

What's the use of Theory and Philosophy of Education?

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In the way the question is formulated, one begins to wonder: Why would it be relevant whether or not something is 'useful'? And 'useful' for whom, with regard to what? The choice of words seems to insinuate that, just like Achilles, we have to fatefully choose a way of action, as if one could *do* Theory and Philosophy of Education – or not, which would then demand a decision based on musings about the usefulness of both for something, or someone.

Alas, this is, of course, not the case. Whereas Achilles did indeed have a choice – and we all know which path he chose – there is no choice about Theory and Philosophy of Education. Whatever the 'use' might be of both (if there is one at all), there is no choice. "*Why is that?*", one might ask. To answer that, some words need to be discussed.

What does *theory* mean? Etymologically related to words like *theorein* ('to look at') and *theoros* ('spectator'), the word was originally used to denote acts of observing something or looking at something. However, it was then in the discussions of the so-called *philosophers*, especially Aristotle, that the word took on an almost mythical aura of relevance – without being entirely clear (Roochnik 2009). Coming from here, the notion has been used throughout the centuries in a variety of meanings. Eventually, it was wedded to the idea of (natural) science and, somewhat later, to the Social Sciences and Humanities, which were now perceived to be producing theories, in opposition to mere beliefs or speculations, about the world. Here, *theories* are then (depending on the view of the academic discipline): a collection of (axiomatic) sentences; a collection of (non-linguistic) models; or an amorphous entity including maybe sentences and models, but also exemplars, problems, standards, skills, practices and tendencies. (Savage, 1990) Or, in short: theories are the 'scientific/academic' way of talking about the world, distinguished from 'normal' ways of talking about the world by academic criteria of precision, truth, and acceptability.

Such a distinction of science and non-science can, and should, be challenged, and on closer inspection, one might end up with a very broad idea of *theory* as proposed by P. Feyerabend (1981b: vii) according to which, *theories* are "systems of thought, forms of life, frameworks", "includ[ing] myths, political ideas, religious systems" (Feyerabend, 1981a: 105, n.5). This perhaps becomes even more obvious when remembering that already a mere description of 'what there is' has to use concepts, i.e. complex ideas embedded in greater frameworks of meaning, when referring to the world. There is no 'theory-free' description. Or, in other words: Every notional interpretation of what is 'in front of us' in any given moment is based on certain theories inasmuch as it is dependent on concepts that become meaningful only in a wider horizon of meaning; e.g. a seemingly simple description like 'The child plays happily.' needs rich concepts of 'child', 'play', and 'happiness' – and a certain understanding of what an activity is, i.e. some process extended over a certain period of time. And, of course, in extension, this means that every reflection on education is also inevitably based on theories deemed to be relevant for such specific reflections, i.e. theories of education. There simply is no choice: We cannot choose between using or not using theories in even the most common event of education (if 'education' is to be more than a mere instinctive way of re/acting to a situation without reflection, i.e. if it is an act that is based on an interpretation of the situation).

The only choice we may have is regarding the level of awareness of our interpretations and the extent to which our interpretations and *theories* govern our acting in this or that situation. But without *theory*, there is no education ... without *theory*, there is no world to speak of.

What about *philosophy*? Is *philosophy* useful in educational matters? Is a *Philosophy of Education* of any relevance? The answer to this question does, of course, again depend on the meaning one would like to give to the notions of *philosophy* in general and *Philosophy of Education* in particular. Neither are very clear. Etymologically derived from the Greek, *philosophia*, i.e. love of wisdom, the notion has been bestowed with as many different definitions as people claiming to engage with it. One approach has always been the attempt to define certain areas of knowledge, i.e. certain areas of questioning the world, which make up *philosophy* as a specific field or discipline. Sometimes it is the trinity of ‘What is true?’, ‘What is good?’, and ‘What is beautiful?’ that apparently encircles the field *philosophical* inquiry is interested in. Later, specific notions for distinct areas mapping out the horizon of *philosophy* were introduced, like Ethics, Epistemology, Metaphysics (or Ontology), and Aesthetics – only to be followed by an uncountable number of composite words, like *Philosophy of Education*, *Philosophy of Mind*, *Philosophy of Mathematics*, *of Science*, *of Biology*, or *Political Philosophy*, *Social Philosophy*, etc.

Defining an area seems futile. And indeed, it may be easier to understand *philosophy* more as an activity, as *philosophizing*. And it was indeed a specific kind of activity for which one of the seminal *philosophers* was admired, and despised, and killed. Socrates was loved for relentlessly asking questions (often in the form of: ‘What do you mean when you say ...?’), for confusing people, for destroying much-loved convictions – and he was killed for this very activity as, apparently, it was corrupting the youth of Athens. If we therefore understand *philosophy* as *philosophizing* – as this very Socratic activity to engage in relentless questioning of all and everything – then what is it good for in general, and what would it be good for in relation to education? I would be inclined to say: It doesn’t matter what it is good for – simply because, again, it is not a choice people make. They do not choose to *philosophize* or to not *philosophize*. Those who do usually cannot help themselves. They are intrigued, puzzled, and driven to ask all those questions. They are driven so much that sometimes they try, in vain, to escape (by climbing mountains, mix with ‘simple’ folk, or by meditating themselves out of their own minds). Those who are not driven, won’t engage with those kind of questions – not convinced by even the long explanations of apparent usefulness that those who cannot stop engaging with it see in it.

‘Usefulness’ is just the rational coat into which some people wrap themselves to hide their overwhelming desires to question and to know under a fig leaf (admittedly a very old tradition). As such, it is already justified: it answers to an urge that cannot be silenced, and there is a good reason why Classic ideas of *philosophizing* are closely related to Classic ideas of *eros* as a forceful and overwhelming ‘daimon’. (Belfiore 2012) And the times when we had to defend the erotic in terms of usefulness are over – one would hope.

Literature

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