

Why the Aims of Education Cannot Be Settled

ATLI HARDARSON

The dominant model of curriculum design in the last century assumed that school education could be organized around aims, defined primarily in terms of students' behaviour. The credentials of this model were questioned by, among others, Lawrence Stenhouse, who pointed out that education serves purposes that cannot be stated in terms of behavioural objectives. In this article, I offer support for Stenhouse's conclusion and go beyond it, showing that if education aims at critical understanding of its own value, then it is even more radically open-ended than Stenhouse argued.

My argument is based on two premises. One of them is that the reason why people disagree about what education involves is that they have less-than-perfect knowledge of what human characteristics are worth cultivating. This premise is supported by a theory of meaning advanced by Hilary Putnam. The other premise is that one of the aims of education is intellectual independence. From these premises, I conclude that a successful course of education serves purposes that cannot be completely stated in advance.

The final purpose of education [. . .] is liberation and the struggle for a higher liberation still (Hegel, 1978, p. 125).

INTRODUCTION: AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The classic statement of the objectives model of school curricula was set forth by Ralph W. Tyler in his 1949 publication, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*. In this influential book, that 'crystallized a half-century of curriculum development thought' in the US (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery and Taubman, 1995, p. 140), Tyler maintained that one of the most fundamental questions that must be answered by those who design or develop a curriculum is 'What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?' (Tyler, 1949, p. 1). He then argued that education should be viewed as a process of changing the behaviour patterns of learners and that the 'educational purposes' should be defined as objectives that 'represent

the kinds of changes in behaviour that an educational institution seeks to bring about in its students' (Tyler, 1949, p. 6).

Models of curriculum design and development, similar to Tyler's, were subsequently advocated by influential curriculum theorists such as Benjamin S. Bloom (1956) and Hilda Taba (1962). Such models were, indeed, dominant for most of the 20th century (Elliott, 2001; Kliebard, 1987, p. 121; Pinar *et al.*, 1995, p. 148). They are still influential and have largely been incorporated into the so-called Bologna Process where one of the key concepts is 'learning outcome' (Karseth, 2006). An article in *The Bologna Handbook* thus advocates learner-centred, specific outcomes in almost the same terms as Tyler, and claims that among 'the great advantages of learning outcomes is that they are clear statements of what the learner is expected to achieve and how he or she is expected to demonstrate that achievement' (Kennedy, Hyland and Ryan, 2009).

Although the objectives model still holds sway, philosophers and curriculum theorists have found reasons to question its credentials. Some of the relevant questions were advanced by Michael Oakeshott (1989), who maintained that education is aimless, like a conversation. More modest protests were voiced by Richard S. Peters (1966, 1973), who argued that the model of means to ends is not generally applicable to education, and Lawrence Stenhouse who, quoting Peters, pointed out aspects of education that the objectives model cannot accommodate. On Stenhouse's account, education comprises at least four different processes: training, instruction, initiation, and induction. The objectives model gives, he observes, a reasonably good fit in the cases of training and instruction. He does not say much about initiation (or the socialization that goes on in schools) nor does he exclude the possibility that it may be covered by the objectives model. However, the 'great problem in applying the objectives model lies in the area of induction into knowledge' (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 81). He explains this problem as follows:

Education enhances the freedom of man by inducting him into the knowledge of his culture as a thinking system. The most important characteristic of the knowledge mode is that one can think with it. This is the nature of knowledge—as distinct from information—that it is a structure to sustain creative thought and provide frameworks for judgement.

Education as induction into knowledge is successful to the extent that it makes the behavioural outcomes of the students unpredictable.

Consider the marking of history essays. The examination marker has a large number which he must monitor.

As he reads them he often becomes aware that there is a depressing similarity about them. [...] From the pile of essays a few leap out at the marker as original, surprising, showing evidence of individual thinking. These, the unpredictable, are the successes (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 82).

Stenhouse's argument shows that *some* of the aims of education cannot be specified as, or analysed into, behavioural objectives. This is because we cannot both expect students to surprise their teachers and demand that teachers specify in detail how students are to behave. The reasons Stenhouse gives, however, leave it open whether or not education can be aims-based, providing that we extend the meaning of 'aims', prevalent in the curriculum literature, to include aims such as intellectual or moral virtues that cannot be analysed, defined or completely described in terms of behaviour.

In this article, I maintain that education is open-ended in an even more radical way than that argued by Stenhouse. My argument not only supports Stenhouse's reservations about the objectives model, but goes beyond them. It is based on two premises. My first premise is that we have less-than-perfect knowledge of what education involves. My second premise is that one of the aims of education is to make people intellectually independent, so that they can reflect on and criticise what they have been taught. The conclusion I draw from these premises is that education is radically open-ended in the sense that although we can specify some of its purposes and make general statements to the effect that it aims at improvement or excellence of some sort, we cannot justify any definitive or exhaustive description of its purpose. This conclusion supports Stenhouse's view that curriculum design should, to some extent at least, leave it open what students are to get out of a course of education because using detailed aims as principle of organisation tends 'to bind the future and to set limits to the possibilities of the developing situation' (Stenhouse, 1983, p. 48). These possibilities are realised by the students. The outcome of a successful induction into knowledge can therefore not be completely determined in advance by those who design the curriculum.

The second premise, for which I will not actually argue here, is implicit in Kant's answer to the question 'What is Enlightenment' (Kant, 1983, pp. 41–8) and thus an integral part of our modern ideals of equality and Enlightenment. My first premise is borne out by the variety of learned and lay opinions about what is most truly educative, and can also be supported by a theory of meaning advanced by Hilary Putnam (1975). Before I rehearse Putnam's philosophy of language and defend my first premise, I shall briefly outline some examples of how people understand the word 'education'.

STEREOTYPES AND LEARNED ACCOUNTS

In literature, in movies, and in daily speech we come across many and various conceptions of what an educated person is like. One familiar stereotype is portrayed and parodied in *Educating Rita*, a 1983 film directed by Lewis Gilbert and based on a play by Willy Russell. The movie tells the story of a working class girl, Rita, who attends an Open University course in English literature in order to become educated. Although it brings Rita's original preconceptions of the superior lives of the literati into question, the movie assumes that the audience accepts its stereotype of an educated person as one versed in the works of William Blake and D. H.

Lawrence. Other stereotypes, no less familiar, depict the professional, the scientist, or the philosopher as paradigms of education. If we go back to the middle of the 19th century, we come across writings where it is assumed, without question, that being educated means having learned Latin and Greek, and going still further back we have the Enlightenment ideal of an unprejudiced and encyclopaedic mind.

These stereotypes, or at least some of them, hark back to educational philosophies of past ages. Rita's ideal is, for instance, reminiscent of romanticism and the revival of humanism in the 19th century, when Matthew Arnold described education as 'a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world' (Arnold, 1925 [1869], p. 6). Likewise, it can be said that the modern stereotype of the scientist has at least some tincture of the Enlightenment. Different people have different stereotypes or paradigms in mind when they talk about education, and these relate to different ideals from past philosophies. But that is not all: learned accounts given by modern authorities also differ.

Oakeshott described education as initiation into a world of understandings, imaginings, meanings, and beliefs (Oakeshott, 1989). A similar account has been given by Charles Bailey in his 1984 monograph on liberal education, where he elaborates on its capacity to liberate students from the restrictions of the present and the particular, and involve them instead in what is most fundamental and general, worthwhile and rational (Bailey, 2010 [1984]). One of the most sophisticated attempts to analyse the concept of education is that of Peters in the first part of his *Ethics and Education* (Peters, 1966), where he argues that being educated entails having a broad range of worthwhile knowledge. Peters' conception of education excludes any narrow specialisation and requires initiation into a wide variety of different subjects such as natural science, literature, and history. Other distinguished scholars have raised doubts about this, however, including Mary Warnock (1977) and David Carr, who points out that:

... we may regard people as educated on grounds other than broad initiation. Thus, it seems reasonable to regard someone who has an in-depth knowledge of poetry and literature (say), but little else as better educated than the 'know-all', who is a mine of shallow information (Carr, 2003, p. 210).

Sceptical responses to Peters have also come from scholars who think that education is not primarily about knowledge but rather about moral virtue, freedom or autonomy. In *The Aims of Education Restated*, published in 1982, John White argued, for instance, that education should, primarily, make pupils morally autonomous persons who form an integrated life-plan worked out from a moral point of view. The view that to be educated is to be morally autonomous seems implicit in his argument. In recent publications, White has written about human flourishing as the primary aim of education. However, he still emphasises autonomy and provides convincing arguments to the effect that flourishing is simultaneously dependent on participation in

changing cultural traditions and on autonomy, i.e. the ability to reflect critically on goods that contribute to human wellbeing (White, 2007).

It may be tempting to conclude from this diversity of views that different authors have different concepts of education. In his later works, Peters expressed reservations about his own analysis and said that although education must, by definition, entail some sort of improvement, all attempts to specify exactly what the concept involves are essentially contestable (Peters, 1981). Since then, many theorists have entertained similar doubts. Some of them are quoted by Carr (2010) who describes the current situation as follows:

In the contemporary literature of educational philosophy and theory, it is almost routinely assumed or claimed that ‘education’ is a ‘contested’ concept: that is, it is held that education is invested—as it were, ‘all the way down’—with socially-constructed interests and values that are liable to diverge in different contexts to the point of mutual opposition (Carr, 2010, p. 89).

Carr subsequently argues that the case for contestability of education rests on a confusion and points out that, in spite of different viewpoints, most theorists agree that education is about emancipation ‘conceived in terms of something like the promotion of critical (rational) open-mindedness’ (Carr, 2010, p. 100).

As Carr points out, most serious accounts of what education is overlap. White’s autonomy has, for instance, something in common with Bailey’s liberation from the present and the particular, and such liberation may perhaps be achieved through Oakeshott’s initiation into a world of understandings that, in turn, may include what Peters called a broad range of worthwhile knowledge. But those who doubt that there is one common concept of education can still point out that, in spite of such overlaps, people hold quite different beliefs about what education involves.

What shall we think? Are there many concepts of education—or at least, many essentially contestable conceptions of a single overarching concept? Does White, who focuses on the moral aspect, have a concept that is different from that of Peters, who emphasises the cognitive aspect? Does Rita, who thinks education is about familiarity with great works of literature, have one concept of education, and does someone who focuses on science and mathematics have a different concept? Do advocates of the objectives model have a concept of education that is different from the one that Stenhouse and its other critics work with, and if they do, is there then any reality that one side to the dispute is right about and the other is wrong about?

THE MEANING OF ‘MEANING’ AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR EDUCATION

In a paper from 1975, entitled ‘The Meaning of “Meaning”’, Putnam (1975, pp. 215–271) criticised some of the then-prevailing philosophical

accounts of meaning according to which the intension of a term (that is, a psychological state existing in the mind of each speaker who knows what it means) determines its extension.

Putnam's arguments are well known, and the conclusions he states have become part of the mainstream in analytical philosophy of language:

We have now seen that the extension of a term is not fixed by a concept that the individual speaker has in his head, and this is true both because extension is, in general, determined *socially*—there is division of linguistic labor as much as of 'real' labor—and because extension is, in part, determined *indexically*. The extension of our terms depends upon the actual nature of the particular things that serve as paradigms, and this actual nature is not, in general fully known to the speaker. Traditional semantic theory leaves out only two contributions to the determination of extension—the contribution of society and the contribution of the real world! (Putnam, 1975, p. 245)

To qualify as having understood a word, one does not have to be able to produce an exact definition. For instance, I can use the word 'tiger' in a meaningful way although there exist some big cats that I cannot tell whether to classify as tigers or leopards. Nevertheless, some minimum knowledge is required. One does not count as understanding the word 'tiger' unless one knows that tigers are animals. Probably most linguistic communities also require speakers to know that tigers typically look like big striped cats. We can, however, leave it to experts on zoology to determine if a white Siberian feline is a tiger or something else. For ordinary speakers, a stereotype suffices and having stripes is part of the stereotype of a tiger; still the word 'tiger' denotes stripeless white tigers as well as the striped members of the species, so that the stereotype is not necessarily true of everything the word denotes. One example Putnam uses is 'gold'. The stereotype of gold includes being yellow even though pure gold is almost white. 'But the gold we see in jewelry is typically yellow (due to the presence of copper), so the presence of this feature in the stereotype is even useful in lay contexts' (Putnam, 1975, p. 250).

In short, we use stereotypes to pick out some typical examples and the extension is whatever shares their relevant (sometimes known, sometimes unknown) properties. Most often our stereotypes suffice to pick out paradigm cases, but sometimes, linguistic communities get it wrong. One example Putnam uses is the stereotype of a witch in New England three hundred years ago.

Towards the end of the paper, Putnam proposes a normal form for the description of meaning and says it should at least include the following:

- (1) the syntactic markers that apply to the word, e.g. 'noun';
- (2) the semantic markers that apply to the word, e.g. 'animal', 'period of time';
- (3) a description of the additional features of the stereotype, if any;
- (4) a description of the extension (Putnam, 1975, p. 269).

The extension of the word 'gold' is, in fact, the element with atomic number 79 and not, for instance, iron pyrite although it looks like the common stereotype of gold. People talked about gold for ages without knowing how to define the extension of the term, that is, how to state the necessary and sufficient conditions for something being gold. We use many words without knowing exactly how to describe their extension. If Putnam is right about the meaning of 'meaning', we cannot jump from the premise that people associate different stereotypes with the word 'education', and that experts give different accounts of its extension, to the conclusion that the word is used to express more than one concept.

As far as I can see, there is general agreement on some semantic markers and the minimum knowledge required to count as understanding the word 'education': that education involves, for instance, some desirable or commendable qualities people acquire through learning. In spite of the above-mentioned differences, most theorists and lay people seem to agree on some characteristics of the extension of 'education', in particular that it has something to do with rationality, open mindedness and critical thought, and that becoming more educated involves an increase in worthwhile abilities, virtues, knowledge, understanding, or wisdom.

Putnam's theory of meaning invites us to think that 'education' denotes whatever known or unknown characteristics the semantic markers and stereotypes point to. Because the 'extension is, in part, determined *indexically*' (Putnam, 1975, p. 245), the meaning of the term is not completely settled by what speakers have in mind. It depends on objective truths and these truths may be partially unknown, more or less dimly understood, and waiting to be discovered, explained, or illuminated.

On this account, disagreement about how to describe the extension of 'education' is to be expected as long as people disagree about what human excellences to cultivate and which of them are enhanced by learning. The thinkers mentioned in the previous section (Oakeshott, Bailey, Peters, and White) listed understanding a world of culture, liberation from the present and the particular, a wide range of worthwhile knowledge, and moral autonomy. But what about artistic creativity, skills in specialised fields such as, say, carpentry, or political acumen? If all of these count also, then people can be educated in many different ways, and there is ample room for disagreement about how to order and evaluate educational ingredients. Because of our limited knowledge, there is also room for disagreement about what types of experience count as educative. We cannot conclude from this, however, that there are many concepts of education. (There are also different types of furniture but it does not follow that those who go for rococo and those who shop in IKEA have different furniture concepts.)

It may be objected at this point that the word 'education' is often used to designate activities and practices that have very little or even nothing to do with human excellence. Like many other words, it is frequently used in a loose sense that deviates from the core meaning. One common deviation is to equate education with formal schooling, as people do when they take it for granted that of two persons, the one with the higher degree, or more

ECTS credits, is better educated. When sensible people talk in this way, their words are not meant to be taken too literally.

Maybe one can find examples of government newspeak where some simplistic conflation of education and years of formal schooling or number of ECTS credits is taken to be the last word about the meaning of 'education'. Newspeak was, after all, 'designed not to extend but to *diminish* the range of thought' (Orwell, 1983 [1949], p. 258). It is obvious that two courses that take equal time can differ in educational value. It is also clear that users of public libraries can educate themselves without going to school and that some people spend years in school without getting much education.

Although years of formal schooling cannot be taken seriously as a theoretical description of the extension of 'education', it may very well be a part (or even the whole) of someone's stereotype. There is nothing wrong with the answer proposed in the following quotation unless what is pointed to as a stereotype is taken to be a definition:

If I were asked quickly what education means, I would probably say 'teaching' or 'schools'. Yet I would sense that it means more than that and hope that the questioner would not probe too deeply (Fletcher, 1990, p. ix).

This author mentions teaching and schools. He could also have used the word 'learning' because 'education' is sometimes used in a loose sense to designate all sorts of learning, and 'learning' is sometimes used as a stereotype or semantic marker to point out the reference of 'education'. Equating learning and education cannot, however, be the last word about the nature of education. Oliver Twist learned how to pick pockets, and some unfortunate people learn how to kill. Maybe there are newspeak dialects where 'education' is applied to examples like this literally and without qualification. But in ordinary language, 'education' cannot mean the same as 'learning' because some of the things people learn make them worse, not better.

One important implication of including the contribution of society and the contribution of the real world in our semantic theory is that our stereotypes can be misleading and our proposed definitions can be wrong. We should keep an open mind to the possibility that what we think of as educative is not really so. A little over four hundred years ago, Michel de Montaigne wrote about what was then taken to be good school education:

If our souls do not move with a better motion and if we do not have a healthier judgement, then I would just as soon that our pupil should spend his time playing tennis: at least his body would become more agile. But just look at him after he has spent some fifteen or sixteen years studying: nothing could be more unsuited for employment. The only improvement you can see is that his Latin and Greek have made him more conceited and more arrogant than when he left home. He ought to have brought back a fuller soul: he brings back a swollen one;

instead of making it weightier he has merely blown wind into it (Montaigne, 1991, p. 156).

If people could not err about what falls under the concepts they use, we would have to say that Montaigne thought education was, at least sometimes, bad for people. But once we realise that such errors occur, we have a better option: we can say that he thought that the schools he wrote about did not really educate their students but were falsely believed to do so.

If the meaning of 'education' were constituted by what people have in mind when they use the word, then we would have many concepts of education. Granted that some of the aims of education follow logically from analysis of the concept, different concepts of education would support divergent, equally valid, accounts of what aims schools must serve to count as educational institutions. If what Putnam said about the meaning of 'meaning' applies to the meaning of 'education', however, the problem is to determine what is truly educative. On the presumption that this theory of meaning is on the right track, the most plausible explanation of why we disagree about what education involves is that we have less than perfect knowledge of what human characteristics are most worthy of being fostered. Our understanding of the purposes of education is under way because we are still searching for answers to the questions about human excellence and the good life posed by the ancient philosophers. An end to that search is not in sight.

EDUCATION, AIMS AND VALUES

If there are many different ways to educate students, choice between them can be guided by considerations that have little to do with education as such. A society, or its government, may, for instance, choose one course of school education over another because it is more conducive to economic growth.

Education is a purposive activity that aims at improvement of some sort. It has aims that are internal or immanent, in the way that the aim of getting cleaner is internal to washing. We can divine from the very concept that hand washing aims at removing dirt from one's hands. But this does not exclude other aims that are contingently related to the concept, such as preventing the spread of an epidemic, showing courtesy, or making a statement as Pilate did.

From the truth that some worthwhile aim is internal, that is, that it follows from the right definition of an activity, we cannot, (at least not generally), conclude that the activity is, or is to be, undertaken for the sake of that aim. And from the truth that some aim is external, that it is contingently related to a concept that is used to describe an activity, nothing follows about its importance (or lack of importance). I can have all sorts of reasons for washing my hands without caring much about cleanliness. We can also have reasons to seek education without caring much about the aims that are internal to education.

Granted that schools are to educate their students: does anything follow about what they should teach and what they should aim at? At the very least, they have to make their students better in some way; a course cannot be a course of education if it fosters vice rather than virtue. (Hand washing can also serve various aims but people cannot wash their hands in order to leave dirty fingerprints on things they touch.) If what goes on in school thwarts the aims internal to education, the school is no longer an educational institution. What we discover about aims internal to education is therefore relevant to what educational institutions can reasonably be expected to do.

From the weak premise that schools are to educate their students, we cannot draw strong conclusions. But what if we start with something more substantial? In what follows, I argue that from what I have already said about our less than perfect knowledge of what education involves, and the premise that education should make students intellectually independent, it follows that the aims of education (or schools qua institutions of education) can only be partially specified or stated.

As Stenhouse (1975, p. 80) readily acknowledged, training and instruction often have aims that can be known and stated in advance. Both teachers and pupils know (to some extent at least) why it is desirable to learn, say, spelling or arithmetic. Learning and teaching these subjects can, without great distortion, be seen as means to reach previously-known ends. Although this applies in many cases, it is not generally true. Some of the most obvious exceptions have to do with the acquisition of appreciative judgement through learning.

Some parts of a course of education involve learning to appreciate and care for values. The distinction between learning to appreciate and other types of learning can be drawn within any subject, and many values can be appreciated through different subjects. Someone learning to swim can, at the same time, learn to appreciate the value of graceful motions and of physical fitness. But it is also possible that someone taking swimming lessons has learned to appreciate or care for these values beforehand. Someone learning history may learn thereby to realise the value of equality or freedom. But it is also possible that our history student has learned to care for these values before entering that particular course of study.

I can aim at acquiring a skill that I lack. But can I aim at acknowledgment or approval of values that I do not appreciate? In a sense I can—if I realise, for instance, that something I do not fathom is probably valuable because there are people I respect who value it. But then I appreciate it as valuable although I concede I am not able to evaluate it independently because of my lack of knowledge or understanding. One does not aim at appreciating something as valuable unless one already thinks of it as worth something. From the students' point of view, learning to appreciate something can therefore not be a means to an end that is previously known and desired, because, in that case, they would already care for the values they have not yet learned to appreciate. This does not preclude teachers from understanding what they do as providing a means to previously-known ends. But what if the students are not only to appreciate the values imparted, but also to criticise them?

Can educators really want students to accept, without criticism, doubt, or reservation the values imparted through a course of study? If students are, eventually, to become intellectually independent, they must at some stage become able to evaluate the course they have been through. Otherwise the educator hands over to them something they have to accept as subordinates or epistemic inferiors. Ronald Barnett, writing about the concept of higher education, expresses this as follows:

If there is an underlying idea, it is that of the development of the student's autonomy as a self-sufficient rational inquirer. Following a process of higher education, a graduate (whatever his/her field of study) should have not just an understanding of the field—its key concepts, theories and findings—and be able to carry out the relevant operations, but should be able to engage with the field with a certain degree of detachment. He/she should be able to maintain a distance from the field, and be able to evaluate and be critical of it (Barnett, 1988, p. 245).

In other words, if we educate our students to be the equals of ourselves, the educators, then we expect them to end up having something to say about what is worth learning and, hopefully, to progress to a better understanding than we have of what is educative. Ideally our students should be able to participate in a conversation where proposals like those made by Oakeshott, Bailey, Peters, and White are criticised and improved upon. To understand why it follows from this that the aims of education (or schools qua institutions of education) can only be partially specified or stated, let us consider the following. Suppose we had made a definitive list of aims: Aim₁, Aim₂ . . . Aim_n. This list may, e.g., include statements about intellectual and moral virtues, preparations for work, and personal flourishing. As I have argued, it follows from the premise that we should educate our students to be intellectually independent that something like the following must be one of the items on the list:

Aim_k: Education should enable the student to criticise the list and propose a better one.

If Aim_k is admitted, we expect our students to find something better to do than merely work towards the aims on our list, and thus the list is not definitive. This one aim makes other items on the list tentative and subject to revision. As far as education is reflexive, that is, as far as it enables students to criticise its own value and progress to an improved understanding of what is worth learning, its aims cannot be settled. This conclusion can be read as an extension of Stenhouse's conclusion that when induction into knowledge succeeds, the results are surprising and original, something the teacher could not have specified in advance. It applies regardless of whether the aims in question are behavioural objectives or abilities, virtues or understandings that cannot be analysed in terms of behaviour—and also regardless of whether they are narrowly defined and subject specific or

stated in general terms, e.g. as ideals having to do with intellectual and moral virtues or democratic citizenship.

Although schools can have aims and although some of these aims can be stated as behavioural objectives or learning outcomes education that leads to intellectual independence transcends any given list of aims and serves purposes that cannot be completely stated in advance. Paraphrasing the quotation from Hegel at the beginning of this paper, we can say that education aims not only at liberation as it is conceived by the educators. It is also a struggle for a higher liberation still. If the nature of education were fully known, this would not follow. Thanks to our human limitations, the best we can do is to invite our students to join us on a journey of discovery. Insisting on a totally aims-based course of education is like asking them to traverse uncharted territories and still insist that they only go to places we have pointed out on a map.

Correspondence: Atli Harðarson, University of Iceland, Vallholt 19, 300 Akranes, Iceland.

Email: atli@fva.is

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