The most striking and alarming thing about the curriculum (or 'curricular theory', whatever that may be) is that debates and discussions never seem to get anywhere. We do not mean, of course, that decisions and policies are not arrived at and (sometimes) implemented; we mean that there seems to be no publicly and rationally agreed advance in knowledge. We are not able to build on established propositions, able to say 'Well, at least we now know that such-and-such pupils ought — for overwhelmingly and demonstrably good reasons — to learn such-and-such, taught in such-and-such a way: so now let us try to take things further.' Arguments continue about not only the methods of teaching various subjects, but also about their value: indeed even about the nature of each subject and what is to count as a 'subject'. Fashions, climates of opinion, and various political (in a broad sense of that word) pressures come and go, and this or that 'consensus' may prevail at different times; but the notion of rational agreement seems hard to realise in practice. This for various reasons: — Certainly one important (perhaps the most important) reason for this, is that we cannot avoid making judgements of value in this area, and that educators and administrators tend to fight shy of making such judgements; or more precisely, since the actual making of them is inevitable, tend not to see the process of forming and defending value-judgments as a potentially rational process, subject to certain rules.
and procedures and types of expertise. The business of (a) expressing one's own values or preferences, and of (b) getting some kind of consensus, by political negotiation, about values, important though these may be, are quite different from (c) the process of working out, by debate and the application of reason, what values are actually right. Indeed, in a climate of relativism and ideology, many people talk as if (c) were in principle impossible or improper; and that, of course, makes any rational progress impossible.

A second difficulty, easy to underrate, is that for various reasons the concept marked by 'curriculum' itself is not properly understood or agreed. We have argued elsewhere (Wilson 1977) that in normal usage — i.e. when not distorted by educationalists and others — the term refers to the teaching and learning of various subjects in some fairly coherent and structured way: it is close to the concept of a syllabus, and does not include just any learning (let alone anything that happens in a school). Pupils may learn from being made to take cold baths, or from being bullied in the playground, or spoken to kindly by teachers in the corridor; but it would be odd to say that these things were part of a curriculum. The point here has nothing to do with linguistic purity; it is that we desperately need clear and well-separated categories under which to assess school life, and hence have to place clear demarcations on each category. We need to distinguish 'curriculum' from (say) 'pastoral care', 'school ethos' and other possible categories. Over-inflating the term will make nothing clearer. (Thus it is a real and important question how far moral education, for instance, is a curricular matter: given a reasonably clear demarcation of 'curriculum', as above, we can at least begin to see what aspects of moral education can profitably be taught as a subject, and what aspects are better done under some other heading. Without the distinction we cannot even approach the question sensibly.)

A third difficulty, which is connected with the two above, is that we tend to be so anxious about certain
other features of the curriculum that we never give ourselves a chance to consider the worth of this or that content. We are anxious to say, perhaps, that subjects in the curriculum should be ‘integrated’, that there should not be taught just ‘facts’ but also ‘skills’ or ‘attitudes’ (‘caring’, ‘concern’, ‘personal relationships’ and so on); or that it should not be unduly ‘middle-class’, or ‘irrelevant, to pupils’ daily lives: or whatever. Such matters, however important, do nothing to settle what must surely be the initial question about any curriculum: that is, what is worth teaching and learning, and to which pupils. It is a point of some importance that nearly all other decisions — decisions about how to teach it, or how often, or whether this or that subject should be compulsory, or whether this or that sort of pupil will benefit from it — can only be made later. For the methods and practices of teaching/learning X are bound to be, in large part, a function of what X is and what we take to be important about X.

Finally (at this level of practicality), there is the difficulty that we tend to take existing subject titles for granted. We have, in effect, just a set of words — ‘Classics’, ‘French’, ‘Science’, ‘R.E.’ and so forth — with a set of (constantly changing) practices attached to them. These titles and practices have grown up for a wide variety of reasons: some practical (science becomes more important to a society, so finds a place in the curriculum), some ideological (religious believers make a place for R.E.): in general, the development of the curriculum in the history of any educational system has been uncritical and ad-hoc. But we too often take for granted these titles which represent the kind of categorisation or taxonomy that we want: we assume that they divide up possible curricular content in the best way. Hence most public documents simply juggle these titles around, inserting ‘a modern language’, ‘some basic science’, ‘English’ and others apparently on the assumption that we already have the goods on sale properly sorted out into various departments, and need only make a judicious selection. But it is quite clear that we cannot assume this, if only
because what the titles in fact stand for changes, often quite dramatically, over time: thus 'classics' now stands for a very different set of practices in most schools than the ones it used to stand for a century ago. Briefly, we do not know either (i) just what the titles are titles of, or (ii) whether they are the titles we need.

When we reach a proper appreciation of these initial difficulties — and we are bound to say that nearly all curricular discussion and change fail to reach it — we face squarely what must be the first real problem, at which we have hinted above: that is, how are we to categorise or taxonomise the item? It is important to realise in advance that many different taxonomies are possible, and quite a few may be important to us. Whether a subject is easy or difficult, whether it is cheap or expensive to teach, whether we have or lack teachers trained to teach it is likely to appeal only to certain categories of pupils, whether it represents a sui generis form of thought—all these are respectable candidates, and there are plenty of others. Unsurprisingly philosophers (notably Hirst: the clearest exposition is in Hirst 1970) have opted for the last criterion of differentiation: that is, for dividing items of knowledge up into logically different categories. Even the attempt to do this is very valuable for anyone planning a curriculum, if only because it makes us think harder about just what differences in method or style of thinking do actually exist in various subjects. (The difference between asking why planets behave in certain ways and asking why people behave is clearly central to any one thinking about science, history, psychology and other subjects: the 'why' has a different sense in either case, and a whole different methodology and approach go along with this.) But why should these logical differences be, in some stronger sense, important? To use a parallel: suppose we were asking what games we wanted to initiate our pupils into, the logical differences between games (in terms of types of rules, perhaps) might not be all that significant. Certainly other criteria would be relevant (does such-and-such a game foster too much competition, is it cheap enough, can it only be played by intellectuals, and above all is it a good game?)
This last thought — is it a good game? — brings us back, inevitably and rightly, to the central question of what knowledge or experience we take as worthwhile or valuable in general; and we want to advance the suggestion that we should attempt some sort of approach to this question before saddling ourselves with any taxonomy — or rather, that making some progress with the question is the best way into seeing what taxonomy we need. We are not aware that philosophers (or modern philosophers at least) have been of much service to curricular theorists in this matter. Part of the trouble, surely, is that not many values: they tend, like the rest of us, to convey at least the appearance of assuming that all the items and categories are of equal importance, and are hence reduced to the (for some attractively 'liberal') position of suggesting only that pupils be given a taste of each category (as in White 1973). Contrast this, just for the sake of illustration, with the views of a strong religious believer who might hold that knowledge of salvation was the only really important thing, other items being mere amusements; or a strong revolutionary Marxist who might hold that a certain kind of political education was so vital that anything else was not much more than a waste of time. As so often, liberals tend to behave as if they not only thought (rightly) that education should not be founded on some ultimately unjustified and arbitrary ideology, but also thought (wrongly) that no serious position about the comparative values of this or that subject could be put forward: thus falling into a sort of supermarket or shop-window view of the curriculum, which may keep everyone comparatively happy (since no one’s goods are down-graded) but fails to tackle the question seriously at all.

In this position it is very important to go slowly and not to rush into setting up the ‘right answers’. One thing that can be done, as we have explained elsewhere (Wilson 1979), is to distinguish the types of argument that might be brought forward on behalf of this or that curricular item; and it is not too hard to distinguish between

(a) items desirable not *per se* but for some extrinsic (‘utilitarian’) purpose, and
(b) items desirable 'for their own sake': a tendentious phrase, but suggesting that their value does not depend on the particular necessities of (say) Britain in the 1980s.

Thus, depending largely on local conditions, it may be of great importance to teach pupils how to fly Spitfires, get on well with microchips or cars, work certain kinds of machines, and so forth — things for which the question "What's the use of . . .?" would be appropriate. On the other hand (b), a defence of classical music, chess, art, literature and other such things would look quite different; we should try to show that these things were important to people as such, not to individuals who had to survive and prosper under a particular set of economic or social conditions.

This (rather obvious but little-used) distinction would, in fact, carry us quite a long way. Instead of just thinking, rather vaguely, that 'science' or 'French' was 'important', we should have to state more precisely (a) what practical use it was in (say) Britain over the next few decades, and (b) what intrinsic value or worthwhileness it had — what there was 'in it' in its own right. We should also come to see that educators were not the right people to determine (a) presumably governments or employers or some such people were better placed to tell us about what pupils need to learn in point of social or economic viability: but that (b) might well be left to educators and academics, whose speciality it is to explore and understand the intrinsic merits of certain subjects, together with the ways in which they can best be passed on to pupils. Again, we should also see that almost every subject-title had to be approached from both angles, and might often split up into two: for instance, 'English' as construed (a) merely as involving certain facts of skills necessary for social viability would be, in effect, a different subject from 'English' as (b) some sort of worthwhile possession or enterprise for any person anywhere (even on a desert island). So too, clearly enough, with maths, a course designed for (a) would look very different from one designed for (b) — though, of course, we should rejoice in any overlap.
That represents some advance in our grasp of different types of justification; and also shows just how much easier it has been for us to concentrate on (a) rather than (b). We have some idea, or think we have, about what is immediately and practically useful or important to today’s pupils; a less clear notion of what is important to any man, or why it is. Hence the over-playing of notions marked by ‘practical’, ‘relevant’, and ‘useful’. We may even think that pupils themselves, who do indeed often ask “What’s the use of . . . ?”, favour (a) as against (b): only to remember, if we do remember, that pupils in practice favour such activities as football, pop music and sex, none of which are obviously ‘useful’ — just as fairy tales and Tolkien are, in one sense, much more ‘outside the everyday experiences of young people, yet appeal to them as much or more than modern novels about contemporary housing estates.

The trouble with (a) is not, of course, that it may not be important. Nobody thinks that pupils should not be employable, or should not have the skills which alone may enable their country to earn its economic living, or should be ignorant of facts which any individual or citizen in a particular society ought to know. The trouble is that (a) is a fragile category; no sooner do we insist on a particular skill than improved technology (calculators) or changed circumstances make it obsolete. (Increased automation and high unemployment represents just one illustration of this.) We need, certainly, a much more well-thought-out and precisely Itemized list of what we want to put into (a); and if the items really are essential, to teach them as hard as we can. Some items, like elementary reading and writing and computation may be non-controversial: others may change over time, and rightly if circumstances change. All that is, in principle, clear enough important in itself (since people are human beings as well as citizens of a particular society), but likely to become more important in the future.

So far as category (b) is concerned — what is important for people as such to learn is that we have to take our courage in both hands and produce a well-reasoned view of the
human condition: what used to be called a ‘doctrine of man’. This is not the place to advance such a view in any adequately-defended form; but there is one general question which must immediately present itself to anyone considering the matter. Given candidates which are not ‘useful’ in any obvious sense — art, music literature, philosophy, and indeed those aspects of ‘useful’ subjects like science and mathematics which are desirable for non-utilitarian reasons —, are we to view them as (i) just fun (‘enriching’, ‘cultural’, etc.), or (ii) as actually needed by human beings in some more serious sense? To put the point briefly: either Mozart operas, Shakespeare, the history of the Renaissance and so on are just pastimes for intellectuals (into which we might hope to induce some pupils, perhaps on the grounds that they may come to find more pleasure in Beethoven than in beer), or else they matter.

We commonly act and talk as if (i) were true: again, we suspect, because of our fear of imposing any ideology on our fellows, or making them feel guilty if they have not read Tolstoy, or down-grading pupils who may never be able to engage in such highbrow activities. But we are not here concerned with high and low brows: again, either music (art, literature, etc.) is just fun or else it is needed — at whatever level or whatever form different pupils may best take it up. In fact, most people who have any genuine love or appreciation of these things, at any level, believe (ii) rather than (i): they regard them as in some way integral to their lives, not just sideline amusements; somehow instructive or educational or in any way important to them as people, not just for the pleasure they give but for the lessons they teach and the way in which they shape the fabric of their lives. The difficulty is to defend (ii) above the level of mere rhetoric (talk of ‘culture’ or civilization’). We have to ask why they matter. And this question presents itself not only for the kind of content-items just mentioned, but also for items which represent the development of particular skills or abilities of attitudes: we need to ask in each case "Why do ‘social skills’, or learning to make friends, or caring for other
people, or reading a novel intelligently, matter to any man?"

Whether we opt for (i) or (ii) will depend, surely, on whether we see the human condition (i) primarily as *all right*, afflicted indeed by certain difficulties but difficulties that are not all that hard in principle to remove (perhaps by 'changing society'); or (ii) as in some way deeply and obscurely difficult, afflicted by original sin, or *mauvaise foi*, or neurosis, or something of that kind. If (i), then these curricular items will be, at best, just a sort of cultural top-dressing which it is nice (not essential bits of equipment for the attainment of happiness or any sort of worthwhile life; to put it dramatically, for salvation. Our guess is that the more any serious person (with or without the benefit of religion, or philosophy, or Greek or Shakespearean tragedy, or Freud) reflects on this matter, the more he is likely to be driven towards (ii); and there are, we believe (Wilson 1979), irrefutable arguments why (ii) must be right — briefly, arguments to do with the inevitable difficulties of developing an ego or rational self in early childhood.

It is more important that we face these questions clearly than that we or any other philosophers should persuade educators of this or that answer; but in so far as curriculum-makers would agree with the general trend of what we have said, we can see some hope of progress. Human beings and the human condition being what it is (and of course it needs much more description, in literary as well as philosophical terms), it would be possible to see how various subjects or other items bear on it — some perhaps more directly than others. We might come to regard certain things (good candidates might include the use of language, the ability to understand and love other human beings) as *central* to being a person, other things as more peripheral or optional. Thus — to stick our necks out — it seems to us that being able to communicate and form personal relationships, and to enjoy doing some job of work for its own sake, are central in a way in which knowing about (say) the behaviour of moths or
differential equations is not central, important though these may be for utilitarian reasons; and we think this could be argued for, rather than just stated as a preferred ideology. Scientists can make machines for me and cure my body — both very important; but I can only talk to, love and relate to, forgive, enjoy or appreciate people and things for myself. (That is not to downgrade science or other subjects; just to re-classify them.) The arts are important because they shed light (not just pleasure) on people: to read Anna Karenina is to understand self-deception, to which we are all prone, more fully. Is mathematical argument just a useful tool for science, or is it (as Plato thought) something which all men need to practise if their thinking is to be really precise? That sort of question, at least, is the kind we need to raise.

It will be clear that we have a long way to go; in particular, that we need much more insight into the intrinsic worth of subjects, something on which little philosophical or other work has been done. Rather than some all-embracing ‘curricular theory’, we need to understand just what would be lost if a magician were to excuse (for instance) a knowledge of French, or poetry, or biology from our minds. Only people ‘on the inside’ of these subjects can help us here; learning from them, we can perhaps slowly come to see different kinds and degrees of importance, and produce not a theory but an order of priorities.

Then — but only then — we should have to take into account a great many other factors, which we have not been concerned with here: for instance, how far pupils should be allowed to specialise in one or another item, how far we can trust pupils’ judgement (as against educators’) in choosing items for themselves, what item can reasonably be made compulsory, what sorts of pupils are suited to what items, and how in fact the items can be best taught. Arguments about these issues, as hinted earlier, are bound to be premature until we have made more progress (for instance, the notion of ‘specialisation’ is context-dependent or relative, in that it assumes a range
of items already given; but we have not established any such range critically). Further, the fact that any curricular set-up must (at least for the foreseeable future) be provisional and uncertain strongly suggests that we must educate pupils directly in this very topic: that is, in the understanding and discussion of what sorts of things might be important for them to learn. That this is not hopelessly 'abstract' or philosophical' is suggested by the successfully-taught paper in the International Baccalaureate 'theory of knowledge', in which pupils are encouraged to step outside their particular subjects and specialisms, and consider more broadly just what kinds of learning and understanding there are, and what might be said for or against going in for them. This kind of discussion is not, in our judgement, outside the range of (as it is certainly not outside the interests of) pupils of quite average or mediocre ability. One cannot of course, get to see what there is in a particular subject in advance of studying it; but that should not inhibit an ongoing discussion on these lines, in which pupils as well as educators should join. The curricular theory of the next generation might be much improved as a result.

Postscript: A Practical Suggestion

It will at least be clear from the above that the first step in any serious curricular theory or practical development are in a very broad sense of the word, 'philosophical'. One of the reasons (as we have said) philosophers of education have given poor service in this area is that other educators have not put proper pressure on them. Philosophers find it only too easy (not least at Oxford) to sit in ivory towers and write books about the curriculum; they need to be forced or coaxed into better communication with other educators.

Our own experience of this in various parts of the world suggests that 'one-off' lectures or essays (like this one) by philosophers only scratch the surface of the problem of communication. Much more satisfactory is a continuous, sustained and fairly intense oral dialogue, conducted every day over the period of at least a week (preferably
two), with no holds barred, between one or two philosophers and other workers in curriculum theory and practice. This kind of continuity is needed before the discussion can (to use a scientific metaphor) reach critical heat: before the jargon, rhetoric, vested interests and prevailing cant about the curriculum are dispersed, and there is some chance of genuine rational confrontation. Universities throughout the world are not always as constructive as they could be about generating such dialogue: like philosophers, they too easily become separated (sometimes by mere distance) from fellow workers elsewhere. A very stern effort is needed to overcome this: an effort to produce not just an annual lecture or a conference in which individual speakers are easily able to make no space for mutual criticism, but a genuine dialogue in which a comparatively small number of people sit down and argue in a tough-minded sort of way. It is much to be hoped an increasing number of universities will take steps in this direction: without it, curricular theory and practice are bound to remain in an essentially autistic and segregated state of being. We have discussed this elsewhere (Loukes et al. 1983); but action is urgently required.

REFERENCES


