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Teaching Western Philosophy: An Anti-Authoritarian Approach

Recently, at a symposium on educational reform, a question was raised about the nature of philosophy instruction, whether or not its pedagogy was in step with progressive-contemporary notions of education (e.g., Dewey's progressive notion of education or Freire's *spiritual* teaching for social justice). Specifically, is philosophy still taught through the traditional methods of lecture and teacher-directed discussion? Immediately I became anxious, because the systematic study of Western philosophy appears, at first glance, *essentialist* in its scope and sequence. To those unfamiliar with the inner workings philosophy's classroom, it is possible to misinterpret both subject-matter and pedagogy in terms that are conservative and authoritarian, and, in the extreme, as was the focus of the conference, to severely misinterpret philosophical pedagogy as virulently oppressive.

Having spent the better part of the day listening to papers warning of the dangers of traditional educational practices, with their foundational store of authoritarian, pre-procedural knowledge, or truth, with a capital "T," it was evident that philosophy instruction was about to be reduced to the "banking model," which, to the detriment of the student, transfers its hallowed and eternal truisms through rote exercises in didacticism. This methodology eschews creative interpretation, excludes the intellectual and emotional autobiography of the student, and precludes the student's involvement in and contribution to the processes of learning. Hence, as the logic runs, the student suffers alienation from the curriculum, and ultimately, from the unique understanding of her burgeoning and developing sense of self-awareness, or selfhood. In this form of education, to incorporate the buzzwords, her experience is one of "subjugation to an authority"; as opposed to a "humane act of dialogue," education becomes an "oppressive form of domestication."

However, I have never viewed the instruction of philosophy, or traditional instruction of any academic subject, for that matter, in such shockingly overwrought, and dare I say, Orwellian terms. Rather, I envisage the instruction process within the philosophy classroom occurring within an open context for thinking, discoursing, and collaborating, where a sense of charity and respect pervades and learning happens amidst a multiplicity of unique epistemological and axiological perspectives, an ensemble of knowledge forms and values. As I see it, pedagogy emerges through two interactive and reciprocal phases: (1) *The Phase of Foundational Knowledge Acquisition, or Discovery*, and (2) *The Phase of Constructive Heuristic Interpretation*, the phase where *Procedural Knowledge* emerges. Teaching philosophy should be conceived in terms of the reciprocal interaction between these two phases as the progressive unfolding of hermeneutic interpretation, always developing and ever-evolving.

It is possible to overcome the tendency to judge philosophical knowledge in elitist, *logocentric* terms, for if we are to trust Russell, philosophy produces no results that are beyond revision, and this includes interpretations of such thinkers as Descartes. For example, what appears as a canonical, absolute, and *essentialist* reading of Descartes' metaphysics, is really an amalgam of

many scholarly perspectives, which has been validated. This interpretation emerges from a communal and historical archive of philosophical knowledge wherein thoughts, beliefs, and opinions cohere within a general system of meaning. Within this archive of communal “truth,” some interpretations or perspectives are simply “more true” than others. Viewing philosophy pedagogy as a heuristic endeavor, granting access to this general store of knowledge is an educator’s first necessary step in the overall processes of doing good interpretive philosophy. Admittedly, the initial phase of instruction stresses the discovery and transmission of knowledge from educator to student, but this phase, and it is a transitional phase in all actuality, is crucial in order to begin the journey. This phase facilitates our way into the hermeneutic “circle,” as Heidegger once stated. If we are to ever hope to eventually refine and reinterpret our general philosophical perspectives, we require a trustworthy inroad.

During the initial phase of instruction we work to master a respected and well-established account of Descartes’ thought and his system, meaning that is available to us from: (1) Descartes’ primary texts (which includes, in this case, examining Descartes’ personal commentary on his philosophy); and (2) a reliable, accredited scholarly interpretation (for in many cases personal commentary by the philosopher is unavailable). Thus, the students are introduced to the primary work as well as the secondary literature that is available as commentary. When teaching the basic and established aspects Descartes’ philosophy, e.g., the notions of metaphysical dualism, the problem of other minds, and arguments for the existence of God, I look to the writings of Cottingham and Kenny, to name but two reputable Cartesian scholars. It would be wrong to ignore these types of interpretations in favor of more radical and inventive readings of Descartes’ philosophy, for this would result in the illogical construction of a straw-man, producing a skewed understanding of things, engendering erroneous and highly flawed readings.

In the second pedagogical phase, the students interpretive abilities are encouraged and nurtured through personal engagement with the material, students begin to experience an evolution in the overall depth of their interpretive powers. Knowledge in this phase is constructed with an emphasis on the student’s personal, imaginative, and rigorous engagement with the philosopher, however, although knowledge in this phase is predominantly procedural, it is always dependent on the foundational knowledge garnered during the initial phase of discovery. The students now begin asking such questions as, “What does this all mean for me?” “Is Descartes correct concerning his view of the world and the human being?” “What type of an effect might Descartes’ philosophy have on our moral, interpersonal relationships?” and other such queries that demand, at this phase, creative interpretation. For example, a student might take the canonical (and correct) interpretation of Descartes and try to move beyond it, speculating on Descartes’ world-view in its connection with human ethical relationships. He might conclude (as did Jon, one of my students, with no previous knowledge of Sartre’s work on interpersonal relationships in *Being and Nothingness*) that a system that embraces closed-off subjects who are at a remove from material reality, which includes other human beings, is an insufficient philosophical view, because it precludes the potential for authentic interpersonal relationships.

However, it must be noted that he's not attempting to dispute our established interpretation of metaphysical dualism that was established, for he requires it for a legitimate scholarly critique of Descartes. Rather, what he is doing in an original manner is creatively and imaginatively considering the logical implications of the philosophy as learned in the initial phases of instruction. Ryle's influential critique of the "ghost-in-the-machine" proceeds along these very lines, emerging from the reciprocal interaction between canonical readings of Descartes and Ryle's visionary, critical, and analytic reading.

To conclude, I share the thoughts of a former student, who never uttered a single word the entire term, even while in her peer-discussion groups. One might conclude that she experienced a sense of alienation from the philosophy curriculum and the material. However, I interpreted her silence in no dramatic manner, without a sense of urgency as an instance of diffidence. She later wrote the following in a letter to me: "I know that I failed in the participation area, but I try to comprehend and analyze before I speak, but I was always listening, *and this class made me reevaluate all of my actions in life!*" With great success, it continues to be my practice to approach students as human beings first, and "pupils" in a secondary capacity only after this initial encounter. I find that this practice fosters an "ethical" climate in the classroom, resulting in a communication and transfer of knowledge that is both honest and respectful.

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