

Introduction

THIS BOOK is about the activity of teaching; more precisely it is about the meaning of the verb “to teach.” Despite a steady flow of books that have “Teaching” in the title, I do not know of a book that covers the same ground as this one. At first glance, answering the question, “What does it mean to teach?” seems simple. A small dictionary will supply an uncomplicated definition, such as “to instruct” (Random House). A larger dictionary (Oxford English Dictionary) will reveal a range of meanings that can vary according to time and place.

Acknowledging the diversity in meaning, we have two options for an answer: either “Let’s agree on one definition,” or “There are so many kinds of teaching that no single answer is possible.” The first choice, agreeing on one definition, allows you to converse with anyone who accepts the same definition. However, that tactic does not take into account how living languages work, nor does it get at troubling inconsistencies in the use of the word. The alternative — no single answer is possible — avoids the question of what is the common bond that holds the diversity together. If the term is not simply equivocal, there has to be a core, root, or foundation from which diversity issues.

Nearly all books on teaching leave out the main story. Most often, they do not even raise the question of the meaning of “to teach.” If they do examine the activity, they concentrate on only one form of teaching. This book asks why people avoid the topic of teaching, or if they do not entirely avoid it, why they study only one unusual form of teaching. My thesis is that people are uneasy with the very idea of teaching. By “people” I mean a good part of the general population, including people who write books on education. At some level of consciousness and conscience, people have an ethical problem with the activity of teaching. Put more simply and most starkly, many people have a deep suspicion that teaching is an immoral activity.

Because this suspicion exists as a vague anxiety about an action that is supposedly praiseworthy, not many people readily acknowledge the

suspicion. The uneasiness with the morality of teaching is seldom articulated and therefore not resolved. Most of the population can go its way to other problems in life that do have to be resolved, such as preparing dinner or paying the mortgage. The ambivalence about teaching only occasionally surfaces, perhaps when a child has a conflict with the first-grade teacher or a school bond issue is up for approval. The question raised in this book may seem peripheral to most people's pressing problems, but I think that our whole culture suffers from an unresolved moral ambivalence about teaching.

I recently participated in a seminar on the nature of teaching. All the participants were professors in a school of education (that is, a school of a university concerned with the preparation of professional school-teachers). Three hours into the discussion, one professor said, "I try to avoid the words 'teacher' and 'teaching' because of their bad connotations. Instead I try to talk only about 'learning.'" To most people outside this discussion, the remark must surely sound absurd. A professor whose job description is "teacher training" but who tries to avoid the words "teacher" and "teaching" would seem to be in the wrong line of work.

The professor of education who made this remark was dipping into a standard cliché of educational literature, namely, that we have concentrated too much on teaching and not enough on learning. This oft-repeated statement strikes me as preposterous. I am not about to argue that we need fewer studies of learning. I do argue that we need more attention to the inherent relation between teaching and learning. That topic is not studied because of an assumption during the last half-century that there is *no* inherent relation between teaching and learning. Teaching and learning are taken to be separate processes. Teaching is at best an optional extra; at worst it is seen as an oppressive interference.

What I offer in this book is an alternative assumption and the resulting description of the relation teach-learn. In much of human history, especially in religious history, there is nothing peculiar about my assumption. Human beings learn because they are taught: by other human beings, by the religious tradition, by the marvels of creation, and ultimately by the divine teacher. In nearly all religions the highest title given to the religion's founder is "teacher." In many languages, "religion" and "teaching" are derived from the same root.

I have been teaching in a classroom every year since 1958, and

have constantly puzzled over what it means to teach someone something. During most of this time I have been engaged in the teaching of religion, an area that offers special problems for the meaning of teaching. But it was while teaching courses in the history of education and the philosophy of education that I discovered the piece of the intellectual puzzle I had been missing: modern theories of education denigrate teaching because of an antireligious bias. When modern European writers rebelled against Christianity, they also fled from teaching. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers did not eliminate the term, but they narrowed its meaning to a rationalistic core devoid of religious meaning. Teaching remained a part of the necessary burden that a child carried until the child could overthrow the oppressive power of adults. In educational literature of the twentieth century it is assumed that teaching is an explanation from the front of a classroom. As a result, discussions of teaching cannot draw upon a comparison of what teachers do in classrooms and what teachers do in other settings for teaching. For example, the ubiquitous phrase "parents and teachers" is the denial of a central activity of the parent, namely, to teach.

For teachers in religious education, the effect of a rationalistic meaning of teaching is to limit the possibilities of their work. Any effective teaching of a religious way of life requires a range of settings for teaching: in the family, in the religious congregation, in struggles for justice, in contemplative silence, as well as in the classroom. However, modern educational writing, which is indispensable to the Christian or Jewish educator, has the side effect of undermining the significance of teaching.

There is another possibility to consider in this relation of modern education and religious teachers. The flight from religion may be nearing its historical limit. The term "modern" is no longer a certificate of superiority. The eighteenth-century project to replace the church with the schoolroom has not turned out as well as expected; there is constant complaint about the failures of the school system. Any successful revolution in education will have to include a reappropriation of the many forms of teaching. The religious traditions are the chief repositories of a richer meaning of teaching. However, the modern world is not going to discover this fact unless religious people retrieve the best of their own traditions and bring that wisdom into conversation with modern writing on education.

Part I of this book establishes a fundamental meaning for "to teach."

The first chapter explores teaching as a moral dilemma, tracing some of the historical journey that has brought us to our present plight. The deep-seated fear that teaching is an immoral act must have some realistic basis. The dilemma cannot be resolved by a quick change of attitude or by simply avoiding everything that suggests threat and coercion. The dilemma continues to exist because discussions of teaching nearly always begin several steps removed from its basic meaning. The second chapter attempts to ground the meaning of "to teach" in its most basic forms, moving from examples in the nonhuman world to communal and nonverbal forms of teaching among humans. The third chapter describes the physical design of teaching, exemplified by the writings of modern reformers of education and in situations where speech functions as a choreographing of bodily movement.

Part 2 of this book explores the languages of teaching. With the basic meaning of "to teach" established, it is possible to discuss the diverse forms of speech that are appropriate to teaching. The fourth chapter explores rhetorical forms of speech that are familiar to any religious person; these include storytelling and preaching. The fifth chapter discusses languages that are called "therapeutic"; they had nearly disappeared in modern philosophy but recently have returned with a vengeance. Religion preserved these languages and still offers a proper ritualized setting for their exercise. The sixth chapter is on languages that call language itself into question; it is here that the conversation of a classroom should be situated.

Part 3 draws out implications for education. In chapter 7, I reflect on the meaning of education in the light of what teaching is. A correlation is drawn between forms of speech in teaching and forms of education. In chapter 8 I focus on the school and the several forms of teaching it contains. Chapter 9 tests the moral solution that has been offered, extending the argument to the teaching of morality. The conclusion recapitulates the book's thesis by contrasting two meanings of "to teach."

Perhaps an initial warning is in order about what this book is not. The first seven chapters are not preparation of a theory that is finally tested out in chapter 8's "teaching in school." Readers who are sure they know what teaching is may be impatient to know what I have to offer as solutions to the "real problems of real teachers." But each chapter of this book is about real teachers and real teaching. I do hope that classroom instructors and other teachers in school read this book.

But it will not be a productive venture unless they are willing to let go temporarily of the terms "teach" and "teacher" so as to consider the possibility that teaching is a mysterious activity in human life that needs to be investigated at length.

I have great respect for classroom instructors and other school staff, but my task is not to offer them solutions to their very real problems. My hope is to open a conversation about teaching that, among other things, will lead schoolteachers to have better conversations both among themselves and, just as important, with other teachers about teaching. To some people this approach may seem unrealistic and impractical. I can only respond by inviting the reader to a discussion that will not go over the well-worn ground of "tips for teachers." Instead, I invite the reader to reflect on the practice of teaching in human life and our peculiar way of speaking that prevents us from having lively, practical discussions about improving teaching, including teaching in schools.

On Hiding "To Teach"

Contemporary literature that claims to deal with teaching usually treats teaching only within the classroom. This form lacks the context needed to describe an effective — and moral — approach to teaching, even in this particular setting. That is, when teaching is equated with classroom instruction in a school, what disappears are not only most kinds of teaching but also the language, imagery, and techniques for improving classroom instruction itself. The one kind of teaching that is thought to be defensible is left morally indefensible.

The jump from "to teach" to one peculiar form of teaching is sometimes made unconsciously. But since everyone does have some awareness of the difference, writers usually acknowledge they are making the jump. Seldom is any argument provided for the move, other than one about the efficient use of the space at hand. Most often the jump is made with a single statement of fact that suggests no need for explanation. The similar case would be someone writing a book on fishing, and who, after a sentence on the first page acknowledging other things that might have been written about, concentrates on the goldfish bowl in the living room. There is nothing wrong with writing a

book on goldfish so long as one does not confuse the task with writing a treatise on fish and fishing.

Take, for examples, two minor classics of twentieth-century writing on teaching: Gilbert Highet's *The Art of Teaching* and Jacques Barzun's *Teacher in America*.¹ These books are among the best in their genre, written with style and learning. They have been helpful to generations of readers. But even these expert treatises on teaching are strangely narrowed down to a small area that counts (at least seriously counts) as teaching at all. An obligatory nod is given to all the other teaching in the world. The typical example of another form of teaching that they cite is what parents do.

In *Teacher in America*, the allusion is in the first chapter: "The odd thing is that almost everybody is a teacher at some time or other during his life. Besides Socrates and Jesus, the great teachers of mankind are mankind itself — your parents and mine." The author does not explain why he considers this an "odd" fact instead of one of the most important facts to be explored about teaching. In any case, after this one paragraph praising parents, the book does not return to them.²

In *The Art of Teaching*, there is also one paragraph on parents found in the chapter entitled "Teaching in Ordinary Life." Curiously, this chapter is the last one in the book, whereas it would seem most logical to put that chapter first. Either way, however, the 240 pages on the school remain untouched by "teaching in ordinary life." The major forms that teaching takes in *The Art of Teaching* are the lecture and the tutorial. Jesus was the first great lecturer, Socrates founded the tutorial.³

The process, as I have described it so far, is to collapse the meaning of teaching into what is done in the classroom. From that beginning, discussions of teaching can proceed to elaborate descriptions of the work of schoolteachers. Notice, however, that there is not just one collapsed distinction here but three. Before we can get to the meaning of "to teach," we have to peel back three layers of covering.

First, the verb "to teach" slides into the noun or gerund "teaching." In the English language, we can indeed use "teaching" to convey the active verb, and I will occasionally do so. I do indeed wish to keep "to teach" and "teaching" in close relation, that is, to distinguish the two terms without separating them. But I will most often use the infinitive form "to teach" so as to pinpoint the question as the activity or event of teaching.

The second collapse is from teaching to teacher. Books about teach-

ing tend to become descriptions of teachers. The question of good teaching, for example, becomes the desired personal qualities of the teacher. Of course, there are excellent reasons here for keeping a close relation between "teaching" and "teachers." Eventually, "to teach" and "teaching" need to be situated as the activities of "teachers." But one should not presume without question that the "teacher" is necessarily an individual human being.

The third blurring is between teacher and professional schoolteacher. This move is a typical case of a modern professional group taking over an important human activity. Educational literature then turns back on its own professionalized meanings; references to "teacher" — unless otherwise qualified — mean a member of the profession. As a result, the meaning of "to teach" is further obscured by all the professional issues surrounding the staffing of schools.

There are numerous examples throughout this book to illustrate this triple folding over of the meaning of "to teach." Examples are not difficult to find; in fact, what is difficult to find are counter examples. Any writer in an educational journal who wishes to maintain seriously (as opposed to paying lip service) that teaching is performed, for example, by parents, is forced to resist nearly all the trappings and jargon of the journal. This book is an exercise in such resistance. I will regularly remind the reader that I am asking a question that is almost too simple for words: What is the meaning of "to teach"?

On the Meaning of Words

The remainder of this introduction will be an extended comment on the approach of concentrating upon language. The quotation marks that I have several times placed around "to teach" are intended to call attention to the term. This distinction between to teach and "to teach" could be interpreted as a fourth level that has to be peeled back. However, I think it is more helpful to consider this issue to be one that cuts across the previous three (teaching, teacher, professional schoolteacher). I refer to the difference between discussing an *idea* about something and getting at the meaning of the *term* that appears in the discussion. A focus on the meaning of "to teach" or "teaching" is a more pointed discussion than talking about ideas or concepts or models of teaching. And

I wish to claim that attention to the term is more effective in changing not only the understanding but also the practice of teaching.

I will not attempt to justify this approach in the introduction. If there is any proof of its value, the evidence lies in the execution of the approach. Here I simply note that my attention to the meaning of the term "to teach" is not based on an idiosyncrasy but is a theme of numerous twentieth-century thinkers. Various schools of philosophy that have little else in common agree that our words are not transparencies for thought but the place where thought is born. Language thereby becomes the source of our difficulties in thinking, speaking, communicating, and agreeing. As Ludwig Wittgenstein, perhaps the best-known philosopher of language in this century, puts it, "It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use."⁴

Why has this century been so concerned with language? Is it a sign of progress or despair? One can view the concentration on words as a possible gain in understanding. But it is also a sign of the modern distrust in just about every claim that is made in words.

First, the distrust of words is manifest. What has slowly but surely spread throughout this century is a doubt that words can convey truth. Regarding the collapse of "all the regnant world systems," Irving Howe says of the effect, "This leads to a mood of skepticism, an agnosticism of judgment, sometimes a world-weary nihilism in which even the most conventional minds begin to question both distinctions of value and the value of distinctions."⁵

This result is not likely what any philosopher, linguist, or literary theorist had in mind when calling attention to the fragility of our words. Alexander Bickel, the political theorist, used to say, "No one wants everyone not to believe in anything."⁶ But the corrosive effect of questioning every word is not under anyone's control and it could lead us into a nihilism, the likes of which have never been imagined.

Friedrich Nietzsche, who died in 1900, is at least symbolically at the head of this parade. Nietzsche is blamed for too much; Nazism — the most horrific result sometimes attributed to him — is not a necessary or direct effect of his philosophy.⁷ Nonetheless, after Nietzsche, Nazism and other frightening things become possible because so many defenses and subterfuges have been unmasked. For the moment my interest is that Nietzsche's withering criticism went at the connection between the words and the things. A contemporary commentator calls attention

to the method on a page of Nietzsche's studded with quotation marks ("revelation," "sin," "sacred book"): "As opposed to conceptual analysis, it refuses to grant that its objects are part of an impersonal world of ideas to be assessed on their own merits. Instead, they are texts which issue from and are signs of power."⁸

The effect of reading Nietzsche is not so much that one agrees with him, but henceforth every term becomes questionable and suspect: it becomes a sign of power. Once one sees this, one can never not see it again. The questioning of language does not necessarily lead to philosophical skepticism or outright nihilism. But any philosophical outlook has to have a chance of standing against the kind of criticism that Nietzsche helped to unleash and others have spread far and wide throughout the twentieth century.

I suggested above that there might be a more positive way to look at the attentiveness to language. It may represent, if not progress, at least a regrouping in rich strands of the past that had become obscured in recent centuries. And in returning to a method of asking the meaning of our ordinary words we may have more to bring to the question than could Aristotle, Aquinas, or Spinoza, who employed a similar approach. Our capacity for tracing the ambiguities of speech should provide us with insights into how language limits us while sustaining us. Perhaps a limited kind of progress could then be hoped for.

In tracing the history of language, Aristotle did not have the benefit of the Oxford English Dictionary. What Aristotle did have was an extraordinary genius for examining the "phenomena" at hand. This starting point was not a collection of facts but the common beliefs people hold: "These are the things we say." Aristotle's quest was for the meaning of "the things we say." If definitions arise, they come only at the end, not the beginning, of Aristotle's process of inquiry.⁹

For example, in investigating nature, Aristotle assembles seven different meanings that the term "nature" had already acquired.¹⁰ Aristotle's own use of the term tried to respect the variety of meanings that the term brought with it. One does not eliminate meaning or meanings by announcing a definition. At most one can bring one meaning to center stage, while trying to relegate other meanings to the wings. Aristotle was brilliantly successful in handling the term "nature"; that is, he stamped his own reshaping of "nature," which still lives on in every use of the term. Our contemporary use of "nature" still embodies the multiple meanings that Aristotle discovered, his reconfiguration of those

meanings, and all that has happened in the two millennia since then.¹¹ This example is not a trivial one. Much of modern history revolves around the uses and abuses of “nature,” whether we are discussing science, politics, ethics, religion, or economics.

Whether people are consciously aware of the etymology and the history of a term, they are always working with and against the limits set by the term itself. This history is often a history of forgetting, the narrowing of meaning in the hands of those who use language for their own purposes of ordering the world. This process is not necessarily devious or ominous; human life can only bear so much disorder. It is left to poets and philosophers to resist such “practicality” and to retrieve the latent meaning of our most important words.

Like “nature,” the story of “to teach” goes back to well before Aristotle. Its story is even more complicated than nature’s because it is a simple, more universal term. In the course of this work I will refer to Plato, Aristotle, and other philosophers in my inquiry into the meaning of teaching. I do so not because any one philosopher supplies the right definition of teaching, but to resist a narrowing of the term and to retrieve forgotten elements. With a term such as “to teach,” the meaning is found in ordinary people’s usage both past and present. Perhaps at the end of a long reflection, a “technical definition” of teaching may serve some purpose, but at the beginning it would almost certainly obstruct a search for meaning. Since the landscape is strewn with such definitions of teaching, the first part of this book is antidefinitonal, an attempt to get behind the *definition* of teaching to the *meaning(s)* of “to teach.”

Some people assume that attention to the issue of language and the search for the meaning embodied in the use of language take us into a realm of “abstractions.” Ironically, the reverse is the case. A discussion of teaching (that is, an idea about the reality) is an abstraction. The attention to “teaching,” to the use of the term, roots us more deeply in ordinary life and its concerns. The metaphorical direction for Aristotle and Wittgenstein is *down*, not up, down into the meanings embodied in the words rather than up to ideas abstracted from words.

The Middle Ages distorted Aristotle’s method by choosing the term “abstraction” for what Aristotle describes as incomplete enumeration.¹² That is, when it is impossible to study all instances of a set (induction for Aristotle), we must penetrate deeply whatever cases are at hand. And the beginning point for these cases are the words we use and the beliefs we hold.

Despite the distortion introduced by “abstraction,” Aristotle’s approach to language was not lost to much of the Middle Ages. It generated great intellectual inquiry until, when atrophied by lesser minds, it became the butt of ridicule in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thomas Aquinas, while differing from Aristotle on fundamental points of philosophy, was a true disciple on the question of meaning and definition. For Aquinas, a definition is never decisive; one has to look to “use.” Agreeing explicitly with Aristotle, Aquinas held that in the naming of things “one must go with the crowd.”¹³

Aquinas’s position may seem to be a shocking capitulation for a philosopher to make. The “crowd” does not supply the answer to philosophical questions. But the answer will not be entirely outside the human crowd’s conversation. The philosopher has to argue that some ways of speaking are better than others, though one must reckon with the possibility that the “better” speaking — more honest, truthful, just, effective, inclusive — will be found at the edge of the crowd or among muffled voices throughout the crowd.

Every human being finds him- or herself in one crowd that is a minuscule part of the complete crowd. Our choice of whom we listen to is within a selection that our time, place, and circumstances have already chosen for us. We can only start with the voices available to us. From there we can try to widen the circle of acquaintances through traveling in space and time, through listening, reading, and conversing on those issues that strike us as worth our effort.

If I were to choose one book from which my dialogue begins, it would be Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. I make no attempt to exegete this complex and intriguing book, but it provides the inspiration and much of the guidance for what follows. Wittgenstein’s book does not announce itself to be on teaching; it is most centrally about the nature of language and how we learn language. But in reflecting on primitive languages, Wittgenstein describes how a child learns a language, that is, how the whole environment and individuals within a human community teach the child to speak. Teaching as explaining or giving reasons plays almost no part at the beginning of teaching. The teacher teaches by showing someone how to do something. The teacher goes through moves and encourages the child to do the same. Then, at some point, “we can go on in the same way as those who are teaching us.”¹⁴

What Wittgenstein gives us is a description of teaching that appeals