EDUCATION & PHILOSOPHY

AN INTRODUCTION

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Philosophical Schools

Marginal philosophy

As we have suggested, the philosophy of education does not loom large in the thinking of those who practise education or those who make decisions about the structuring of education systems. A distinguished philosopher of education of our acquaintance put the matter in the following way. Teachers in schools and colleges think that the philosophy of education is ivory-tower theorising that is disconnected from classroom realities; policy-makers think that it is too abstract and that it is incapable of producing constructive, practical solutions to educational problems; 'real' philosophers regard the philosophy of education with contempt as a career niche for those whose philosophical formation has not equipped them to contribute to 'real' philosophy; and philosophers of education cannot manage agreement as to the concerns, objectives and methods proper to their field of enquiry. As a result, the philosophy of education is effectively ignored at every level of the education system.

This book will not be entering into a defence or an attack upon the philosophy of education. It is useful, nevertheless, to explore the formation of this academic field in order to understand its traditional limitations and appreciate the benefits of broadening our scope of enquiry. In this chapter we briefly review the history of this subfield of philosophy and its various political commitments, before offering a critical introduction to academic philosophy in general. We then broaden our definition of Western philosophy by considering it in its aboriginal, ancient Greek forms. It becomes apparent that ancient philosophy barely resembles its modern self. Ancient philosophies were not studied in the abstract; they were adopted as a way of life. Each philosophy had its own associated moral and social comportment, which entailed a transformation in the philosopher's being.

The philosophy of education

When the philosophy of education was established in the 1960s as a distinct area of enquiry, it went energetically about the business of setting up all the appurtenances and distinguishing features of any academic field – such as university positions, accredited courses and modules, annual conferences, academic societies, research journals and canonical texts. Great efforts were made to carefully outline and limit its scope. It was felt that in order to establish the philosophy of education as a legitimate area of study, it would have to be clearly defined and defended as a form of enquiry distinct from other practices of research, such as those applying the methods of historical study, psychology and sociology to educational matters. The philosophy of education, like any other field, was built on systems of exclusion that determined what authentic educational–philosophical statements would look like, and consequently, what would count as educational philosophy. In producing this book, we are acutely aware of this history and its constraints. We want to make it clear that although we provide an introduction to aspects of the field (with its canonical texts and established ideas), our aim is to open philosophical and educational questions to an examination that will extend beyond the horizons of those seeking, first and foremost, to establish and defend a field of study.

In the 1960s, Richard Peters and Paul Hirst produced a series of texts that became foundational to the philosophy of education.[1] Both belonged to the tradition of 'analytic philosophy', which came to academic dominance in English-speaking countries during the twentieth century. The originators of analytic philosophy thought that philosophy should adopt the methods of mathematics and the natural sciences and thus bring a new rigour and clarity to the discipline. The current heirs of this tradition have, on the whole, rejected such scientific pretensions, but retain a respect for the methods of logical enquiry and a cautious narrowness of investigative focus, a concern for precision which often involves a commitment to the use of straightforward, 'plain' English. Philosophy of this kind aimed to break apart problems into more digestible units and address only those questions it believed it had the power to answer. All other versions of philosophy were excluded as insufficiently rigorous, and hence, insufficiently philosophical. The so-called big questions of philosophy – those that could never be broken down and tested – were ignored. (We will see that there have been exceptions to the analytical consensus concerning the practice of philosophy – essentially, philosophers within that tradition who have thought historically.)

It was under this influence that the philosophy of education was reduced from the outset to a '"second order" activity restricted to exposing and eradicating the incoherences and confusions inherent in the language through which our knowledge and understanding are embedded'.[2] The philosopher's role as the likes of Peters and Hirst understood it was to tidy up what were viewed rather condescendingly as

the conceptual confusions of those working in education. As a conceptual clearing house, the philosophy of education fostered the illusion that it was separate from, perhaps above, all political and moral disagreement. It offered itself as a neutral arbiter, ensuring that any debate concerning educational matters was able to proceed with rationally agreed, value-free definitions of educational concepts. But as Wilfred Carr, an educational philosopher and critic of the field argued,

> this should not be allowed to obscure how, by the mid-1970s, the works of Peters and Hirst had somehow managed to provide the philosophical basis for a value-laden, 'first-order' account of the purpose and content of education of precisely the kind that the methodological principles of analytical philosophy explicitly proscribed.[3]

The form of education favoured here was precisely that type of education which most closely suited, in their view, the society in which they found themselves.

Though the academic field of education has since become more inclusive and diverse, its practitioners remain concerned that the philosophy of education is losing ground to other forms of intellectual enquiry. The philosophy of education no longer enjoys the status it once did. In schools and university education departments it is no longer widely presumed that the study of education necessarily begins with the study of its philosophy. Facing the possibility of its own near extinction, the philosophy of education currently enjoys a curious, if precarious, twilight life which thrives in journals and conferences but which has little or no vital connection to educational policy-making or practice.

Modern academic philosophy

It will become apparent that philosophy is, and always has been, overwhelmingly dominated by men. This does not mean it can be ignored or simply invalidated as a patriarchal discourse. Rather, that that discourse remains an enduring problem for philosophy. We should not underestimate just how uncomfortable and fraught with difficulty a woman's engagement with philosophy might be, given that philosophy has been riven with gendered assumptions for more than two and a half millennia.[4] Throughout this book, we make no effort to disguise the exclusivity of philosophy, and its overwhelming concern with that gendered epithet 'man', so common in philosophical discourse until relatively recently. Indeed, it is important to remain aware of that exclusivity, and its continued effects.

In the West philosophy is now a specialist subject, largely confined to the university. In its current form it has been separated from most practical day-to-day activities and is carried out by a select few. Unlike the philosophy of education, academic philosophy continues to enjoy high status, although its survival, depending as it does on intellectual prestige and distinction rather than any measurable effectivity, cannot be entirely secure. While its academic practitioners generally

support and uphold its elite status, presumably in the belief that its position of detachment above the fray is what enables its uniquely privileged perspective, a few so-called 'popular philosophers' do exist, seeking to draw in the lay reader with the promise that philosophy can be relevant to, indeed can improve, the quality of everyday life. Almost invariably they operate within the boundaries of a philosophy that accepts the current ordering of our world as, more or less, a given – an ordering whose workings need the monitoring, the reprimands and the enhancements that philosophy can offer, but an ordering that does not need, and indeed should not be subject to, fundamental questioning. Here philosophy is presented as a means of reasoning about life more sensibly and thus improving its quality, at both personal and social levels.

While philosophical activity has the potential to confront and upset commonplace assumptions, it largely avoids this task. In its contemporary rather sedate form, philosophy has become a cultural emblem, signifying the intellectual and moral seriousness of a society rather than performing any active role as a source of uncomfortable questions about the priorities and the values that shape life as we live it. The marginalisation of philosophy in this form has resulted from changes in the field of knowledge as a whole, a reconfiguration that has had consequences for intellectual enquiry in general. The modern sub-division of knowledge into specialist areas – each discipline adopting its own limited subject matter, methods of enquiry and discursive conventions – separated these specialist areas from the broader philosophical discussions in which they were once based. Pre-modern definitions of philosophy were far more inclusive, encompassing questions that ranged from what we would now describe as scientific, to psychological and sociological concerns.

In his critique of academic specialisation, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre explains why this could be dangerous. He takes the example of moral philosophy. Following academic specialisation, MacIntyre argues, 'psychological evaluations of personality traits and studies of political order' are separated from moral philosophy. The consequence of separation is that psychology and politics are now investigated as distinct disciplines 'in a way that presupposes that these are not essentially moral enterprises'.[5] His overall argument is this: when the scope of moral philosophy was diminished, the scope of moral questioning was also reduced.

The same argument applies to educational questions, which have been similarly reduced in scope. In its pre-modern context, education was not isolated from other social, political or theological concerns; such concerns were articulated within a common discourse. Educational questions were at the same time questions about the nature of existence and the nature of belief. As a vital aspect of intellectual activity, education brought into play questions about the ordering of society and the cosmos, debate about the universe given to humanity by God. Along with scientific, judicial and medical reasoning, it was located and had to account for its conclusions within a clearly recognised moral and theological order. In this context, the study and practice of education was a philosophical activity in the most extensive sense.

Philosophies and their contexts

When studying any particular philosophy, it helps to understand the context within which that philosophy was developed. It is mistaken to treat past philosophers and their doctrines as if they were contemporaries, and ask, for example, what Plato or Rousseau would have to say about this or that twenty-first century development in education. Such an approach would merely insert ideas formed in the social, political and cultural particularities of one historical moment into a very different present, into a society ordered to radically changed priorities.

Examining past philosophies from the perspective of our present also has the effect of limiting what can be included as genuine philosophy. There is a tendency, in other words, to accept only those ideas and arguments that are judged 'philosophical' by current standards as to what constitutes philosophy. Even the works of individuals identified in retrospect as the great philosophers of the past are sometimes divided like this, into those sections of their work that are taken to be worth reading as philosophy, and those parts that are viewed as too spiritual, poetic, speculative or insufficiently rigorous according to contemporary standards. This kind of approach, which defends philosophy against pseudo-philosophy, imposes arbitrary divisions on past work and cherry-picks it for ideas that fit with contemporary notions. Considerable violence is thus done to the complex intellectual and social integrity of the original work.

As Richard Rorty argues, philosophers have not been labouring over the same questions in the same terms throughout the ages.[6] There are no essential questions, and there are no essential ways of going about answering those questions that are essentially philosophical. Those who pretend that these timeless questions exist are claiming for themselves the dubious right to rule over our intellectual histories. Those who tell a history of philosophy must, then, be open about the fact that theirs is a partial account. Martin Heidegger makes a similar point, arguing that every historical investigation 'usurps a currently dominant mode of thought and makes it the guiding principle according to which the past is examined and rediscovered'.[7] Histories are always, consciously or otherwise, designed according to the needs and confines of the present. An account of the history of philosophy will unavoidably construct a 'dramatic narrative', as Rorty put it, tied to the drama of our times.[8]

Attention given to the history of philosophy is nevertheless important in that it provides accounts of very different conceptions of the world. These radically different conceptions cannot be accommodated easily to modern perspectives, but they do offer a glimpse into other ways of framing the world, reminding us of the constructedness, the provisionality of what we take to be the inescapable, natural, way of viewing and understanding our own. Another way of putting this is to say that history is essential to the study of philosophy because of the human tendency, so useful to the powerful, to forget. One might say that forgetting allows what are in fact arbitrary orderings of thought to assume the appearance

of universal and unquestionable truths. These become the organising principles 'for a wide range of the practices in which we think and act and deal with the world'.[9] To engage with philosophy historically is to take aim at the commonplaces, conventional wisdoms and unquestioned background assumptions that organise our present. Confrontations such as these, driven by alternative conceptions of education, will not release us instantly from our current ingrained ways of thinking. We will remain attached to the many conventions of contemporary thought that continue to define how we think about education. An awareness of the provisionality of the present, and a history of alternative modes of thought, is insufficient on its own to release us from our conceptual confinement. If we want to see that our way of understanding things is just one option among others, it is necessary also to retrieve and understand the history of the conventions that currently constrain us.

Ancient philosophies and philosophical schools

In confronting the contingent, historically specific and limiting nature of present day education and philosophy, the meaning of philosophy itself must be brought into question. Here we concur with the French philosopher and historian Pierre Hadot, who argues that if we are to understand past philosophies, it is necessary to 'eliminate the preconceptions the word *philosophy* may evoke in the modern mind'.[10]

In the Western tradition of philosophy it is conventional to locate the origins of philosophy in ancient Greece. Like all so-called origins, this beginning is an arbitrary one. It does, though, reflect the profound influence of Greek culture on surrounding regions and subsequent history. Like other influential ways of thinking about the world, the success of Greek thought is not solely to be attributed to its intellectual potency. It was spread on the back of a very different kind of power, by way of the conquests of Alexander the Great, Aristotle's pupil. Alexander's exploits seeded Greek thought in Asia and were important to its survival and subsequent passing back to the West via Islam, but it was precisely its originality and power that appealed to Rome – that is, it survived on its own merits even after military defeat. Through imperial conquests ranging as far afield as India, a vast though short-lived empire was established, throughout which the influence of Greek culture extended. The subsequent Hellenistic period, from the fourth to the first century BCE, established the enduring and widespread influence of Greek philosophy in the Western and Middle Eastern world. Remarkable in its capacity to absorb the most diverse mythical and conceptual themes, classical Greek culture became the intellectual foundation stone of Western civilisation. All cultures of the Mediterranean world as it existed then would eventually express themselves through it. This process of amalgamation did distort the content of all the traditions involved, including the content of Greek culture itself.

But in doing so it established remarkable cultural continuities that still permeate and to a significant extent structure thought and life in the West today.

This unifying process ensured continuity at the heart of philosophical and literary traditions, where various philosophical schools managed to endure throughout the Hellenistic period. These ranged from Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum, which were run along institutional lines, to the movements and spiritual traditions of Scepticism and Cynicism that adopted more informal arrangements. In the centuries that followed, these schools gradually collapsed and amalgamated. Platonism had the strongest legacy at first, giving rise to Neoplatonism. Loosely deriving from its originating thinker, Neoplatonism strongly influenced philosophical and theological systems, maintaining a division between tangible things which are considered imperfect, and an ideal realm of intangible abstract entities. These intangible entities are considered only available to the philosopher, and include the idea of an overarching, abstract Good. This unifying phenomenon would dominate thought throughout the medieval period, with a Christian God becoming associated with this notion of an abstract Good (see Chapter 4).

While philosophy undoubtedly prospered during the Hellenistic period, having widespread influence, we should not be deceived into overestimating the role of the philosopher in this context. Though a philosophical tradition of sorts appears to have been established across kingdoms and empires, achieving a degree of permanence and influencing thought, culture and politics to the present day, the activities of everyday philosophers were often carried out in isolation from the communities in which they lived. In this period, to think philosophically was to adopt the conventions of an applied mode of reflection. Each philosophy referred to a way of life that was embedded in a particular discourse and set of practices. In some cases, these practices were sustained and passed on by a philosophical school, within which the way of life associated with a philosophy could be taught and learned. Here, to be a philosopher was to live the particular way of life developed and cultivated within that school of philosophical thought. As Hadot argues, this often 'implied a rupture' with one's surroundings, a 'rupture between the philosopher and the conduct of everyday life'. This break with daily life was 'strongly felt by non-philosophers' and 'in the works of comic and satiric authors, philosophers were portrayed as bizarre, if not dangerous characters'.[11]

The deliberate isolation of the philosopher did not necessarily signify the philosopher's personal or moral rejection of the world. It was not the result of a social critique through which the philosopher hoped to demonstrate by experiment and through example that another form of social life was possible. Characteristically, the philosopher's isolation was based on the philosopher's love of wisdom, a love that was combined with the conviction that wisdom is not a thing of this world. It was the love of wisdom that made the philosopher a stranger in society.

Each philosophical school preached its own form of life that would presumably allow its members to reach the elevated state of having achieved access to wisdom. To achieve wisdom, in other words, the philosopher or sage would learn to live in

the world differently and relate to it differently in order to see it differently. From the philosopher's perspective, daily life as lived by those in the surrounding community must necessarily appear abnormal. This resulted in a perpetual conflict between the philosopher's view of the world, and the conventional, or commonsense, view of those who did not share the philosopher's vision. Strategies varied, ranging from those adopted by philosophers who refused the world of social convention seeking a total break from society, to those who tried to live within social convention, but in a more 'philosophical' manner. As we outline below, these strategies involved various practical exercises in self-control and contemplation. Ancient philosophy was not pursued then, as an abstracted, intellectual exercise. Both the theoretical and practical dimensions of ancient philosophy were closely interrelated. The pursuit of wisdom entailed something more profound and far reaching than the production of knowledge (where the latter is a distinctly modern preoccupation). The pursuit of wisdom took the form of a series of practical, personal adjustments in how the philosopher would relate to the world.

The Hellenistic schools

The way of life practised by each Hellenistic school, along with its accompanying conception of philosophy, varied widely. Of the four schools founded in Athens, by far the most influential, as we have indicated above, was Plato's Academy. As an institution it lasted several hundred years, and as a philosophy it continues to influence us even now. Hence Whitehead's famous description of the European philosophical tradition as 'a series of footnotes to Plato'.[12]

The Academy was originally conceived as an intellectual and spiritual community in which its members would learn to reorient themselves towards what is 'good'. This would involve the transformation of all involved. While members of Plato's Academy were intended to play a role in political affairs, it was believed that they must first learn to govern themselves in ideal conditions (that is, in isolation from the city state, the political unit of ancient Greek society), before taking on political responsibilities. Disciples were trained in part through a debating technique known as dialectics, where one interlocutor would defend a thesis such as "Can virtue be taught?" from attack by an interrogator. This was not simply a form of intellectual combat. It was a regulated activity, requiring that the interlocutors both agreed upon and submitted themselves to rules of conduct and argument. The point of dialogue was not to achieve a definitive conclusion, but to teach the interlocutors to live philosophically, establishing connections between their own thoughts and external conduct.

By contrast, members of the Lyceum associated with Aristotle were engaged in a more theoretical mode of enquiry. This was not geared towards the preparation of citizens expected to play an active role in political affairs, but was devoted to a form of life that was intended to liberate the mind from all worldly distraction.

Available to a select few, the philosophical life could be realised 'only in leisure and in detachment from material worries'.[13] Even under these conditions, pure contemplation was expected to be a rare achievement. Hence most of the philosopher's activity was geared towards attaining it, subordinating everything to the pursuit of knowledge and its contemplation. Again, this was an activity involving dialogue, where the discussion of problems was more important than any solution that might be arrived at, since the process of enquiry itself developed those habits that were deemed essential to the formation of the philosopher.

The Stoic and Epicurean schools were more dogmatic, in that they were based around a number of fixed doctrines and sayings that members were expected to learn, meditate upon and defend. Again, these traditions were intended to produce an effect on the philosopher which brought each disciple into alignment with the way of life practised by members of that school. Epicureanism claimed to be able to deliver its members from suffering so that they might be able to experience pleasure. Genuine pleasure was considered difficult to come by since we are distracted from it in life by a range of false pleasures that are, by definition, incapable of ever satisfying the desire for pleasurable experience. Epicurean pleasure was hence defined as the absence of hunger, thirst and cold, and as such, is a condition we must learn to appreciate under the guidance of Epicurean philosophy. It can only be enjoyed once we have limited our appetites, 'suppressing desires which are neither natural nor necessary, and limiting as much as possible those which are natural but not necessary' since the latter 'may result in violent and excessive passions'.[14] Unsurprisingly, the Epicurean school reserved the right to define which desires are acceptable, and which are to be avoided.

Stoicism operated rather differently, working not towards the pursuit of pleasure, but towards one's alignment with what is 'good'. Viewing the universe as largely indifferent to the plight of human beings, Stoics sought to develop a practical attitude that allowed the philosopher to happily consent to things beyond one's control, to all the accidents and setbacks that life throws up. It sought instead to focus on the one thing considered within one's control, which was the purity and consistency of one's intentions. This philosophical school taught a form of self-inspection designed to align everything one did or thought with this moral mission.

The philosophical schools of Scepticism and Cynicism had no formal organisation or philosophical dogmas, but were defined by their attitudes to life. The Sceptics argued that all human judgements are in error one way or another, and that we must suspend judgement in order to achieve peace of mind. They used philosophy as a way of purging themselves of all systems of judgement, including those associated with philosophy. Presumably, this would enable Sceptics to live a simple, calm and composed existence, since they would be unable to judge any single event in one's life to be better than any other. This was a philosophical way of life that enabled Sceptics to face all events, both happy ones and sad ones, with equanimity.

The Cynics were equally radical in their aspiration to reject what they considered doubtful. Theirs was a more rebellious (and to the modern mind, entertaining) existence however, since they focused instead on the arbitrary nature of all social constraints and conventions. Cynics opposed the world in which they found themselves, not through argument, but through an embodied, militant philosophy that subverted social norms. Diogenes, their most famous representative, is best known for disgracing his fellow Athenians by performing in public acts which most would prefer to keep private, namely masturbation and defecation. He lived on the street, begging and then berating any would-be benefactors. He was ungrateful, confrontational and shameless. Like the Sceptics, the Cynics operated without fixed institutions and were defined more than any other philosophical tendency by their distinct attitude to life and divergence from civilised existence. Cynics would ridicule social niceties and traditions by ignoring them, thereby demonstrating the arbitrary nature of those traditions and the possibility of living differently.

The strangeness of ancient philosophy

Ancient philosophies took on the rather exacting task of creating an entire way of life. They were far more ambitious in this sense than most modern academic forms of philosophy. To achieve this aim they were highly restrictive, where the dogmas and principles of each school were generally not open to debate. To adopt a philosophy, as Hadot put it, was to 'choose a school, convert to its way of life, and accept its dogmas'.[15] Discussion mostly occurred at a secondary level, leaving the central doctrines and practices of each philosophical school relatively untouched. That a philosopher would willingly adopt dogmas and forms of conduct that were to remain unquestioned looks peculiar to the modern eye. In many other respects, the traditions of ancient philosophy are very alien to us now. For this reason, Hadot argues, the philosophical works of antiquity 'almost always perplex the contemporary reader' who criticises them 'for their bad writing, contradictions, and lack of rigor and coherence'.[16] These modern reproaches are often, however, the product of a basic misunderstanding concerning the functions these philosophical works served.

In antiquity written philosophical texts performed a function that was subservient to oral instruction, where they were no substitute for direct engagement with an accomplished philosopher. They were intended, moreover, to be read aloud and so retained 'the starts and stops, the hesitations, and the repetitions of spoken discourse'. Indeed, how a text sounded was just as important as its philosophical rigour. These texts were designed to complement a philosophical education that was chiefly oral, where writing was 'only an aid to memory, a last resort' that would 'never replace the living word'. The literary productions of philosophers were sometimes little more than an 'extension or echo of their spoken lessons'.[17]

Here they reflected the various teaching methods adopted by the philosophical school in which the lessons took place. They could, for example, take the form of a dialogue in which a question is posed and then answered with reference to various general principles adopted by the school. For this reason, as Hadot argues, 'different works written by the same author' are not 'necessarily coherent on all points because the details of the argument in each work will be a function of the question asked'.[18] Another textual approach would be to discuss the meaning of a previous text through lengthy commentaries on it. The practice of textual interrogation could be seen as a model, later taken up and transformed by medieval scholasticism to which we return in Chapter 4. Crucially, these works were not intended for a general audience. They were designed to shape into a way of life the members of the particular philosophical school. These texts were written not so much to inform the reader but to form him.

These approaches to writing may appear strikingly odd when viewed across the long historical distance that separates us from the ancient world. But the literary traditions of recent philosophy are perhaps just as peculiar. The dominant literary form of contemporary philosophy – the academic paper contributed to a professional journal – has indeed been described as the 'most eccentric latecomer of all philosophical genre forms'.[19] That philosophical thought has willingly confined itself to single slabs of writing, the academic paper, with all its structural, stylistic, topical and hence intellectual constraints, is indeed one of the most remarkable and noteworthy of all the uncontested assumptions that make up contemporary academic discourse. It imposes its own restraints on what can be thought and done, but unlike ancient philosophy, the constraints of modern philosophy are rarely acknowledged.

In the next chapter we explore two traditions of ancient philosophy and education, paideia and praxis, which have appealed to modern thinkers. Here we investigate the continued attraction of ancient philosophy taken as a source of alternative ways of thinking and alternative practices. For this reason, we depart at points from the chronological sequence of this book and reflect on present-day educational problems and how they have been related and contrasted to previous ways of thinking and being. Switching in this way between present-day commentaries and ancient philosophies will exemplify how conceptions of the past are always invested by the concerns of the present.