A Situated Philosophy of Education

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Philosophy of education today is broadly divided between two fundamentally different views about the nature of philosophy itself. This meta-debate is almost never engaged directly, and yet it is exemplified in one way or another in many of the paradigmatic disagreements we have with one another. One view is typified by Thomas Nagel's phrase, "the view from nowhere": on this account, philosophy's virtue as a mode of inquiry is its distanced objectivity, its commitment to timeless standards of argument and reason, and its recurring attention to fundamental questions of truth, value, and meaning that establish continuity across philosophers from before Socrates to the present day.[1] The other view is a radically historicized account of philosophy as the expression of worldviews within a particular cultural and historical context, always partisan and implicated in social dynamics of power, and merely contingent in its ability to persuade or compel assent — there is nothing "timeless" about it.

Few espouse these views in such extreme forms, but we believe they will be basically familiar to all. Our project here is to sketch a broadly pragmatist alternative to this dichotomy, as other pragmatists, like John Dewey, have tried to do. But our view is not Deweyan in character, although it is beholden to him, Richard Rorty, and other scholars in that tradition.

Our version of the pragmatist argument is to start with the idea of a *practice*. The activity of philosophizing is one such practice. A practice is a socially established, cooperative human activity that has normative standards that govern its activity, and which is adapted to local contexts and innovations over time. All practices are situated — that is, they are carried out by particular people, under particular conditions of place and time, in particular prototypical ways that are deemed "proper" by the norms of the practice itself. Sometimes, though not always, practices are situated in formal institutional contexts that are designed to support and sustain those practices; sometimes, though not always, practices are professionalized and subject to the regulation of formal organizations or guilds. But whether through such formal mechanisms or not, practices must contain within them, as part of their operations and norms, processes for initiating and orienting new practitioners into the practice — they are self-reproducing. This persistence of a practice over time, even as some of the particular activities of the practice might evolve and change, is itself a constitutive element in a practice. It would be a contradiction in terms to identify a practice that was only carried out by a small number of people for a very short period of time (not all human activities, therefore, are practices).

This conception of practice is useful for us because it embeds the ideas of education and reproduction into the conception of a practice itself; indeed, on our

view, the normative structures of a practice need to be understood not only as the regulative principles that facilitate the conduct of the practice in a particular place and time, but also as the conditions that allow that practice to be taught, learned, and mastered by new participants in the future. Without those, a practice will die out.[2]

Considering philosophy as a situated practice, then, focuses immediate attention on how people do philosophy, and on the ways in which it is done by particular people, under particular conditions of place and time, and in particular prototypical ways that are deemed proper by the norms of the practice itself. This framework clarifies both the non-arbitrary elements that provide continuity to the practice of philosophy, as well as the contingent manner in which those elements are interpreted and applied in real-world contexts. By and large, today, philosophy is a highly institutionalized and professionalized discipline, carried out by academics working in universities. To be sure, ordinary people in all sorts of circumstances do thinking that can be considered philosophical — but almost none of what they do is preserved or added to the record of what is counted as "philosophy." That record is controlled almost entirely by university programs, journal and book publishers, conferences, and professional organizations that apply the label "philosophy" to work that they deem of sufficient merit and importance to deserve to be discussed and passed along to future generations; they also, not incidentally, control almost entirely the initiation and certification of the next generation of participants into that conversation.

"Situated philosophy," as we are defining it, is philosophy carried out under four broad conditions:

1. It is conducted with a self-critical awareness of its status as a human practice, recognizing how the conditions of that practice facilitate and constrain the content of work that is done.

2. It realizes that it is a practice always carried out by particular people, under particular conditions of place and time, in particular prototypical ways that are deemed proper by the norms of the practice itself.

3. It considers the conditions of reproducing itself as a practice, not as extraneous considerations, but as integral to and constitutive of the nature of its practice.

4. It maintains a keen awareness of the social effects of what is said and written under its auspices.

This characterization of situated philosophy is intended to avoid the previously indicated dichotomy. Situated philosophy is decidedly not the view from nowhere. It is, and recognizes itself to be, a practice always carried out by real, material people in all their imperfections and circumstances. Ambition, insecurity, stubbornness, generosity, competitiveness, aggression, and kindness — all the human virtues and vices are part of its practice. Institutional and professional considerations influence, and sometimes drive, the problems that are identified, the positions that are taken, and the modes of argumentation that are found compelling and those which are not. As philosophers, we might struggle against such influences in ourselves and in our institutional settings because the aspirations to objectivity, open-mindedness, and a

transhistorical continuity in our activities are themselves norms of the practice. But such a struggle is intrinsically, and not only contingently, incomplete. There is a fundamental tension here, one that might be termed "binocularism," both holding and questioning particular views at the same time.[3]

On the other hand, the completely historicized view of philosophy as merely the conventions of belief and value favored by particular groups of people who have the institutionalized power and authority to impose their views on others cannot be maintained (for one thing, it is self-contradictory, since its own claim is apparently not a merely contingent one). Furthermore, not all practices can be sustained over time, and the very persistence of this practice shows that its activities and regulative norms are not merely contingent and arbitrary. It is effective at addressing important and existentially recurrent human problems and concerns. While, on our view, philosophy is certainly implicated in a broader network of social effects, it cannot be understood merely as the sum total of those effects. The continuity of philosophy and its manifest success in attracting and socializing generation after generation into its activities shows that its beliefs and norms are, while not transcendental or universal, certainly generalizable over a very broad range of participants, contexts, and concerns. From the kind of pragmatic standpoint we have laid out here, this means something — in fact, it might be the most persuasive kind of substantiation possible.

To illuminate our way of framing philosophy, consider the following example. In her book, *Cultivating Humanity*, Martha Nussbaum notes with dismay the absence of blacks from graduate programs in philosophy in the United States.[4] A key impediment, it turns out, are required courses in logic. Nussbaum points out that an assumption that blacks "can't do logic" is racist, on the one hand, while the claim that logic is merely "white thinking" seems to rob the discipline of one of its grounding regulative conditions. Is there a way beyond this antinomy?

The view from nowhere says, "Logic is logic." It was not invented by a particular group to exclude other groups; it is the formal condition of any effective argument. All else is rhetoric which, while it may be persuasive, is unreliable as a basis for philosophy. Even those who deny logic must inevitably use it if they seek to disprove its value, and this subjects them to a performative contradiction. While it may be true that certain groups (women, blacks, or whomever) do not like studying logic, are underrepresented in logic classes, or do not perform well in them, this is not the fault of logic *per se*. It is a subject of legitimate concern that these groups are not performing well, but the origins of that problem must be sought elsewhere than in the nature of logic itself.

The totally historicized view says, "What else is new?" It is not only not an accident that logic excludes certain groups; it is the very efficacy of logic (and institutional requirements to study logic, such as in philosophy graduate programs) in excluding those groups that proves its value — for it insures that only people who operate comfortably within the established consensus about what philosophy is and what it is all about can gain access to the degrees, the conference slots, the publishing

venues, and the jobs that define the field. *Of course* logic is inhospitable to the ways of thinking and self-expression of some groups — and if philosophy did not have logic, it would need something else to keep those people out.

A situated view of philosophy would frame the problem in an entirely different way. While not denigrating the value of logic as a regulative norm in the conduct of the practice of philosophy, it would recognize that it is, while important, only one such norm among many — and not necessarily the essential one. It would ask seriously the question about the relative value of requiring such courses, if the effect (for whatever reason) is to systematically exclude whole classes of people. It would self-critically consider how this problem gets interpreted within a larger society that frequently identifies blacks as less intelligent than whites, and would question its own implication in that racist dynamic (or sexist dynamic, and so on). And it would examine the consequences for philosophy's own reproduction and permanence as a discipline if it consistently (if unintentionally) biases the population of future practitioners in certain ways. On our view, to repeat, these program requirements are not merely contingent professional or educational considerations, extraneous to the essence of what philosophy is — these requirements reveal and enact what philosophy is, and must be understood as such.

What such a self-critical analysis and reflection on the problem might yield is something we cannot predict here: it would be the natural result of real, actual deliberation within the broader community of philosophy. How is logic being taught, and by whom? How essential are certain course or program requirements, balanced against other considerations? And so on. This will involve tradeoffs and balancing judgments that are inherently imperfect and do not have clearly right or wrong answers. But that is just the point of a situated practice.

For philosophy of education, we believe, the significance of this reconception would be fundamental. We are continually tossed between the ideas that we are all philosophers who only happen to apply our tools to educational problems, or that we are educationists seeking a philosophical underpinning for issues of policy and practice to which we feel commitments on other grounds.

Instead, let us return to the four aspects of situated philosophy we discussed previously: It is self-reflexive, recognizing how its conditions and circumstances of practice influence the content of the work that is done. It is particular, reflecting the unique contexts, cultural influences, identities, and spaces that bind and frame it. It consciously considers the conditions of its own reproduction over time. And it attempts to measure and weigh its effects, the social repercussions of the texts and ideas it produces.

What then would situated philosophy of education look like? First, we would look at the conditions of our own practice: the academic and nonacademic settings in which our work is done. We would look at our professional societies, like the Philosophy of Education Society (PES). Did you know that the original purpose of the designation of "Fellow" in PES was to distinguish academic professional members from other educationists (amateurs) who might want to join and attend

meetings of the society — but would not be allowed to vote or hold office? We would look at our journals, who does and does not publish in them, and how our selection and review processes, while perhaps fair and reasonably conducted, practically speaking exclude whole classes of people from ever writing or expressing their concerns there. Again, this does not make these processes "bad" (any more than such considerations make logic necessarily "bad"), but a situated philosophy of education ought to subject them to occasional reexamination.

Second, we would ask questions about the who, when, where, and how of what we officially designate as philosophy of education. These assumptions, we hope it is clear, are recursive and self-confirming. They operate in such a way as to determine, in large measure, who gets to be part of the conversation about what philosophy of education is — and, being among those selected, who are more likely then to consider those definitions and boundaries to be perfectly reasonable (because they were the ones authorized to participate under them). It is not impossible to stand outside that self-reproducing dynamic and ask questions about who or what topics are not represented in our programs, journals, organizations, or conferences — we have such conversations all the time. But what is very much harder to do is reexamine (and still harder, to change or abandon) those very conditions of our practice that create those exclusions, and thereby (speaking frankly) put at risk the benefits *to us* of maintaining those boundaries, even as we worry about them.

Third, we would examine the educational and reproductive processes by which we train, initiate, and socialize new participants, which happens almost entirely in graduate programs in a handful of North American, British, Australian, and New Zealand universities. An additional phase happens in professional societies like this one. And while we continually remark on the incredible diversity, talent, and virtues among our newer members, the fact is that from an external point of view they appear quite homogeneous, strongly socialized into the norms of our practice, and by and large thoroughly professionalized in their orientation to the field. Again, this is not bad — it is what we do; it is in one sense our *raison d'être*. But it has consequences, and effects.

Fourth, we would need to examine those effects: our practice, like any practice, has significant consequences for others not directly part of our tribe. Moral philosophy has a rich vocabulary for the various direct and indirect effects, unintended consequences, moral luck, and double effects that branch out from our choices and actions; some are foreseeable, some are not. But one of the primary requirements of a view of philosophy (or philosophy of education) as a situated practice is to reflexively examine these effects as considerations intrinsic to what we are doing and how we are doing it. For instance, the institutional conditions of our practice create status differences among participants — or potential participants — in our conversations. When we aspire to include school personnel, policy makers, researchers in other fields, and so on into our philosophical conversations, where and how we engage in philosophical discourse (our methods of inquiry, questioning, critical reflection, and dialogue, which we take so much for granted) have material effects on the nature and possibility of such engagements. It is not just a matter of

having others at the table — we must also, so to speak, ask who built the table, where it is located, how it is tilted, and so on. We need to ask how philosophy is done around a seminar table at the university; how it is done in an elementary classroom, sitting on undersized chairs; how it is done in a living room, or even better, around a kitchen table; how it is done over a round of beers at the pub. And if we think "philosophy is just philosophy," regardless of where, when, and among whom it happens, then we have not thought enough. Plato's *Symposium,* and most of the other Platonic dialogues, go out of their way to specify where, when, and among whom a particular exchange is happening. Why did Plato do that, if it were not philosophically relevant?

The challenge to a situated philosophy of education is to reflect critically on the institutional contexts and customs that implicitly define and direct much of what we do — to ask how they affect the problems we choose, the styles of reasoning we adopt, our vocabulary, and our discursive practices. Philosophy is something that we *do*, and we are always doing it in a particular way that is not a given; it might be otherwise.

The approach we sketch here has a number of fairly radical implications. But we do not claim that these are unprecedented insights; we have learned from Dewey, Rorty, Nancy Fraser, and many others. Jim Giarelli offered a similar idea several years ago in his conception of "philosophy *as* education" (instead of "philosophy *of* education" or "philosophy *and* education").[5] Like any other practitioners, we consciously stand in a continuous lineage of experiments, innovators, successes, and failures from which we have learned. And, also, consistent with our approach, we are trying to think seriously about the implications and consequences of what we are proposing here, if adopted as a more general framework of practice. No position is insulated from such interrogation, and certainly not ours. This is not the view from nowhere.

One radical implication of this argument is an inversion of the typical relation seen between philosophy and philosophy of education. Rather than regarding our field as an applied (and on some views, inferior) subdiscipline of "real" philosophy, we ask how philosophy of education can illuminate the significant educational dimensions underlying major philosophical problems. Moral philosophy cannot be simply an examination of what it is right or wrong to do, without asking whether and how it is possible to foster the development of people who will think and act that way. Epistemology cannot be simply the examination of truth conditions or criteria of warrant, understood entirely apart from considerations of how people learn to interpret and apply those standards. Critical thinking is not just a set of analytical skills and tools, but also a set of emotional conditions and dispositions toward enacting them. How do these get formed, and sustained? Political liberalism is not just a set of abstract principles and norms, but the actually achieved areas of overlapping consensus that capable citizens learn to pursue and establish. In each of these areas, and others, mainstream philosophers have been moving toward more dispositional and virtue-based understandings; and with these moves, educational and developmental questions have gone from the periphery to the heart of

philosophical problems. Is this all of philosophy today? No. Is this shift uncontested? Of course not. But we take it as an encouraging sign that these ways of thinking about philosophy, grounded in quite ancient understandings and traditions, have reemerged more recently. It is a consequence of just the sort of practice-based understanding we suggest here to expect that good ideas will recur and that more workable practical solutions to problems will have a kind of persistence over time.

Another radical implication of our account is to change the dynamic of philosophy of education and the concerns of educational research, policy, and practice. A longstanding debate within philosophy of education is about whether we ought to hitch our problem definitions and questions more self-consciously to prevailing issues and public debates about education. It is argued, quite rightly, that an overly rigid application of that principle could have the effect of artificially constraining freedom of inquiry and the exploration of myriad questions that may not have immediate or apparent "relevance." But by hewing too closely to the *laissez-faire* model, we suggest, the field has marginalized itself — and this is not a merely professional or strategic consideration, we are saying, but a substantive one that has often removed from our deliberations the practical considerations that not only ground the relevance of our concerns, but actually give them a certain kind of structure and substance.

And this leads to a third radical implication. Rather than assuming the vocabulary of an applied discipline (as Giarelli points out), applying philosophical tools to educational problems, perhaps we ought to invert the order of things, beginning with concrete and richly detailed case studies and examples, and drawing philosophical insights from the analysis of those particulars. The subtlety of those analyses comes not from philosophical cleverness alone, but from the far deeper subtlety and complexity of the world as we find it — perhaps especially the world of education and the endlessly difficult formal and informal settings in which we try to help young people gain the knowledge and capabilities of becoming successful adults. Such grounded investigations would provide limitless material for philosophical (and interdisciplinary) analysis and reflection. There are many good examples of work done in this general vein. Nussbaum's *Cultivating Humanity* is one such type of study, in which she begins the argument in conversation with students and institutions around the country, investigating the problems of liberal arts education and its moral meanings and deriving from those investigations her moral and educational argument. Another example is Stacy Smith's *The Democratic Potential of Charter Schools*, a study situated in observations and engagements inside charter schools, with charter school educators.[6] Ken Howe has for years blended the empirical with the philosophical in his analysis of arguments on equality and schooling.[7] Robert Floden's recent Philosophy of Education Society Presidential Address made a similar point in the context of engaging empirical educational research.[8] Cris Mayo explores gay-straight alliances in schools and builds her analysis out of those scenarios, in conversation with local participants.[9]

Finally, a fourth implication: another virtue of this approach is to enforce a certain kind of philosophical honesty. We spend far too much time, in our view,

preaching to educators about what they can and should be doing in their work, without fully appreciating the impediments and very real risks such activities would subject them to in schools as they exist today. We imagine utopian alternatives of grand style and imagination, which are totally disconnected from any conditions of practice that could conceivably sustain them. We readily attack the failures and hypocrisies of educational practice in other venues, without considering the profound contradictions of our own practice — or following through on the implications of such reflection to recognize the constraints and difficulties that make all situated practice a compromised and imperfect affair. There is, and must be, a certain recalcitrance to practice, and we are always subject to it; we cannot simply make it up as we go along, or radically transform it to align with some abstract vision of what it might be.

Our defense has always been that it is our very distance from the daily concerns of policy and practice that gives us the independence to critique and to imagine radically different alternatives. We are the gadflies, the visionaries, the stubbornly irrelevant (and irreverent) voices we think education schools and the wider field of educational policy and practice so desperately need. And all of that is true. But a wholesale conception of our professional endeavor around such principles will marginalize — and is marginalizing — our voices. It is costing us jobs, as more and more education programs decide that subsidizing a resident gadfly is a luxury they can no longer afford. With a few prominent exceptions, our concerns and voices are completely absent from national debates.

It is imperative, we believe, that we adopt a more engaged, collaborative, and interdisciplinary understanding of what it means to *do* philosophy of education today. Of course, as we have noted, many individuals are already working in this vein — but we are addressing a deeper and more constitutive reflection on the way we think about and represent our field itself. By the same token, however, we must emphasize that the situated perspective we are arguing for is not the One Best Approach to philosophy of education, or some kind of moral or political imperative. Clearly we think it has merit, especially judged against some of the dichotomous debates that have characterized the field; but there could not be an authoritative argument that this is the way things must be, if we are to remain consistent.

What we are urging, then, is not just a return to old debates about practicality and relevance — although we think those debates will always be necessary, maintaining a healthy dialectic between theory and practice, between abstract and applied, between ivory tower and field-based perspectives. Let us have those debates by all means. Our concern has been to reframe the purpose and value of those debates, not as merely professional concerns, but as raising fundamental and constitutive questions about the nature of our practice itself. The how, when, where, and who of philosophy of education ought to be matters of more serious and sustained attention, and the Philosophy of Education Society ought to engage those questions more directly, more systematically, and more self-critically than it has usually done.

1. Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

2. See also Paul Smeyers and Nicholas C. Burbules, "Practice: A Central Educational Concept," in *Philosophy of Education 2005*, ed. Kenneth R. Howe (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005). The account here is indebted to, but differs significantly from, Alasdair MacIntyre's view of practice; see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

3. Nicholas C. Burbules, "2001: A Philosophical Odyssey," in *Philosophy of Education 2001*, ed. Suzanne Rice (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2002).

4. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

5. James Giarelli, "Philosophy, Education, and Public Practice," in *Philosophy of Education 1990,* ed. David Ericson (Normal, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1991).

6. Stacy Smith, *The Democratic Potential of Charter Schools* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001).

7. Kenneth Howe, *Understanding Equal Educational Opportunity: Social Justice, Democracy and Schooling* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).

8. Robert E. Floden, "When Is Philosophy of Education?" in *Philosophy of Education 2005*, ed. Howe.

9. Cris Mayo, *Disputing the Subject of Sex: Sexuality and Public School Controversies* (Boulder, Colo.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).