
Introduction

ETERNAL QUESTIONS / PARTICULAR CONTEXTS

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Philosophy comes under attack from the outside (and sometimes from the inside) because it usually fails to reach a final consensus or to resolve many of the central quandaries it formulates. Its questions are “eternal” and its answers seemingly nonexistent. This accusation is not without merit: it is entirely accurate to say that the same questions that teased and tormented the ancient Greek philosophers—questions about the nature of the self, the meaning of justice, the possibilities of knowledge, and so forth—are still very much with us. To some people, of course, the durability of philosophical questions is a credit to philosophy. These questions are “eternal” because they get at what is most important about human life and therefore demand continual reconsideration. Yet, the suspicion persists that these lingering questions discredit philosophy as an enterprise, at least as a way for adults to spend their valuable time. After all, these critics charge, any task that remains uncompleted after more than two millennia of constant activity hardly seems like productive activity. Recall Albert Einstein's definition of insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

In philosophy of education, we have our own “eternal” quandaries: questions about the goals of education, the nature of education in a democratic society, the link between schooling and education, and so forth. Furthermore, our philosophies of education also deeply depend on how we respond to the eternal questions that have vexed the larger philosophical tradition. For example, a final answer, if we had one, about what constitutes a just political regime would clearly be relevant to how schooling is formulated and justified. If these sorts of answers are not forthcoming in the larger enterprise of philosophy, philosophy of education might itself be discredited.

In the face of such worries, I propose two modest conjectures or hypotheses. Evidence for these hypotheses, I believe, is provided by the contents of this issue of the journal. I want to conjecture that, while the questions of philosophy (and philosophy of education) are indeed eternal, in some sense, this is because of the continually changing context in which philosophy occurs. The shifting ground demands that even the most basic questions (e.g., who am I?) must always be revisited. Thus, eternal questions exist not because philosophers are dim-witted (I hope) or because philosophy is unproductive as an activity, but because philosophy is simply trying to hit a moving target. The papers included in this issue show how the particular social

and educational contexts in which we live seem to have recast the eternal questions or given them new significance.

But why bother doing philosophy if the answers it produces are so fleeting and ephemeral? This brings me to my second conjecture: Bringing eternal questions into confrontation with specific problems, contexts, and practical issues, serves to both enrich our comprehension of the specifics of the context *and* of the eternal question at hand. Our understanding deepens, the reach of our intellectual faculties extends, and our wisdom increases, even as final answers are elusive. As a branch of philosophy that must pay close attention to specific contexts and practical issues, philosophy of education is well-suited not only to engage its own eternal questions about education, but also to inform the larger questions that have haunted philosophy from the beginning.

In what follows, I divide the issues in this journal into three “eternal questions.” My grouping is admittedly somewhat arbitrary since many articles would fit under more than one category. I follow the statement of each group’s eternal question with a “possible response,” a type of insight related to the eternal question, which is suggested in each essay. I then describe the contents of the essay. These descriptions will show that specific contexts, issues, and histories are brought into dialogue with the eternal questions in a way that constitutes an intellectually productive exercise.

ETERNAL QUESTION: WHO ARE WE?

Who are we? Possible response: We are fractal selves. Kip Kline begins his 2011 OVPES Presidential Address on a note of discouragement, claiming that philosophy of education has largely failed to actualize a systemic transformation of American schools. It is time, Kline argues, to “imagine a field of philosophy of education that focuses on non-institutional lines of inquiry.”¹ Kline urges philosophers of education to stop trying so hard to influence schooling and to instead focus on the many ways in which human beings develop, change, or become “educated” in the broadest sense. One possible topic that will arise with this new focus, Kline suggests, is the increasing instability of human identity—who we think we are—even as we are embedded in modern institutions that seek to influence and define us. Instead of trying to talk to school teachers, principals, and policy-makers within these institutions, philosophers of education should focus on this question: Who are we now and what are we becoming?

In her response, Kathleen Knight Abowitz admits that, while she is initially attracted to Kline’s invitation for a new focus in philosophy of education, there are several concerns that give her pause. She questions

¹ Kip Kline, “Toward a Post-institutional Philosophy of Education,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 43 (2012): 11.

whether it is true that philosophers of education are increasingly marginalized or whether “transformation” could (or should) be the goal of philosophy of education. Building on Levinas, she argues the relevance is possible, but we must focus on our deep ethical responsibility to respond to the Other. She agrees with Kline, however, that the pressing issue of identity within our postmodern condition would be a fruitful topic for philosophers of education to pursue, outside of the institutional context of schooling.

Who are we? Possible response: We are strangers to one another. Eduardo Duarte’s unique article is an attempt at *parrhesia*, free speech. It seeks to break up the norms surrounding the discourse in philosophy of education in order to not only say something new, but to say something in a new way. It attempts to do something new by doing something old, that is, by reintroducing the ancient idea of philosophical poetry. The poem stresses the importance of asking ontological questions in educational encounters: Who am I and who are you? These are the questions (eternal questions) that initiate both philosophy and education. Education and philosophy begin as we see ourselves, and everything around us, as strangers. New forms of philosophy (such as that embodied in Duarte’s article itself) help us to see the old as new and the familiar as strange, thus spurring us on to philosophy and education. Duarte accomplishes the paradoxical task of asking an eternal question in an ancient way, yet still saying something new.

Who are we? Possible response: We are philosophers (lovers). Sam Rocha urges us to rethink who we are as educators, and who our students are. He borrows heavily from Dewey, whom he quotes saying, “Any person who is open-minded and sensitive to new perception, and who has concentration and responsibility in connecting them has, in so far, a philosophic disposition.”² Philosophy is simply a disposition that is open to experience, even in domains of everyday, ordinary life. To those who say a disposition does not amount to a philosophic identity, Rocha replies that it is *potentiality* that truly constitutes the philosophic identity. The philosophic identity is by nature an identity involving aspiration and desire, of a consciousness of incompleteness, manifest when we are curious and full of wonder. Philosophy involves striving for an always unattainable and illusive ideal; thus, it is the disposition to philosophy that is most central, rather than the possession of certain traits or attributes. Rocha argues that seeing students as philosophers, in the ancient sense as people disposed to wonder, gives contemporary teachers the humility that is essential to teaching in its richest sense.

Who are we? Possible response: We are the laughing bipeds. Justin York surveys theories of laughter—the superiority theory, the incongruity theory, and the relief theory—and then turns to contemporary work on the

² Samuel D. Rocha, “Who Gets to be a Philosopher? Dewey, Democracy & Philosophical Identity,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 43 (2012): 65.

relationship between laughter and education. To those who see laughter as merely a distraction from the work of learning, York defends the view that laughter in the classroom can sometimes work to foster a sense of community and democracy. This educational laughter, however, must meet certain preconditions. As the traditional theories of laughter point out, laughter can sometimes be an act of superiority and degradation, an act of bullying, which is largely antithetical to democracy. For laughter to function educationally, then, laughter must stem from a proper sense of humor, it must take place in a humane and democratic context, and it must be motivated by an acceptable cause.

Who are we? Possible response: We are part and parcel of Nature.

Christopher Peckover explores the implications of Rousseau's exaltation of "Nature" in education. For Rousseau, education should help to realize the natural self buried within each of us. While admitting that the issue of what is "natural" is complex, Peckover argues that considering again the eternal questions of Rousseau makes us attentive to two contemporary trends affecting children. First, if we care about "Nature," we should worry about standardization, which essentially ignores the individual (natural) curiosities of children. Learning the standardized subjects of schooling—math, reading, science, etc.—is not the goal of education; rather, the goal is to use these subjects in exploration and self-realization. Second, if we care about "Nature" as Rousseau did, we should be concerned about the lack of exposure children have to the natural world. Education should enable self-realization, becoming what we are, and this must involve seeing our connectedness and dependence of the natural world. Natural education, for Peckover, ultimately means using the tools of the mind to investigate your connections to the places that surround you.

Who are we? Possible response: We are what we reject. Benjamin Kearsal employs theories of "incorporation" and "abjection" to understand the workings of "official knowledge," particularly as such knowledge appears in high school American history textbooks. Kearsal first outlines several ways in which textbooks incorporate the selective tradition of history in order to establish "official knowledge." These ways include: textbook sales strategies focused on adoption states, the reprinting of similar passages across time, the concealing of the debate about what to include in textbooks (which makes knowledge seem natural and uncontested), and the avoidance of discussions of crises that call into question national logic. Meanwhile, theories of "structures of feeling" and "ideological quilting" help us to understand why we accept ideological formulations in textbooks: "they predictably tell us who we are."³ The theory of abjection, which discusses the outcast, explains our uneasy

³ Benjamin Kelsey Kearsal, "The Incorporation and Abjection of Official Knowledge," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 43 (2012): 98.

reaction to textbooks. Like a corpse or excrement, textbooks conceal the violence of incorporation and they make us uncomfortable with who we are. They are parts of ourselves that we have rejected. Textbooks are the abjection (they are the product of our disassociation of our current selves with our past selves, which makes them “safe”) and the abject (e.g., in failing to mention continuing discrimination). As Kearl’s essay demonstrates, asking the question, “Who am I?” within the context of contemporary textbooks leads to unexpected answers.

ETERNAL QUESTION: WHAT CAN WE KNOW?

What can we know? Possible response: Enough to make democracy meaningful. Tony DeCesare takes on the famous “problem of knowledge” and its relationship to politics using the famous “Dewey and Lippmann Debate” as a resource. Dewey and Lippmann, DeCesare says, offered differing conceptions of the possibility of competent self-government in an increasingly complex world. Lippmann believed that society was becoming too complex for popular self-government and that experts would necessarily play a larger role in administering the modern state. In contrast, while Dewey believed that experts were necessary, he thought that their primary role should be to educate citizens about the great issues of the day. With the help of experts (e.g., climate scientists), citizens could be competent to make decisions about policy (rather than, say, have climate scientists making decisions themselves). Experts give information rather than prescribe solutions. Furthermore, the public guides the experts in their inquiry and energy. DeCesare seems to favor Dewey’s view because it preserves a more robust democracy. Education can do certain things to facilitate the sort of social engagement that is necessary for popular government to be a viable option. Schools should cultivate the habits of mind essential to democracy, and they should be places that allow for local participation—something necessary for democracy to be learned and practiced.

What can we know? Possible response: We know best what is local. Similar to DeCesare, Kevin Currie-Knight is concerned with the knowledge problem, the worry that understanding the complexities of modern life is beyond the scope of individual human comprehension. Currie-Knight builds on Friedrich Hayek’s criticisms of certain forms of socialism, where there is a centralized decision maker who allocates resources, labor, and commodities. Hayek made, to many, a compelling case that centralized control of the economy is a bad idea: the knowledge of what products and labor are needed where and when, and the knowledge of who can best meet these needs, depends on a thousand local factors that a centralized distributor would be unable to grasp. The free market, where many small, local decisions are being continuously made over time, possesses a sort of “wisdom” about distribution that a centralized bureaucracy cannot. Currie-Knight turns this central idea into a critique of centralizing trends in education. As we move toward national standards, much of the local knowledge—the needs, desires, and characteristics

of individual children in their families and local communities—will be lost. Currie-Knight points out that this worry spans the political spectrum. This suggests that the larger questions about knowledge raised by Hayek are fruitfully applied to the particular issues involved in educational authority.

What can we know? Possible response: We know more than modern scientism allows. Angela Hurley argues that human beings possess an understanding that transcends the logical and empirical methods bequeathed by Enlightenment materialism. Notions of spirituality and of the sacred, Hurley argues, are currently ignored in serious intellectual life and in education. There is a part of us that longs to make connections between ourselves and the world, between what we can see and what is hidden, between facts and values, between our minds and hearts. An education that promotes the acquisition of facts and data, but ignores this connective or “spiritual” enterprise, would be devoid of real human meaning. The solution, for Hurley, is a curriculum “that allows students to examine diverse and perhaps conflicting notions of the spiritual or the sacred, along with, and through, the great works of literature and art that give symbolic expression to the human condition.”⁴

What can we know? Possible response: We can know because we are embedded in history. Growing out of his ethnographic work with forcibly removed Afrodescendent rural peasant river communities in Colombia, Stephen Nathan Haymes seeks a phenomenology that would enable him to get at lived social reality, a reality that exists beyond social construction imposed by concepts or languages. Namely, he seeks to give a “real” account of how “victims of violence struggle to reconstitute a moral life out of circumstances that attempt to diminish the reality of their lives.”⁵ He considers how phenomenology might approach the sociological study of collective memory, settling on genetic phenomenology from the late Husserl. This approach sees the moral life-world as constitutive and, understood as a community, holds reality across generations. Social events have a reality that we can access through a phenomenological approach that places events into their historical appearances. These histories of things experienced together give events a social reality that are not simply reduced to linguistic conventions or social constructions. This analysis suggests a possible framework for other sorts of social research, including educational research.

HOW SHOULD WE LIVE TOGETHER?

How should we live together? Possible response: According to the overlapping consensus. In the Phil Smith Lecture, Barry Bull seeks to apply the

⁴ Angela Hurley, “A Yearning for Wholeness: Spirituality in Educational Philosophy,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 43 (2012): 126.

⁵ Stephen Nathan Haymes, “Memory, Reality, and Ethnography in a Colombian War Zone: Towards a Social Phenomenology of Collective Remembrance,” *Philosophical Studies in Education* 43 (2012): 127.

principles of liberal democracy, particularly the political liberalism developed by John Rawls, to higher education. Bull argues that there are four principles growing out of an “overlapping consensus” that should govern how we think about education: Personal Liberty, Democracy, Equality of Opportunity, and Economic Growth. Because of age differences and because of the specific mission that universities have to undertake research, these principles have different implications for higher education than they do for primary education. Among other things, the liberal state has a responsibility to grant higher education opportunities to all interested and deserving young adults, to ensure that there are options in higher education for those who have different conceptions of the good (particularly unpopular conceptions), to protect academic freedom, and to give young adults greater control over the type of education they receive. It is also important that the liberal state remember that higher education institutions themselves are voluntary associations of the type strongly protected by liberal theory.

While sympathetic to Bull’s vision of higher education, Bruce Kimball asks questions about the Rawlsian political liberalism that underlies Bull’s analysis. For example, he asks questions about the tension between the early Rawls and the later Rawls, and about the tension between the normative and descriptive elements of Rawls’s later work. Questions could also be asked about the implications of Bull’s approach for particular policy questions in higher education, such as affirmative action, funding priorities, commercialization of research, and so forth. Bringing questions of justice into the particular context of higher education, Kimball argues that Bull’s framework could prove remarkably productive.

How should we live together? Possible response: As pluralistic meliorists. Daniel Narey argues that some political philosophers, including John Dewey and Jürgen Habermas, have placed too much emphasis on commonality and consensus in democratic politics. Such commentators devalue the richness that uniqueness, dissensus, and plurality bring to democratic life. Building on the work of Sharon Todd, Narey argues for a conception of democracy that recognizes human uniqueness and a conception of pluralism that transforms moral distinctions of “right” and “wrong” into political distinctions of “us” and “them.” When this democratic pluralism is synthesized with the meliorism of William James, Narey argues, we can come to see democratic engagement in terms of continually shifting political alliances (changing categories of “us” verses “them”) aimed at resolving specific issues and problems, rather than through the terms of static political identities or unchanging ideals. Narey ends with the hope that melioristic pluralism would allow for a new flexibility and for new alliances that would promote reinvention and renewal in educational matters.

How should we live together? Possible response: As those who have been properly exposed to academic subject matters. Joseph Watras compares

the views of John Dewey, Boyd Bode, and William Bagley on the place of academic subject matter (e.g., mathematics, history, chemistry, and so forth) in education. Should educators focus on teaching the logical structure of academic subjects, or should they focus on practical tasks, projects, or “occupations”? Dewey believed that subject matter became relevant as a type of tool that could be used as students confront problematic situations in their occupational activities. Academic subjects could enter education, but only as they serve the interests of the student in achieving her occupational goals and of the community in fostering cooperative activity. William Bagley believed that some subject matter instruction could be important in guiding student behavior (e.g., arithmetic), but most subject matters were not so practically relevant. When used properly, though, subject matters could teach socially valuable ideas and increase the richness of the students’ lives. Bode, a prominent philosopher of education at Ohio State University, believed that subject matters were important as ways of understanding human life. Subject matter instruction might not have immediately instrumental utility, but it does allow students to appreciate the world around them. Bode was also aware, though, that subject matters should not be taught as a fixed set of meanings (as Bagley had claimed, and as E.D. Hirsch or others might claim today), but as something where meanings and principles are always in the process of reconstruction. Finally, Bode argued for a reconstruction of student experiences that would give them the opportunity to choose authentic democracy.

RETURNING TO THE CONJECTURES

Each essay in this volume, then, intersects with at least one “eternal question”—a question of ontology, epistemology, ethics, or political philosophy. At the same time, the results of these essays hardly seem stale, the activity hardly unproductive. Perhaps this is best shown in the two showcase essays, Kip Kline’s OVPEP Presidential Address and Barry Bull’s Phil Smith Lecture. Kline looks again to eternal question of human identity, but does so in a new context. It is a context, on the one hand, of technologies of identity—e.g., multiculturalism, consumerism, individualism—that fracture the self, and on the other hand, of a failure of philosophy of education to impact schooling in a substantive way. Kline shows how the failure of philosophy of education alerts us to new possibilities of the fractured self. The current power of modernist schooling, being so resistant to philosophical critique, demonstrates the need for a reconsideration of who we are. For his Phil Smith Lecture, Bull brings Rawlsian philosophy (and its eternal preoccupation with justice) into a previously underexplored context in liberal theory: higher education. The collision between the eternal question and the specific context allows us an opportunity to test our educational institutions, while at the same time testing Rawlsian principles of justice. In this sort of reflective equilibrium, the specific context is enlightened, and the eternal question addressed in a fresh, productive way. We can ask how higher education fares when placed under the scrutiny of

Bull's principles of justice, or how Bull's principles of justice fare when examined under the realities of higher education in modern society. This back and forth between eternal questions and specific contexts is what demonstrates the productivity of philosophy. With this, and the rest of the contents of the journal, philosophy is hereby vindicated. At least for now.
