism, at least as much a case for the timeliness of classical education as the timelessness of classical education.

4

Moral Education

Roth believed that the task of character formation was essentially an art, not a science. The illustrations he chose to elucidate moral education drew upon the arts. More significantly, however, was his choice of a method for moral education. Instead of advocating study designed to develop moral reasoning, Roth proposed a curriculum of imitation to develop moral action and ultimately moral actors. Through imitation, Roth sought to advance the divine initiative to create human beings capable of discerning good and evil and then choosing, and eventually becoming good. "The educator does not instruct the student in the manner of writing on blank paper. He motivates him to actualize himself, that is, to bring out that which is innate."²¹

One who is educated as a person (and he is the educated person in the full sense of the term) is not a one-dimensional expert who is an authority in only one field. He possesses overall judgment that enables him to observe all of the experts and various disciplines and know how to evaluate them properly.²²

Moral education in Roth's view was not an educational subject; it was the subject of education. The acquisition of knowledge, even to the point of expert knowledge, did not demonstrate education. The key to learning - that which frees up a person to be a humane being - is the ability to judge the quality of an act, and ultimately, an actor. Citing Psalm1, Plato, Aristotle and Spinoza, Roth argued that without a moral compass, a person is essentially without character, capable of being convinced of anything, unable to accept moral responsibility, capable of knowing and not doing what is right and just. As a philosopher of education, Roth made his case for building the State of Israel in the image of Greek science, Jewish ethics and British politics.

5

Education for Social Change

Despite his reverence for classicism, Roth did not romanticize the past. He sought to reanimate the soul of classicism, not reproduce its works. In considering the zeitgeist in the reborn State of Israel, Roth argued passionately for an educational reawakening, a seizing of the opportunity to build a state that guarded the rights of its citizens to agree to disagree, to be nurtured by the integrity that comes with diversity.

He did not believe that the needs of the present should be governed by the solutions of the past, only that present needs required the same spirit of creative leadership exhibited by giants of the past.

Roth valued in education the opportunity to challenge and change the status quo. He feared the power of the state to repress individual voices of dissent. Cast in the mold of Socrates, Roth himself challenged and criticized the political establishment that began to crystallize all around him in Israel. He responded to his own political and social reality through his attempts to shape the education system in Israel, especially the university system. He defended the qualities of a liberal arts education, which prepared its graduates not for a career in a particular discipline but for active participation in the life of a nation in the making. He was a generalist in an age of materialism. Roth's fate was not exactly that of Socrates, but less than five years after the publication of Education and Human Values in 1953, Roth returned 'home' to England, but soon found that England was not home either, a tragic, but fitting ending to a life ruled by iconoclasm. Roth's diagnosis of the social disease which infected the twentieth century, and which could be rooted out by effective education, was neither new nor revolutionary. He argued that the balance between body and spirit, matter and form, had been lost. In order to restore a dynamic equilibrium to contemporary society, Roth prescribed a classical redux, a reinvigoration of the educational spirit which drives the political engine and sets the moral compass of the age. He regarded classicism not only as a worthy heritage, but a desirable destiny as well.

Hindsight enables us to see clearly that Leon Roth failed to exert significant influence upon the educational landscape in the twentieth century. Instead of the unified primary and secondary education he advocated, Israel utilizes a multitiered system divided along religious lines – not only between Jews, Christians and Moslems, but intra-Jewishly between secular, religious and ultra-religious. Instead of the teaching college he endeavored to construct, the Hebrew University has emerged as a leading research institution. Instead of the Greek classicism he supported, Israel has assumed international prominence in science technology. Instead of the English political model he sought to transplant, Israel is forging its own unique version of democracy by party coalition. Instead of the universal acceptance of Judaism as the moral force behind the State of Israel, educators continue to debate the place of Judaism in Israeli schools. The State of Israel chose not to follow the educational path illuminated by Leon Roth, but three-quarters of a century later the essential questions he addressed remain fundamental in Israeli society.

The most cogent and devastating critique of Roth's educational vision is the one to which Roth himself succumbed. He left Jerusalem disillusioned, forced to face, if not accept the reality that his educational philosophy as well as his portrait of Judaism would not seize the day. While he was appreciated and even acclaimed as a teacher, Leon Roth failed to rear disciples of his educational philosophy. The educational system in Israel does not bear Roth's imprint. If anything, educational tracking along religious lines is even more ingrained into the Israeli consciousness nearly half a century after the founding of the state. Although he claimed to espouse elements of educational philosophy that transcend time and space – humanism, Aristotelian ethics, and Maimonidean Judaism – time and space have passed by Leon Roth. His portrait of Judaism, as his philosophy of education, has become outdated and relegated to archival research. This was most assuredly not his intention. Ultimately, Leon Roth designed the blueprint for an educational system that was never built.

Roth did not write about education after he left Israel, choosing to dedicate himself, or more accurately, rededicate himself to Judaism and ethics. While making a clear distinction between education for an individual and education for a society, Roth curiously omitted mention of education for the purposes of building a nation. I believe this silence was a natural consequence of Roth's version of Zionism. He was the Ahad Ha'am Professor of Philosophy in more than the nominal sense. Roth was a cultural Zionist, not a political nationalist.²³ Roth did not join the educational program calling for the nurturing and crystallizing of a Zionist identity. As far as he was concerned, a Jewish state would be distinguished by its ethical excellence, not its political acumen. Leon Roth did not achieve his goal – to develop an educational philosophy that would be translated into educational practice – but it remains as worthy as it is elusive.

Notes

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 29b, where Moses fails to recognize the Torah he received from God until Rabbi Akiva cites the source of his teaching authority.

² William Frankena. The Historical Philosophies of Education. Scott Foresman and Company; Glenview, IL, 1965, 138.

³ John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed", The School Journal; Vol. LIV No. 3, January 16, 1897, 78.

⁴ Martin Dworkin. Dewey on Education, 1959, 125.

⁵ Laurence Silberstein, Martin Buber's Social and Religious Thought. NY University Press; NY, 1989, 189.

⁶ Buber, Martin. Between Man and Man. Macmillan; NY, 1975, p. 101.

⁷ Silberstein, 193.

⁸ Whitehead, Alfred North. The Aims of Education. MacMillan; 1929, p. 2, 5.

⁹ Leon Roth, החינוך וערכי האדם. Jerusalem, 1949, Introduction.

¹⁰ Exact phrasing is this author's, but the thought is extrapolated from Roth, 18.

¹¹ Roth, 36.

¹² Roth, 19.

¹³ Roth, 24.

¹⁴ Roth, 34.

¹⁵ Roth, 189.

¹⁶ Roth, 38.

¹⁷ Roth, 42.

¹⁸ Roth, 44.

¹⁹ Roth, 45.

²⁰ Roth, 88.

²¹ Roth, 27, 57. The learner is not indifferent towards the content of learning. Formative education is not only formal. On the contrary, the blessing in education inheres especially in the character of the learning material. Study is food for the soul, and it is important to be vigilant that this is food in particular is nourishing. See Rambam, Eight Chapters, Chapters 1 and 3. Know that the soul of a person is a unity even though it performs many discrete functions. Just like a healer of the body, a healer of the soul who seeks to repair a person's character needs to know the soul's faculties in general and in particular, what will make it sick and what will make it well. A healthy soul whose traits and the traits of its parts cause it to make good and appropriate actions habitual.

22 Roth, 68, 73.

²³See לימוד גבוה וחינוך הדור _ 1944. Where Roth, as Rector from 1940-1942 seeks to apply this distinction in articulating the educational processes and products of the Hebrew University, e.g., p. 165. “There is no religion without education and vice versa. Both of them exist to refine humanity. . . The teacher is the worker who serves humanity. It is especially his/her need to understand who and what we are and what our life means, from whence we come and to where we are headed; in other words call it by any name you desire, s/he must have a religious basis. . . In Judaism, this gets translated into Mitzvah education. . . But the essence is not education for the sake of Mitzvot, but rather Mitzvot for the sake of education. Education is the end.”