

Footnotes to R.S. Peters

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This essay is titled “Footnotes to R.S. Peters” because of the considerable influence of his “Education as Initiation” on educational theory. Although the work has had tremendous influence on African education in the socio-cultural context, my response to Leonard Waks’s essay will focus on its philosophical perspective. I will examine Peters’s “Education as Initiation” with reference to *The Dark Child*,¹ the English translation of Camara Laye’s *L’Enfant Noir*, an autobiography depicting traditional Africa’s simple dignified way of life which used rites of passage or initiation into adulthood as an effective process of socialization. Even though Peters focused on development of cognitive perspectives, his emphasis on values in education also tallied with the moral goals which Waks highlighted in *particular initiation* in formal education as exemplified by *voluntary* association into fraternities and professional guilds alongside *general initiation* as exemplified by *obligatory* tribal initiation rites at puberty.

LEONARD WAKS AND R.S. PETERS’S THREE CONDITIONS OF EDUCATION

Can Peters’s three conditions of education also be justified as conditions of initiation? The conditions are: the process (of education) must (i) possess intrinsic value, (ii) conduce to knowledge, understanding, and development of cognitive perspectives, and (iii) not engage learners involuntarily or unwittingly.

THE VALUES CONDITION

The first condition is that the process of education must possess intrinsic value. Understandably, such intrinsic value(s) are also meant to be values in education. In other words, the values are inherent to our very understanding of the concept. However, one can argue that Peters has underplayed the value(s) of education, those reasons for which education is highly sought after and which if unfulfilled, would make the product of education end in frustration. Waks put this very graphically as follows: “Pathways to adult status are obscure for both former working- and middle-class young people. More and more school and college graduates, regardless of their academic attainments, languish in their parents’ basements.”

Values of education — that is, the observable material benefits — are vital to an understanding and desirability of education otherwise the process could end in despair. If we need to consider values of education and values in education, we need to consider the same for the processes of initiation, whether general or particular. As for obligatory general initiations, Camara Laye summarized the value of the rite of initiation by circumcision as follows: “We had become so isolated from the world and had become so changed, even though a mere month had passed since we emerged from childhood into manhood.”²

A marked difference between the change in the initiates of circumcision and the initiate of Peters’s education is that transformation in the former was psychological

while in the latter, it is systematic and brought about expectedly, by a change in intellectual development.

THE KNOWLEDGE CONDITION

Waks observed that Peters “over-emphasizes the intellectual dimension of activities and practices” in his account of material conditions for successful initiation:

The various formulations, however, are not equivalent because forms of thought or states of mind — paradigm objects of formal classroom education — are clearly *abstracted from* real world activities or practices. It is one thing, for example, to learn to *think like* an artist, and another to actually *be* an artist.

Peters himself corroborated this further concerning the relationship between knowledge and practice of moral behavior:

Consider, for instance, what a child has got to know before he can develop a habit like that of stealing. He must be able to distinguish between himself and others and must have developed the notion of property; he must also grasp that people have a right to things and that these things must not be appropriated without permission ... He cannot learn what “stealing” is just by watching others ... To realize that something is a case of theft he must, therefore have developed a conceptual scheme without which theft is an unintelligible notion.³

Concerning R.S. Peters’s fields of educational activity, Leonard Waks pointed out the limitation of Peters’s fields of educational activities to the liberal disciplines, leaving out the professional and technical studies. In *The Concept of Education*, however, Peters did show the importance of skills acquisition in learning:

Constant practice is absolutely essential especially under the eye of a skilled performer who both corrects and provides a paradigm of the performance. Skills are difficult to master so, extrinsic forms of motivation usually have to supplement the intrinsic motivation provided by the desire to achieve or get something right.⁴

Even though Peters focused on the traditional liberal education of the Institute of Education of his day, he was conscious of the need for technical skills. From the ethical point of view however, Peters submitted that skills could be easier to acquire than moral habits: “It is conceivable that something like swimming could be just picked up or caught by practice and imitation ... But a habit like that of honesty which is not just a kind of ‘know-how’ or knack could never be picked up just like this.”⁵

These go to show that Peters was aware of the need for both theoretical and practical knowledge in education including knowledge and practice of moral values. Concerning the processes of general and particular initiation, Waks’s description of expectation of workplace performance (the context of particular initiation) showed demand for a knowledge content base in order to derive the instrumental values of education. Laye also submitted as follows:

The teaching we received in the bush, far from all prying eyes, had nothing very mysterious about it; nothing I think, that was not fit for ears other than our own. These lessons, the same as had been taught to all who had preceded us, confined themselves to outlining what a man’s conduct should be: we were to be absolutely straightforward, to cultivate all the virtues that make a honest man, to fulfill our duties toward God, toward our parents our superiors and our neighbors.⁶

Here we also see a marked departure from Peters's criteria of education. Instead of knowledge of facts and skills, we have knowledge of relational skills that are needed in social life.

THE PROCESS CONDITION

The third criterion of education for Peters is the process condition, which Waks translated as "not engage learners involuntarily or unwittingly." If we look at the three models of educational institutions cited by Waks — Eton, Bryn Mawr and Morehouse Colleges, Waks has shown the importance of co-curricular or informal learning activities in the process of formal education. In Eton, games and sports were training ground for developing leadership qualities and the spirit of patriotism pride while the weekly sermons at Bryn Mawr and Morehouse prepared the students for leadership positions later in life. How do these take place in the process of initiation? In Camara Laye's narration of initiation, the author reported that the process took place in an atmosphere of terror:

[F]or all our nearness to one another and for all the vigilance of our elders, our march — so silent after the recent uproar — through the wan moonlight, far from the town, frightened us. And we were filled with terror at the sacred place toward which we were going, and the hidden presence of Konden Diara.⁷

One can add that even in the process of formal education, school bullies can be worse than Konden Diara, and in broad daylight at that! But whereas the process of education condemns bullying, Konden Diara represented institutionalization of terror in the initiation process. Therefore, this rules out the process of general initiation described above as a process of education.

This discussion has deliberately omitted discussion of initiation into secret societies because since the societies are secret, the three conditions discussed thus far, that is, values, knowledge and process would be secret. Education is a public affair even when it is privately arranged as home schooling or undertaken as a privately organized institution. Processes of education as we understand them would therefore not admit comparability with processes of initiation into secret societies.

It follows that a process of education may be a process of initiation, but a process of initiation may not logically be a process of education.

In conclusion, Leonard Waks's reconstruction of "education as initiation" recommended that all students (of our comprehensive schools) "will undergo rigorous training in several disciplines and fields, acquiring packages of particular initiations." "[All] — regardless of class origins — will be concerned about occupational opportunities." "[All] will embrace education's transitional role — as initiation into adult life."

At the same time he also pointed out that school curricula are overbloated in their present form. This contradiction needs to be addressed. Let me end by asking what can be done in higher education practice to make education at this level a process of initiation into the ways of life of contemporary global society. R.S. Peters did not address this. Leonard Waks does not, either.

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1. Camara Laye, *The Dark Child*, trans. James Kirkup and Earnest Jones (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1954).
 2. *Ibid.*, 133–134.
 3. R.S. Peters, *The Concept of Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), 7.
 4. *Ibid.*
 5. *Ibid.*
 6. Laye, *The Dark Child*, 128.
 7. *Ibid.*, 98–99.

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