
Phil Smith Symposium

WHY PHILOSOPHY NEEDS SCHOOL:
RESPONSE TO RENÉ ARCILLA

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Twelve years ago, René asked why philosophers and educators aren't talking to each other.¹ He concluded that the reason for the disconnect hinges on the difference between what philosophy *is* and what education *is for*. Already there, we had a sense of René's concern about the difference between education as an instrumental undertaking and philosophy as a resolutely unproductive undertaking. Whereas education aims to improve and transform, philosophy questions, doubts, unsettles and indeed, un-does. Already there, we had a sense that philosophy resists the reification to which education is susceptible.

In this paper, René takes the argument many steps further. Philosophy ceases to be a matter of questing and is now a matter of recognizing the "miraculous Present" in the face of our mortality. And education is seen to be without redeeming value because it prevents us from confronting the most important and deepest questions of existence. Instead of presenting us with an alternative to the world, educational institutions present us with an even more jumped up version of a world that Heidegger describes at the end of *An Introduction to Metaphysics*: "an age which regards as real only what goes fast and can be clutched with both hands [and] looks on questioning as 'remote from reality' and as something that does not pay, whose benefits cannot be numbered."² What this obsession with measurement and speed misses, writes Heidegger, is "the essential," which is the dimension of time. Heidegger explains here that he is not referring to his book *Being and Time*, but "to a problem," which is our unwillingness to "wait, even a whole lifetime" for the question of Being to present itself.

René concludes his paper with a provocation: "Which side are you on?" In this response, I want to ask whether siding with philosophy against education is even a possibility in the present moment. While it is true that there isn't much room within the present context of schooling for philosophical reflection—or indeed, for any kind of authentic learning—it seems to me that there isn't much room for philosophical reflection anywhere else either. (I take it that René is using "education" broadly to refer to universities as well as

¹ René Vincente Arcilla, "Why Aren't Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?," *Educational Theory* 52, no. 1 (2002): 1–11.

² Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Anchor Books, 1961), 172.

schools). So, in response to René's paper, I'm going to make a somewhat counter-intuitive case not only that philosophy needs schools, but that philosophical reflection is in many ways unthinkable apart from the reified practices of education that René abhors.

I am talking here about schools as they were originally conceived, not as places to prepare people for work, and even worse, as spaces that essentially replicate the world of work, but rather as spaces that sought to free up time for learning.³ In ancient Athens, *scholē* were valued precisely because they did not replicate life. To go to school was to hold the world in abeyance, at least for a time. These first Greek schools also upended the natural order of Athenian society, by releasing the many from the demands of work and drawing the elites away from idleness. This made schools rather suspect from the start, which is probably why school reformers ever since have sought to make schools both less threatening and less strange—more and more like “life” and less and less like “school.”⁴ My argument here is indebted to the profound and radical reevaluation of schools put forward Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons in their recent book, *In Defense of Schools*. This book draws our attention to the aspects of schooling that are most artificial and yet most essential to learning—and I want to say to philosophical reflection also. Masschelein and Simons call these aspects of schooling “scholastic,” a term that has been tainted by the idea that it involves consideration of academic minutia that have no bearing on life—the modern equivalent of earlier theological discussions about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. The usual response to the charge of scholasticism has been to make schools (including universities) more relevant, which is to say, more easily assimilated into our experience of the lifeworld: quicker, more accessible, more readily applicable. Masschelein and Simons reject this urge to short-circuit what is distinctive about schools and make the counter-intuitive case that we should value schools precisely for the ways in which they manage to hold these pressures in abeyance. Their efforts are conservative in the best sense of the term: they want to preserve those educational practices that make it possible for young people to have authentic encounters with the world, i.e. the kinds of encounters that will help them understand *who* rather than simply *what* they are and can become. There are clear echoes of Arendt here, although Masschelein and Simons differ from Arendt in valuing schools for what they make available to students in the present. The scholastic conception of schooling regards schools as spaces of *being* as well as *becoming*. Whereas contemporary schools tend to devalue of the present for the sake of a seemingly more important future by attempting to move the future forward prematurely (through considerations like early college and career preparation), scholastic schools defer the future

³ Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons *In Defense of School: A Public Issue*, Leuven, Belgium: Education, Culture and Society Publishers, 2013, 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*

rather than defer to it, and they do this by carefully constructing environments and designing activities that call our attention to the Present.

This aspect of suspension *makes* school time. The time made free by school lifts us out of our usual roles and allows us to focus our attention on something in a sustained way.⁵ This isn't something that simply happens: it requires a certain manufacturing and structuring of space (i.e., a classroom or a lab or even a workshop), along with a careful orchestration of the activities (discussions, lessons) that occur in that space.⁶

Schools are also characterized also by detachment. Just as time is suspended and reconfigured in schools, so too is our experience of the world. Activities and ideas are selected, which is to say, detached from the more naturalistic ways in which we experience them in "real life." This detachment from life is why schools are often charged with irrelevance, but Masschelein and Simons make the case that detachment is precisely what makes it possible for us to experience these phenomena (i.e. ideas, practices, events) deeply.

Suspension and detachment are essential for that other scholastic practice: paying attention. The purpose of schools is to make time for students to pay attention, although of course, school time is constituted by the paying of attention. Looking, listening, and thinking contribute to the suspension of time. This attentiveness does not come easy. It takes practice, and some students need help—hence the instruction to students to "pay attention," which can take the form of an admonition ("pay attention"), an invitation ("listen to this!"), or a more subtle engagement opened up by the sheer proximity and person of the teacher. The presence of the teacher is another crucial element of school time: it calls us into Present.⁷

Drawing from the memoir *School Blues*, by Daniel Pennac, a teacher in the spaces of alienation, despair and anger that constitute the French suburbs, Masschelein and Simons capture the many ways in which an artificial environment like the school classroom bring students into the "*present indicative*."⁸ Pennac writes: "What walks into the classroom is an onion: several layers of school blues—fear, worry, bitterness, anger, dissatisfaction, furious renunciation—wrapped around a shameful past, an ominous present, a future condemned." Pennac imagines the students laying down all of this alongside their backpacks when class begins. Through something "hard to explain,"—a solicitous remark, a meaningful look from a caring adult—the students are brought into the present. They are released—albeit temporarily—from both the weight of a colonial past which burdens Pennac's students with no or low expectations, and the seemingly inevitable press of the future, which is either "predestined" or "non-existent."⁹ For an hour, the classroom is an

⁵ Ibid., 42.

⁶ Ibid., 113.

⁷ Ibid., 37.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

island in a sea of possibilities; a space for *thinking* and perhaps even *being* differently has been opened up. Pennac is not naïve about this. He writes, “Naturally, the benefits are temporary; the onion will layer itself back together outside of the classroom, and we’ll have to start over again tomorrow. But that’s what teaching is all about: starting over again and again until we reach the critical moment when the teacher can disappear.”¹⁰

You might be wondering what this understanding of schools has to do with philosophy. Masschelein and Simons are talking about learning in general, after all, not philosophy, and they are talking about school, not life. This emphasis on artificial practices in an artificial environment is hardly a prescription for living authentically. This is perhaps true if one understands philosophy in a conventional way as the *pursuit* of wisdom, or the *quest* for understanding—i.e., a mode of existence that is always looking forward to a future goal. But as I understand René’s point about awareness of “mortal loss” as the impetus for an appreciation of the “miraculous Present,” philosophy is not about actively seeking some future understanding of self in relation to world. It is rather a matter of *suspension* in the sense in which Masschelein and Simon understand it: a matter of making time, paying attention, dwelling for a moment with a sense of possibility in the space opened up by the presence of Being. These words, “making,” “paying,” even “dwelling,” alert us to the unnaturalness of philosophy these days, for we are living in a world in which time and space and therefore philosophy itself have been commodified, along with education. Reification is inevitable and unavoidable. But in another sense, the reification of time and space that we encounter in education is desirable. It makes it possible for us to be present and to *be* in the present—for a few moments—in ways that are decreasingly available to us in the current configuration of the life-world. It is thus not a matter seeking to sever the connection between philosophy and education, but rather of showing how the two are related. Herein lies a very important task for philosophers of education—one that we are less likely to accomplish if we conceive of philosophy and education—even schooling—as distinct undertakings. Siding with the authentic realm of philosophy over and against the artificial environment of the school misses the extent to which philosophy needs schools—and needs schools to be purposefully inauthentic and “out of order”—precisely for the sake of opening us up to the Present.

¹⁰ Ibid.
