
Phil Smith Symposium

IS THERE REALLY SUCH A THING AS PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION?

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If the first rule of public speaking is to win the audience's sympathy, then it can be no surprise I am already on the apologetic defensive. My title reminds us that our field is fighting for its life. By formulating this title as a skeptical question, however, implying that it could actually be rational to answer no, I am liable to strengthen the already implacable hand of all the cost-cutting, grant-hungry, novelty-chasing *apparatchiks* who are wiping out our academic positions right and left. In short, raising a question like this transcends bad manners: it seems positively traitorous. What kind of philosopher of education am I?

Or are we—it is precisely this common identity that I would like us together to reconsider. Could the very idea of being a philosopher of education be a self-contradiction? I propose to explain this challenge to who we think we are by sketching out an understanding of education and philosophy that, while coherent, departs from how these terms are currently used. Far from being an arbitrary construction, this revised language is rooted in Georg Lukács's critique of our fragmented, inauthentic practices and Martin Heidegger's portrait of authenticity. According to it, and contra Dewey, philosophy can never provide theoretical support to educational practice.¹ Conversely, education, including that offered by professional philosophers, is a distraction from philosophy. In response to the academy's eradication of philosophy of education, then, I recommend that we acknowledge, without evasion, the reason for this educational institution's hostility to philosophical life and that we affirm the political implications of loving wisdom.

Such a grim thesis might go down better with a whimsical introduction to its argument. Imagine we have encountered intelligent beings on another planet. As we and they start to learn each other's languages, these aliens note that on their world, they use their equivalent of the word "philosophy"—which they have learned from us means "love of wisdom"—and their synonym for "education"—defined as "leading out"—interchangeably. For example, sometimes they will say, "Spock is neglecting his education," and other times, "Spock hasn't been putting much into his philosophy." At which point, it is not hard to imagine, our linguists might

¹ For Dewey's position, see John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916). I discuss his understanding of the relation of philosophy and education in my "Why Aren't Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?," *Educational Theory* 52, no. 1 (2002): 1–11.

protest that Spock's translators have not in fact fully understood what "education" and "philosophy" mean for us.

Why would this be the case? Why is our real world actually opposed to this science-fiction one? Consider how we conceive of education. Roughly speaking, the term refers to a specialized, technical practice, analyzable into similar component practices, that aims to help people acquire knowledge. Education is an activity that is not purely spontaneous or idiosyncratic; it has a history of standardization. By virtue of its focus on enhancing learning, it differs from other practices pursuing other goals. Like many such practices, though, it invites progressive technical organization so that it may achieve its end with the most effective and efficient means possible. Indeed, these means may be sometimes considered themselves practices. We are used to regarding the practice of education as an umbrella term that comprises various sub-specialties such as physical education, higher education, distance education, as well as, of course, philosophy education, all geared to making certain kinds of knowledge available in certain ways to certain kinds of people. A last thing to note is that such an increasingly global, comprehensive, and institutionalized practice requires considerable resources. In the name of education, big money is constantly changing hands.

Although hardly thick, I trust this description is uncontroversial enough. Now I want to suggest that education represents an instance of what Lukács, in the groundbreaking text of critical theory, *History and Class Consciousness*, calls "reification."² This concept grows out of Marx's critique of commodity fetishism, a mode of behavior according to which people mystifyingly treat social relations as relations between things.³ For example, I, the computer I am working on, and this text may be taken for things that stand in relation to each other and still other things according to their exchange value, instead of being considered manifestations of many-handed labor that calls for deliberate organization and cooperation. Lukács examines how this way of behaving expands to affect not only the realm of production but every dimension of human life.

[Commodity fetishism] stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can "own" or "dispose of" like the various objects of the external world. And there is no natural form in which human relations can be cast, no way in which man can bring his physical and psychic "qualities" into play without their being

² See Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 83-222.

³ See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 163-177.

subjected increasingly to this reifying process. We need only think of marriage, and . . . the way in which Kant, for example, described the situation with the naively cynical frankness peculiar to great thinkers. “Sexual community,” he says, “is the reciprocal use made by one person of the sexual organs and faculties of another . . . marriage is the union of two people of different sexes with a view to the mutual possession of each other’s sexual attributes for the duration of their lives.”⁴

No wonder poor Immanuel never made it to the altar. At any event, Lukács elucidates how our individual and communal lives are being increasingly broken down into compartmentalized parts that we buy and sell. What prepares us for this commodifying reification is our subjection to Weberian rationalization, particularly to specialized, nominally scientific sets of causal laws for prediction and control that both place elements of a part of life in systematic relation to each other, and not incidentally to a market that supports them, and cut off this practice from the rest of life. Sex is indeed an illuminating example. Instead of being understood to be something like a quality of people’s lives as a whole, it is commonly treated as a gothic drive that can be mastered only by knowing pleasure seekers equipped with the tools of the trade. The laws recognized by these technicians ground sex on calculable, quantitative measures and thus pave the way for its experiences and props to be assigned their proper cash value. No wonder, then, that some of these experiences may be judged to be not worth lifelong financial support.

This split between fragmenting, commodified, advertised parts of life and a person’s holistic life has formative consequences for each of us. When we compare images of what sex is supposed to be with the sexual life we are each fatefully striving to make something of, we will probably feel that the latter struggle is all the harder, more strange, because it is evidently unrecognized by our culture. In the same way that the worker is alienated from the products, process, and meaning of his work by the capitalist division of labor, so we are each dispossessed of our experiences in general by the way they are represented, and canned, so as to serve the interests of an industry. It is this alienation that characterizes what the Situationist critic Guy Debord calls the society of the spectacle.⁵ In such a society, we are pressed to identify ourselves with the spectacle of reified life surrounding us so that we may pump capital into its business. Who does not want the latest in sexy rags. But every time we turn to check out our outfits in a store window, anxious about whether they are really working as planned, we lose sight of our own non-standard experience of the sexual nature of life—and suffer self-ignorance. Likewise, I

⁴ Lukács, “Reification,” 100.

⁵ See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

am suggesting, every time we fantasize about acing exams, climbing the ladder of grade levels, and then—the big prize—clinching lucrative jobs, we may wonder whether any of this reflects the life of learning we are actually living. Whether the individual and social benefits of education are not costing us our self-understanding.

Of course, for this critique of education as a spectacular reification to be at all plausible, we would have to possess an understanding of the “life” it is a reification of. Otherwise, the term’s opposition to education and other such practices could be merely abstract and empty of content. What else could life be than participation in various practices?

My response to this question diverges from Lukács’s which equates an understanding of holistic life with that of the comprehensive, ongoing history of the social relations that govern the production of life’s necessities. Although I would be the last person to deny the importance of such a sense of history, I find it more plausible to root our sense of life as a whole on a more universal and direct source of insight. Following Heidegger, among others, this is the realization of our mortality. In the famous pages of *Being and Time* that launched existentialism as such, he observes that “the problem of the possible Being-a-whole of that entity which each of us is, is a correct one if care, as Dasein’s [i.e., the human being’s] basic state, is ‘connected’ with death—the uttermost possibility for that entity.”⁶ We experience our existence as a whole when we care about, when we project ourselves toward, our possible non-existence. Heidegger goes on to characterize this possibility as the one that is “ownmost . . . non-relational, not to be outstripped, and certain,” yet “*indefinite* as regards its certainty.”⁷ Death is what most belongs to us; it separates us from others, thus individualizing each of us. Furthermore, there is no evading its certain approach; when it will come, however, cannot be foreseen. For all that, though, death is not something we have to deal with elsewhere in the future; as the very possibility that distinguishes each of us, it is ever-present and here. Now even this cursory summary of Heidegger’s reflections enables us to substantiate Lukács’s distinction. On the one hand, we have various forms of reified experience which are impersonal, comparative, optional, and predictable. Think of how we experience a school exercise. Heidegger designates this mode of existence, “everydayness;” it is ruled by what “they say” and marked by a nervous evasiveness about death.⁸ On the other, we have mortally delimited, personal life, honestly acknowledging anxiety.

As is well known, this dichotomy for Heidegger widens into one between inauthentic and authentic ways of life. Working out the implications of this realization of our mortality, he postulates a call of conscience that awakens us from our false, everyday sleepwalking and directs us to live with the truth of

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 303.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 310.

⁸ See *ibid.*, 296–304.

death in mind.⁹ Indeed, one of the most beguiling achievements of *Being and Time* is how much it is able to suggest an ethics without having any recourse to the traditional language of moral judgment; “ought” appears to grow naturally out of ontology. Without criticizing this line of thinking, I want simply to point out that what is ultimately at stake in the existentialist *prise de conscience* is the classical question of how we should live. In this respect, Heidegger is offering us a kind of “moral orientation,” to employ Charles Taylor’s insightful term, a way of linking an understanding of our nature to an idea of the good for beings of that nature. When we grasp our lives as mortal wholes, we take the first step on the path of the good life illuminated by the ideal of authenticity.

This is a fitting place to introduce a central term of my argument: “wisdom.” I associate the word with whatever serves as an answer to Aristotle’s question of ethics. Approaching this question via Heidegger, however, enables me to emphasize a particular kind of passion that leads us to ask how we should live. My mortal anxiety, accordingly, is bound to grow into worry that everything in my life, particularly those things I treasure, will be taken away and lost. How can I accept this fate? More precisely: is there some way of understanding and living my mortality that would put me at peace with my death? “Authenticity” names one important quality of this way of life, but its meaning is primarily negative since it emerges out of conscientious resistance to inauthenticity. A further step on the authentic path would be to ask whether there is some positive good that I can affirm on condition I am true, rather than false, to my nature. My insight into such a good that calls me to pursue a particular way of authentic life would constitute an understanding of my life’s meaning. Focused on this good and this meaning, I am apt to find my existential anxiety alleviated, since before my life is taken away I would be devotedly giving it away to a calling. The question of ethics approached from the existentialist realization that life is mortal, therefore, is one about the meaning of life. And Monty Python’s gibes aside, this meaning is what I denote by the term “wisdom.”

The central desire of a mortal life is thus for wisdom. This is what I meant when I suggested earlier that life itself has a learning dimension, or even that life *is* learning. Here, once more, the contrast with reified experience is striking. On the one hand, our specialized practices are focused on any number of heterogeneous and partial goods. On the other, the fact that these goods and the means to them can be commodified testifies to their commensurability. For an authentic mortal, though, for someone who is not simply a momentary participant in and supporter of a practice, the object of desire is incomparably vital. His or her very life is a quest for the “hypergood” (borrowing yet another term from Taylor) that is evoked whenever we realize our finitude and care about how to accept it. Whenever, that is, we ask the question of wisdom.

⁹ See *ibid.*, 312–348.

Some of you can guess where I am going. Reified experience, animating and confined to practices like education, flees the realization of death and has no thought for wisdom. It chases instead what Pascal calls, at the dawning of the bourgeois age, “*divertissement*,” “distraction.” To be sure, improved literacy scores may seem like a considerably more consequential and noble goal than an hour of laughs at the comedy club. Nevertheless, we can still ask, literacy for whom? For a cog in a machine or for a mortal being? The latter is distinguished by an overruling need for wisdom. It would seem, then, that I am arguing we mortals are inherently philosophical.

But this is not quite the case. The reason is that I want to insist on a crucial distinction: that between desire and love. As a gloss on what I mean, consider the difference, in a romantic situation, between saying, “I want you,” and saying, “I love you.” In the first scenario, I would be expressing lust and as a thousand and one songs remind us, what has love got to do with that. More generally, desire is normally for something that serves the self, echoing what Freud calls primary narcissism. The beauty that inspires love in the second scenario, however, can move me to self-sacrifice. My declaration commits me to scruple using this person, let alone possessing her. Love transcends the economy of desire.

Contrariwise to how we participate in reified practices, when we realize our mortality, we cannot help but long for wisdom, cannot help but raise questions that speculate, however inchoately, on the existence of wisdom. But this is not yet the philosophical life. Neither is it that of acquiring or possessing wisdom. I rather define philosophy as being focused not on the determination of wisdom but on the conversion of desire for wisdom into love of it. What should ultimately matter for the philosopher, I propose, is not a piece of knowledge, all-important it may be, but the quality of our *relation* to this hypothetical knowledge.

How do we manifest a desiring relation to knowledge? We do so when we sincerely ask a question about the object of that knowledge. Professing ignorance is not enough: I could admit, for instance, that I do not know the name of Madonna’s illegitimate boy, but I could leave my boredom unconcealed. Similarly, asking whether it is Jesus may not count as sincerity. When we truly want to know something, we formulate a question that specifies what we are ignorant of and links this lack, even if only implicitly and unclearly, to something we care about. For example, I might wonder why faith in Christ might challenge us to limit his human origins.

Obviously, there is an infinity of things that we may desire to know. Our focus here is on wisdom. However, simply asking, or echoing someone else asking, “What is the meaning of life?” may not be enough to raise the question of wisdom. If I am not authentically in touch with my death, I could be expressing with these words mere theoretical curiosity. The question becomes mortally urgent only when I articulate it in a way that casts doubt on whatever lulls me into a state of existential security, put otherwise, when it recalls me to my existential exposure. Indeed, the more the question concerns

the actual, concrete supports of life that some particular person takes for granted, rather than meaning in the abstract, the more compelling it is for that person who will, as Heidegger remarks, die as an individual.

This does not mean that questions of wisdom are utterly idiosyncratic. We do tend to rely on the same kinds of things to hide us from the thought of death. Because of this, others can help us articulate questions about them more convincingly. By joining the Great Conversation, to salute Robert Maynard Hutchins's metaphor, by entering into the universal, open-ended, historical discussion of what is important in life, we can start to discern what other things promise to give meaning to our lives. At the same time, we may discover how involved our thinking necessarily is with other, very different people by virtue of its uncontrollably dialectical nature. The conversation that enables me to elaborate the question of wisdom so that it captures the distinctive details of my mortal life also draws me into communion with other wisdom seekers.

It is this musing together which takes place among people and texts that is a pre-condition for love of wisdom. Unlike much of the discourse in education, including that in philosophy education, this kind of conversation does not aim above all to establish and disseminate knowledge. It is not interested in evidence and proof and right answers, except negatively. Philosophical conversation instead aims to make the question of wisdom come to life for as many individuals as possible. It has faith in the Gramscian notion that everyone is a proto-philosopher, not just those who have majored in the subject. In doing so, it gathers these individuals into a community larger than the "disciplinary field."

But what about the question's answer? What sense could it make to ignore the very object of our desire for wisdom? None at all—unless something happens to transform the questioner's desire into a loving relation to the sheer supposition of wisdom. This is the kind of event, the kind of grace, I am intimating, that inspires full-fledged philosophy.

Fortunately, I am reaching the limits of what I can for now think and say clearly just as the clock is running out. With your indulgence, though, I shall conclude with a few wispy leads I hope to follow up on in the future. Earlier, I had characterized this event as a conversion. In this regard, I find Heidegger's example once more suggestive. Students of his work have long identified a break between his earlier writing which, as we saw, examines the nature of human being, of how humans *are* in the world, and his later, which contemplates the nature of being as such. Because unlike Heidegger, I am not engaged in charting out a scholarly history of being, I can perhaps eschew his jargon and redescribe his *Kehre*, his turn, more accessibly for my populist purpose. Think of the turn as one from anxiety about our precarious existence and one toward wonder that anything exists at all. Such a conversion suggests that we might lose our desire for wisdom when we appreciate that the *givenness* of existence in general calls for a gratitude that is prior, in every way, to any fear it will be snatched from our possession. As Spinoza points out, freedom

from the cause of desire renders the object of desire unnecessary: accordingly, once we are sprung from the need to claim our lives, we no longer have a job to give to wisdom. In previous work, I have called this liberating figure of grace, the Present.¹⁰ A more familiar name for it is beauty.

How does the Present reach us? A large part of the answer to this, if not the main part, is that we have to be receptive to it. And my hunch is that fostering such a state of openness is precisely the effect that questions of wisdom have on us. Such questions undermine our tendency to take an order of things for granted; they level obstacles to the appreciation of beauty. We become no longer so sure about what is important and what not. Until one day, some happenstance thing, just as insignificant as everything else, is surprisingly wondrous. Scooting out on the limb a bit further, I could perhaps venture that “being,” in such a setting, does admit of a practical definition. “Being” would be the action of whatever chance thing it is that causes, in the language game of articulating the question of wisdom, our desire to be transformed into love. As in the following example: I was racing down the path to the office, afraid that I had already missed the appointment of my life, when suddenly there *was* an orange-tan deer in the grass and I felt tremendous calm. My desire for the figure of wisdom in this case dissipates not simply because of the deer or its orange-tanness or its juxtaposition with the grass, but because the deer *is*, in the same way as the grass and I and everything else. Next to this being I cannot take for granted, this realization of beauty, this Present, my mortality does not matter. More precisely, my orientation to death that establishes my selfhood is converted to an orientation to being that dissolves all distinctions between me and everything else in the common miracle that things are. I can then devote my life, however brief, to celebrating the lure of wisdom that sets us each up in different ways to receive something else. Where desire for wisdom was, there love of what stages the Present shall be.

Such a conversionary calling, though, is also a commitment to a struggle. My argument cannot be truly complete unless it circles back to the conditions that make it necessary in the first place. We tend to flee our mortality into fragments of canned experience. At the doors to the institutions that support these practices stand all kinds of ticket sellers and conglomerating moguls. Philosophy will be only a slightly hipper show if it does not direct us to change this world; it should not take the *Theses on Feuerbach* to remind us that philosophy entails anti-sophistry. One of the things the love of wisdom ought to press us to do, accordingly, is to look hard at how we *learn* to live inauthentically.

What is philosophy of education? Much of the discourse generated by this question has tried to establish a symbiosis between philosophy and education. I imagine that many of you would not be here if you did not believe in it. I certainly did. But having watched over the course of my career history

¹⁰ See my *Mediumism: A Philosophical Reconstruction of Modernism for Existential Learning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010).

turn against our field, I think it is time we take seriously the likelihood that this symbiosis is a fallacy. Philosophy and education may be really opponents. Lukács and Heidegger help us see why. Education is a reified practice that reproduces a social order governed by the principle of exchange value and exploitation. It is incompatible with the philosophical life of mortal loss and the miraculous Present. As people who have been trying to bring philosophy and education together, with diminishing rewards, we are in a position to understand more profoundly than anyone how sharp is their clash and what, for each realm, is at stake in it. Let us start, then, by facing our own question of wisdom. Which side are you on?
