

Introduction

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Published online: 9 April 2008
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In the last few decades a certain kind of critique has become prominent in the ethos of Western philosophy. This newer kind of critique differs in key respects from what we might call ‘landmark’ critiques in the history of that philosophy. While the older kind of critique, such as the critiques of Kant or Descartes, focused on establishing new constructive possibilities for thought and action, the best energies of the newer kind of critique are reserved for investigations that combine an incisive analysis of ethical and political issues with a deep and enduring scepticism, even pessimism. Its gestures are characteristically more deconstructive than constructive and it targets in a particular way the more buoyant currents of thought in the philosophical discourse of modernity. Perhaps the most prominent examples of the newer critique are the writings of Lyotard and Foucault, but permeating this ethos more widely is the influential figure of Nietzsche, whose ‘philosophy of the future’ has finally come of age. In such an ethos it becomes particularly difficult to articulate a philosophy of practical hope, because to do so is to call on inspirations that have more often than not been shown to be masternarratives; grand philosophical accounts of truth, freedom, justice, and other such ideals, that seek to win minds and hearts but that often overlook invidious distinctions or mask the exercise of one or other kind of violence.

Such an ethos can be variously seen as a corrective to sanguine philosophical impulses or as a debilitation of worthy philosophical efforts. Where the philosophy of education is concerned, such an ethos would be particularly watchful of theories that are inspired by ideals of emancipation that boldly re-envisage the promise of learning; theories like those of a Rousseau or a Dewey that call for a widespread shift of imagination among educators. Either way, this kind of ethos furnishes a historically new context for thinking about educational practice; one which scholarly efforts have concentrated in an unprecedented way on penetrating critiques, and in which philosophical investigations of the practical environments of teaching and learning are not nearly as numerous. If one asks here the question that must be asked of all critique—Critique in the name of what?, or more precisely, Critique for the sake of what?—the answer is all too often a loss of articulacy, or an uneasy silence.

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These were the kinds of considerations that were foremost in the decision to make the theme of the INPE conference of 2006 in the University of Malta ‘Philosophical Perspectives on Educational Practice in the 21st Century’. This special issue of *Studies in Philosophy and Education* presents a selection of the papers presented at that conference. I don’t intend to preview each of the contributions here. Rather, I would like to call attention to two features that I observed during the course of the conference, and more particularly in preparing the selected papers for this volume. The first of these is the absence of a common theme in the papers, though a few of the papers carry clear echoes of others. There is nothing in the papers to suggest that there is a new grand theory of educational practice on the horizon. The second feature is the other side of the first and concerns not just the diversity of the papers, but what the nature of that diversity suggests about developments in scholarship within the philosophy of education. A brief comment on this may be of interest to readers.

If educational practice in our own time is to be illuminated by scholarly researches in the philosophy of education, this is more likely to be by way of a diversity of particular insights than by the influence of a new major school of thought. At the same time, where a diversity of insights is manifest chiefly as a disparity—a war between incommensurables—the consequence for educational practice as a coherent set of endeavours is anything but healthy.

As I read through the papers, noting their diversity, but also their very wide imaginative reach and their alertness to the responsibilities of practice, the word that struck me was *profusion*. Practitioners in education must increasingly learn not merely to handle unprecedented plurality among their pupils and students. They must also learn to live with it in their professional self-understanding. Perhaps the philosophy of education itself is best viewed in late modernity as a discipline of thought and action that cultivates the capabilities and dispositions that enable practitioners to do this; to become themselves discerning yet human learners for whom, as Stephen Toulmin, puts it: ‘nothing human is foreign’.