
Philosophy of Education as an Exercise in Thought: to not forget oneself when ‘things take their course’

JAN MASSCHELEIN

University of Leuven, Belgium

ABSTRACT Starting from a distinction between a critical and an ascetic tradition in philosophy and taking into account their different stances towards the present, the article proposes a practice of philosophy of education within the ascetic tradition. In this tradition, the work of philosophy is in the first place a work on the self – that is, *putting oneself to ‘the test of contemporary reality’* - implying an enlightenment not of others but of oneself; however, of oneself not as subject of knowledge, but as subject of action. Putting oneself to the test is, therefore, an exercise in the context of self-education. The article indicates how this exercise can be described as an *exercise of/in thought*, how it has to be conceived not as a private matter but as a *public gesture* and as a condition for a truth-telling that is in the first place illuminating and inviting. In order to do so, the article first recalls how Hannah Arendt describes her own work and how this indicates what kind of philosophical practice is entailed in the ascetic tradition. In line with this description, a topical example (i.e. the films of the Belgian Dardenne brothers) is offered of how educational philosophical research in this tradition is carried out today. And, finally, it is clarified how this relates to a proposal for doing ‘empirical’ philosophical research and for creating laboratories.

A widespread practice of philosophy of education conceives of it as a kind of supplementary inquiry or meta-reflection that regards educational research and practice itself as an *object of knowledge*. Such a practice belongs to a critical tradition that conceives of the work of philosophy as the work of judgement, ordering, justification, selection, concept clarification, interpretation and explication, and is ‘critical’ in the sense that it is in one way or another oriented towards validity claims (either ethical/normative or epistemological). This means that *it puts reality* (educational research and theory, educational policy and practice) *to the test* of its own thinking: the test of argumentative logic, of interpretive procedures, of theoretical or practical principles, of theories... Therefore its utterances always assume a critical-judgemental role for educational scholars. Its truth-telling has something either of a demonstration (wanting to teach something), a judgement (valid/not-valid) or a de-mystification (revealing what is underlying or presupposed, or denouncing illusions).

It is my aim here not to question this *critical* tradition, but to offer a modest reflection on the value of another, more marginal tradition in philosophy, which we can call the *ascetic* tradition. In this tradition, the work of philosophy is in the first place a work on the self – that is, *putting oneself to ‘the test of contemporary reality’*, implying an enlightenment not of others but of oneself – however, of oneself not as subject of knowledge but as subject of action. Putting oneself to test is, therefore, an exercise in the context of self-education. As I will try to indicate, this exercise, which various authors (Arendt, 1968; Wittgenstein, 1980; Foucault, 1986) described as an *exercise of/in thought*, has to be conceived not as a private matter but as a *public gesture* or a way to make things public and as a condition for a truth-telling that is in the first place illuminating, inviting, cutting, inspiring. In order to do so, I will first recall how Hannah Arendt describes her own philosophical work and how it is part of this ascetic tradition. In line with this description, I will then present a concrete example of how educational philosophical research in this tradition is carried out today. And

finally, I will clarify how this relates to a proposal for doing 'empirical' philosophical research and for creating laboratories.

The Ascetic Tradition: putting oneself to the test of contemporary reality

Hannah Arendt considers her own work in *Between Past and Future* to be 'exercises in thought', being mainly 'experiments' 'arising out of the actuality of incidents', and having the form of 'essays' (Arendt, 1968, pp. 14-15). Most interestingly she elaborates on the space/time of these exercises and states that the 'proper region of thought' is not the region 'which Western metaphysics has dreamed [of] from Parmenides to Hegel': a 'timeless, spaceless, suprasensuous realm' (p. 11), but what she calls the gap between past and future. But this gap, another name for the present, 'is not the present as we usually understand it', as a point in a continuous 'flow of uninterrupted succession' (p. 11), but it is the present 'due exclusively to the presence of man' (p. 10) – that is, the insertion into time of 'a beginning', of man as acting being. So, the space/time of the exercise of thought is the gap or present which 'come[s] into being only with his own, self-inserting appearance' (p. 10). The exercises of thought are concerned with the present, but the present is not what simply appears as such and before us (as an *object of knowledge*), it is what is experienced when we are, so to speak, present in the present (attending the present, taking care of it, being attentive), when 'we' insert ourselves and thus also expose ourselves to what is happening. That is to say that the present exists only in as far as man recognises or experiences him/herself not as a knowing subject but as a beginner, as an acting subject, 'splitting up time in *forces* that work upon him/her' (p. 11, italics mine), but that are, thus, in a way broken or interrupted in him/her (as beginning – where s/he stands).

The exercise of thought is not a jumping out of the present, but on the contrary 'remains bound to and is rooted in the present'. Although Arendt claims that the one who thinks is 'ageless' (i.e. has no history or biography), the time of thinking is not the time where one is 'above the melee' (Arendt, 1968, p. 12), it is precisely the present as the gap, and the way to live in this gap is thinking. Or, better, thinking is an activity immediately related to an existential question of how to live the present ('how to move in the gap'), it has to do with myself as a subject of (right) action – that is, a subject who takes care of the present and of one's presence in that present. The exercise of thought (which cannot be learned, according to Arendt, but has to be performed time and again) is a work on oneself, but as one who experiences oneself as a beginner, somebody who is 'able to' act and speak, suspending [1] historical time, suspending biographical time, suspending social time – that is, ageless, as Arendt says, but at the same time attached, attached to the present, present in the present. So thinking means not to forget oneself as a subject of action, as being an insertion in time.

According to Arendt, the gap between past and future (which always existed due to the presence of man) was bridged by tradition, but now tradition is lost and has ceased throwing light on the future [2], and the present has become 'a tangible reality and perplexity for all', urging for exercises of thought to see 'how to move in this gap' (p. 14). However, this condition has also called into being all kinds of strategies to close the gap, to ignore it, to avoid thinking as exposing oneself to the present – that is, to immunise oneself against the fact that after tradition has been lost, one has to take up the challenge of living a truly 'human' life and to try the words (e.g. son, father, mother, daughter, child, etc.) and verbs (educating, living, etc.) again. If we refuse to expose ourselves to the present, being, as Arendt says, a 'battlefield of forces' rather than a home (p. 13), and to recognise ourselves as 'acting', then there remains only the experience of 'sempiternal change of the world and the biological cycle of living creatures in it' – things taking their course, and we only trying to protect or to adapt ourselves.

In *Men in Dark Times*, Arendt writes: 'what begins now, after the end of world history, is the history of mankind' (1955, p. 90). And she writes at the end of her essay 'What is Authority' (and repeats at the end of 'The Crisis in Education') that this means 'to be confronted anew, without the religious trust in a sacred beginning and without the protection of traditional and therefore self-evident standards of behaviour, by the elementary problems of human living together' (Arendt, 1968, p. 141). Assuming the history of mankind (accepting that we are without sacred beginning and without destination) and taking up the confrontation means to ask and investigate how to make sense again of such 'words' as freedom or authority, how to conceive of education, culture,

etc. These are the exercises of thought which she offers in *Between Past and Future*. It is a kind of thinking which, as she writes, 'is different from such mental processes as deducing, inducing and drawing conclusions' (Arendt, 1968, p. 13). It is also not to interpret or to explain. 'The only aim of the exercises in thought is to gain experience in how to think; it does not contain prescriptions on what to think or which truths to hold. Least of all do they intend to retie the broken thread of tradition or to invent some newfangled surrogates with which to fill the gap between past and future. ... The question is ... about how to move in this gap' (p. 14). How to be present in/to the present, how to see the present anew, how to deal with it, what to think of it, how to relate to it and how to continue? These exercises are critical of traditional concepts, but this critique is not intended to 'debunk' (p. 14), unmask or demystify them. Starting from acknowledging that, in the strong sense, these concepts stopped meaning something, their meaning having 'evaporated' and left behind 'empty shells', the challenge they take up is rather 'to distil from them anew their original spirit' (p. 15). These exercises are to a large extent 'experiments', which 'do not attempt to design some sort of utopian future' (p. 14) or definite solutions, but are attempts to clarify some issues and to 'gain some assurance in confronting specific questions' (p. 15). These exercises are not part of an academic discipline, but rather are expressions of indiscipline. They arise out of the actuality of incidents of living experience (p. 14), their literary form is that of the essay and the work that of an experimenter (p. 15). The experience in thinking can only be won 'in doing something' (p. 14) whereby the trouble is '... that we seem to be neither equipped nor prepared for this activity of thinking, of settling down in the gap between past and future' (p. 13), so that we have to look for equipment and preparation in order to elaborate our experimental and attentive attitude towards the (educational) present, of which we ourselves are part as far as we take up our insertion into time – that is, as far as we take care of ourselves (as acting subjects).

Taking as a basis Arendt's own description of her philosophical work as being exercises of thought, we can understand such philosophy to be educational in three senses. First it is a kind of investigation that implies a bringing into play of the researcher herself (her thoughts): a self-education as 'work on the self' (Wittgenstein). But philosophy as an essay is, as well, a public gesture and is, therefore, also educational in the sense that it can have a meaning for others who are invited to share the experience (to put themselves to the test, not to receive teaching). And lastly, such philosophy can be educational in the sense that the present at stake is the educational present.

In order to further clarify what such 'exercises in/of thought' entail and what they require, I now want briefly to sketch a topical example.

The Example of the Films Made by the Belgian Dardenne Brothers

Of course it may sound strange to take films as an example, but there is no reason why philosophy of education should only be concerned with books and lectures, and not with films. And although it is not my intention to invite the readers to stop writing and to make films, I want to indicate how this work is philosophical and educational, and I want to draw some indications out of it with regard to the kind of 'work' which, I believe, we could try to do today, what kind of work ethos it implies and what kind of requirements (in terms of 'equipment and preparation') it entails.

The films of Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne all deal with issues that have to do with the relationship between children or adolescents and adults in our actual conditions.^[3] However, they deal with these issues in such a way that their films not only reveal something about our educational present, but also present themselves as public gestures that constitute us into a thinking public. Their films are, in fact, studies of essential educational situations and matters: what does it mean to be a child, an adult, a father, a son, a mother, a daughter, a teacher, an apprentice? What does it mean, not in general, but in the concrete and sometimes extreme situations and conditions which society offers today? Their films investigate these questions and whether and how answers are given/found. In fact, we could say that they are showing us exercises of thought (with the main figures in the films trying to find out how to shape their relationships), and are in themselves such exercises. The films show an insertion in the continuum of time, a gap between past and future, and are themselves moving in such a gap, testifying to such insertion (that is also why they are able to offer us an insight in the 'forces' that are at work, to use the words of Arendt).

When asked why they are fascinated by the relationship between adults and children, the Dardenne brothers respond:

Maybe it comes also from the fact that in the city where we make our films, we have seen families destroyed by economic crisis, drugs, unemployment, truancy, and now kids are earning more than their parents but from illegal means. People are more and more alone. When we first wrote *La Promesse*, we had an older character who was supposed to provide guidance to the younger characters. But then we realised that this was nostalgic – now, there is no one to be that voice. So we put them in a situation and asked the question, ‘how are these people, who are now alone and without the help of the past, going to find their way to be fully human?’ (Andrew, 2006)

Indeed, the films of the Dardennes ask this question in a fascinating and penetrating way. And it is not difficult to hear how this resounds with the question and task Hannah Arendt raised: today we are confronted again, without the protection of the past and the bridge of tradition, with the question of human living together. And their films make clear how this question as a concrete question ‘arising out of the actuality of incidents’ (i.e. the actuality of a small town in Belgium), and related to their personal experience, nevertheless is put before us in a way that it appears as a common question. Their local anchoring does not prevent the Dardenne brothers from making ‘common’ or universal films. Their work investigates this question of how to be human today (how to find one’s way, alone and without help of the past) in such a way that it also becomes ‘our’ question, the question of the spectators. They invite us to be attentive, to see and listen and to think, they make us into a public, they gather us around this question and what is at stake in it, they also put us to the test (how to find one’s way, how to act in a right way, what it means to be a father, etc.).

How do they arrive at this? First of all, they investigate the question as a radically open question, not as gatekeepers of the truth, but as truth seekers themselves. The fact that these films are imbued with ethical-philosophical and educational questions does not turn them into a moralising cinema; on the contrary, they give no easy answers and are not preaching any morality. They do not judge, neither do they prove or explain/explicate anything. Of course, in a way the films certainly have a frame and are framing, and this frame marks a space, but the space is no interior, no home, but a kind of space of exposition, of being exposed to things (happenings) that become exposed.

Their films do not proclaim or defend any truth, they are no expression of a doctrine, theory or conviction, but in their films there is truth that shows itself in what is *happening* before the camera. Their camera registrates the truth of the words and deeds of the protagonists - a truth which shows itself to us and which manifests itself in an almost inescapable way. As one commentator wrote:

I cannot remember to have seen films which are so objective, so purely registrating as yours. What makes your films so special is the apparent absence of rhetoric. That makes them sometimes also unbearable. Rhetoric in films offers the spectator the occasion to think: this is bad or terrible, but beautiful. You don’t offer the spectator this softening thought of ‘this is beautiful’, this possibility to feel distance towards the described reality and to look at it with the ironic gaze of the distinguished art expert. (Grunberg, 2008)

In this context I would state that this cinema is in fact a very interesting form of empirical philosophy, maybe one of the most important, advanced and needed forms. One which is neither judging nor only observing facts and *making them known*, but one which illuminates a(n) (educational) reality – that is, one which makes that which is observed also ‘speak’, as it were, or better maybe, become ‘real’, something that ‘works’ and *that offers ‘experience’* and not only knowledge (and that is the strong sense of ‘empirical’). They illuminate, not in the sense that they explain, teach a lesson, but in that they make something present. They do not re-present something and do not show us a scenario put into images, but registrate a happening before the camera. In this way they make something become ‘real’ and ‘present’: they make us attached, existentially involved in the question that the situation they show entails. And I believe that they can do this because they are themselves present in these films. They are present in the sense that these films are for themselves an exercise in thought, where they don’t know what is going to happen before

the camera, where they don't know what exactly they are looking for, using the film-making as an attempt to literally make answers (to the question of the human) appear, answers which they themselves are not aware of at the moment they actually start the process.

In an interview, J.-P. Dardenne says:

Our documentaries were 'pastoral'. [Indeed they made documentaries in the seventies and eighties.] The word had the central role, and the film served only as a 'mise-en-scène' of a testimony. Situations, places, actions were shown to sustain what was told in the story. In our documentaries the event or happening always lay in the past. It was re-told. In *La Promesse* this dwelling on words is replaced by the immediate present of events/happenings. The camera cannot choose a location which was thought of beforehand, the camera (together with us) also registers for the first time what happens, without making a detour along a predefined logic. In *La Promesse* the camera registers direct environments. (Sartor, 2001, p. 19; translation by author)

The camera which is used is a hand-held camera, a camera which surprises and catches at the same time. The way they film makes clear that the camera does not know what is going to happen. The Dardenne brothers thus show us in a radical way film and no scenario. They don't want to announce, name or define something before we have seen it. They are not defining what happens, as is the old philosophical dream, dreamt by analytical philosophers; they are not contextualising or historicising it as is the dream of hermeneutics; they are not deconstructing it as postmodern philosophy aspires to do; but they attempt to show the happenings as 'actions' – that is, as happenings in the gap between past and future, as experiments and attempts that start from the acceptance of one's insertion in time – that start with the protagonists themselves, who try to find out what it means to be a son, a daughter, a teacher, a father, a mother ... and put things in motion.

Every 'given' is first submitted to the test of film itself: naked presence and duration. Looking at their films, it is as if the words and deeds, the gestures, appear, as such, on their own, as a kind of 'empty shell' that can start to get (new) meaning again. Only afterwards can we assign the fragments a place in the course of events. Because of their fascination for the sudden illumination of moments, the Dardennes let us often wait minutes before we grasp something of the meaning of a scene (i.e. they create suspension). However, this meaning does not refer to a story, but to a protagonist and a situation. Their cinema does not tell stories, does not narrate, but *registers*. 'To narrate impedes or obstructs existence,' they note, referring to *Rosetta*: 'the less one tells about a persona, the more it exists ... Rather than narrating, we have tried to find the *gestures* which were essential for the character' (Sartor, 2001, p. 15, translation by author). The story does not precede the characters, but is organised around them and starts from them, it is these, their gestures and movements, their words, that offer the starting point and not the plot. The films therefore have no clear beginning or end. They have no history that explains the actions we see. The characters are *there* (present to the situation, and not absent, distracted); the camera registers what they do or do not do, and this is more important than who they are and what will happen. What happens is also shown as fragments from a journey (*un parcours*), and not of a discourse (*un discours*). Very often, we as spectators are set in a situation and only gradually can we find out why the characters act as they do. Luc Dardenne notes:

It's to avoid explaining to the viewer that this character's mother did this and so that's why he's behaving that way. Because when you do that, the character ceases to exist. This is why in mainstream cinema, when you explain why characters behave in a certain way, the audience understands, but really we have understood nothing. We want the viewers of our films not to be able to explain where they have come from and why they're behaving that way, but they'll be able to see that these characters will be able to get through - i.e. are able to act, to begin!
(Andrew, 2006)

One could say that the Dardennes show us how today fiction is necessary to make something appear as 'real' and to make appear the possibility to act. They make clear that fiction is necessary today to show the truth of action or the possibility of beginning (or of potentiality), and gather us (as a public) around such questions as: What does it mean to be father, son, teacher, mother ... *today*? Jorge Larrosa formulates the question (towards philosophers of education with regard to the actual transformations of educational institutions like schools and universities) as follows: "We"

knew the old words (university, philosophy, education), but now we are no longer sure they mean anything. And we are not keen to learn the new ones: we do not trust them, they are irrelevant to us. Moreover, we are sad and tired at the course taken by things in general and by everything related to universities, philosophy and education in particular. ... Will we be capable of trying all the words and verbs once again: university, philosophy, education?' (Larossa, 2010)

Well, I believe that, to put it in a more general way, the Dardennes are doing precisely this: trying the words (teacher, student, father, son, mother, daughter, adult, child ...), trying the verbs (educating, teaching ...) once again where 'things are taking their course': they open a space of practical freedom. That is why their cinema is not only a realistic and hard cinema, but essentially also an optimistic cinema – something takes its course, but they present the gap between past and future and investigate how to move in this gap. They offer a kind of hope, but hope without foundation and guarantee, and precisely, therefore, pure (human) hope. Their films do not illustrate or tell or explain, but illuminate our educational present and bring it into play. There is something to see (and they discover it with us and we with them), but it is precisely this seeing that is also such that it makes us think (they offer us philosophical, ethical, educational questions as *existential* questions). Inventing a new cinematic language, using particular equipment and preparations, they show the complexity of reality, its unpredictable course, but also create a space of thought (the present as a gap, the issues as common issues) in which they invite us and attract us.

Just like the writings of Arendt, the Dardennes' films are 'essays' and experiments. They are not thought experiments, but are experiments in/of thought, the experiment being precisely the exposition of what they think and are. And therefore they are present in it. If it works out, then the reader or spectator is not only offered an insight, but also an experience, and this experience is also an experience of freedom, a freedom with regard to the way 'things take their course' (as 'sempiternal change', in Arendt's words). The reader or the spectator does not have to accept what is written or shown, or even believe it, but when witnessing this writing or filming, she can feel invited to partake in the risk of discourse and of a usage (of words and verbs) which are not assured and safe (immunised). She could feel reminded (by the way they are written or made, and the way their authors are present in the work) of her own difficulty (or perplexity), and therefore could be ready to engage in a vivid conversation or a 'collective experiment' (as Bruno Latour calls it [Latour, 2005]).

Exercises of Thought and Creating Laboratories

In line with the foregoing, I want to propose that we conceive of philosophy of education as 'exercises of thought', where we put ourselves to the test of our educational present. These exercises illuminate, try to see, try to attend our present, try the words and the verbs once more, starting from 'the actuality of incidents'. We can conceive of the space/time of these exercises, the space/time of suspension, as the one which is made in creating a laboratory. It is the place (space/time) to try to put one's thinking to the test of reality (the place of the attempt and the essay). It is the place to study and to expose oneself to things, but these things are to be 'made' present, and we have to be present, to be attentive. Therefore the laboratory is also a place of registration. It develops the equipment (devices) to 'see' something, and entails preparations, not in order to see what we think, but to think what we see, to expose our thinking to what is happening and to get through our own reflections in order to see anew.

To try the words and verbs again, we need to expose ourselves to concrete issues and should try to develop a particular ethos, a 'way of doing' or of working on the self in order to dismiss our reflections and to be able, so to speak, to catch what happens. In this respect, we can take suggestions from the Dardennes. They not only make use of particular devices (hand-held camera, clearly limited spaces, etc.), but refuse all kinds of financial, technical and intellectual comfort in order to displace themselves, to make themselves into strangers (Dardenne 2005). They rely on a particular discipline of the body and the mind to become attentive, to attend the present, to remain in the gap, to help them avoid to interpret and explain the present, to contextualise and historicise it, to help them, in trying to penetrate it through cutting and producing it (making fiction), to articulate questions (see also Masschelein & Simons, 2008). They indicate a way of doing which

refrains from activities of judgement and gatekeeping, which avoids explanations, interpretations, contextualisations, deconstructions. A way of doing which is 'fictionising', making, so to speak, reality and gathering a public. A way of doing as a *public* gesture, making things public, which means to set them free: to present them in the gap, detached from past and future (no longer appropriated), but also to create a public as people invited to share the concern with these things, people attached to the present.

To conclude, I think that what is important today is to make the questions 'what is education?', 'what is adulthood?', 'what is a child?', 'what is a university?', 'what is a school?', 'what is a family?', 'what is an asylum?', 'what is a teacher?', 'what is a student?', etc. into 'real questions' and into 'our questions' – that is, into matters of concern (Latour, 2005). That is, no matters to be solved by facts (experts) or by addressing individual needs, but, rather, matters that make us think, putting ourselves to the test, trying to move in the gap between past and future, trying the words and verbs again. Things take their course, transformations of educational systems and institutions are deeply affecting us, and all kinds of forces are at work. The point is not to forget oneself as being the point at and through which the forces work, and where at and through which insight into the game of forces that constitutes our existence can be gained, as well as where at and through which they are split up and broken so that the words and verbs can be tried again and we can 'gain some assurance in confronting specific questions' (Arendt, 1968, p. 15).

Notes

- [1] Suspending does not mean to erase or deny or ignore, but precisely to 'temporarily prevent from ... being in force or effect' (*Oxford English Dictionary*).
- [2] Of course there are parts and elements that subsist, but they do not work as a tradition any more, but appear today as 'heritage'.
- [3] I am referring to the five films Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne made since the mid-nineties: *La Promesse* (1996), about a boy whose father exploits illegal immigrants and is confronted with the question of how to relate to his father when his father simply lets such an immigrant die when he falls from scaffolding during illegal construction works; *Rosetta* (1999, Golden Palm winner in Cannes), about a girl who is desperately trying to find a job in order to be able to simply survive and to sustain her mother, who is addicted to alcohol and with whom she lives on a camping site; *Le Fils* (2002), about a teacher-carpenter who works in a re-integration centre for troubled youth and is one day confronted with the young murderer of his own son who has come to the centre to become his apprentice (not knowing that the teacher is the father of the one he killed); *L'Enfant* (2005, Golden Palm winner in Cannes), about a young adolescent who has to deal with the issue of what it means to be a father when being confronted with his girlfriend's (unplanned) pregnancy and the fact that she gives birth to the child; first he sells the child on the market for child-traffic, but then tries to bring the child back to the mother and find out how he can live together with her; and *Le Silence de Lorna* (2008), about a young Eastern European girl who has obtained a visa in Belgium and now, in order to get money, is involved in fake marriages in order to offer other rich Eastern Europeans the possibility of also obtaining a visa; she then has to deal with a young Belgian drug addict with whom she accidentally has to share an apartment.

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Correspondence: Professor Dr Jan Masschelein, Laboratory for Education & Society, K. University Leuven, Vesaliusstraat 2, B-3000 Leuven, Belgium (jan.masschelein@ped.kuleuven.be).

Reply to Jan Masschelein

Becoming Present in Context: the politics of the gap in educational transformation

SHARON TODD

Department of Education, Stockholm University, Sweden

ABSTRACT Masschelein's article works as both a proposal and an invitation: it proposes an existential orientation to questions of educational concern, and it invites everyone to think along with him, to implicate themselves in this particular exercise of thought. In response, therefore, the author seeks to create a conversation, one that reflects an exercise of her own thinking in relation to that of Jan's – and highlights in her reply 'in relation to' for reasons which will become clearer in the article. She does this by building upon the main thinker with whom he is himself in conversation – namely, Hannah Arendt. First, however, the author offers a reading of what she sees as Masschelein's main position and then turns to her own encounter with his text as an illustration of what she later discusses as 'becoming present in context' – a context in which the place of narrative occupies a central position. She then discusses what this means for the relation between philosophy of education and transformation.

Moving away from the critical tradition, which has often marked philosophy's relation to education, Masschelein proposes instead an ascetic turn, through which what is at stake is not the enlightenment of others, but the enlightenment of oneself. It seeks to transform or modify one's mode of being and how one lives the present. Drawing primarily on Hannah Arendt – and also rooted in the thought of Michel Foucault and Jacques Rancière – Masschelein wishes us to take a journey – a *parcours* – through which we explore the 'gap' between past and future.

Masschelein focuses specifically on Arendt's depiction of this 'gap', which, as has been noted, is not the 'present as we usually understand it' and is made possible by the presence of man, who is inserted as an interruption in the flow of continuous time. On Masschelein's reading of Arendt, it is this co-temporality of existence and the present that ought to lie at the heart of our educational endeavours – indeed, this is what Masschelein calls the 'educational present'. And it is a present that reveals a certain truth about the 'reality' of education, about its *Wirklichkeit* in German (*verklighet* in Swedish), about its appearance as a work. Masschelein's focus on the present leads him to a reformulation of philosophy as in fact a working of the gap, a working of the educational present. He renders philosophy therefore *as* education. Philosophy as an exercise becomes, for Masschelein,

a research that works on the self, a genre – the essay – that creates a public gesture, and an engagement with the present.

In discussing the films of the Dardenne brothers – I myself have seen only one, *Rosetta* – he attempts to show how the exercise that is philosophy is prominent here. For Masschelein, the present is revealed through what happens before the camera, without interpretation or explanation. In his words, the films open up a ‘space of exposition, of being exposed to things that are exposed’. Through their films, Masschelein sees the potential for developing a direct engagement – an immediate engagement – with the present that is beyond story and narrative. The directors, to his mind, do not ‘direct’, but stage – *mise en scène* – they present the present, one might say, and turn the worlds of their characters into something ‘real’. This ‘ethos’ refuses the explanatory function of philosophy/theory and is meant to capture instead the experience of the present.

With this said, Masschelein moves into his call for philosophy of education to become ‘exercises of thought,’ spaces in which we essay, test, experiment with new vocabularies and create new publics. And it finds its expression in Masschelein’s notion of the laboratory. On Masschelein’s account, a laboratory ‘develops the equipment (devices) to “see” something, and entails preparations, not in order to see what we think, but to think what we see ...’ Here, we are to reframe questions of education as being not merely matters of fact, but matters of (public) concern. It is a place to study and expose oneself, ‘to dismiss our reflections’, ‘to make something present’, ‘to catch what happens’, like the Dardennes’ camera. It is to live in the gap, in the suspension of judgement and narrative. Thus, the relation Masschelein makes between philosophy of education and the transformation of educational systems turns on our capacity to be guided by the reality that appears before us – philosophy of education operates, therefore, not in a mode of criticality, but in a mode where the public posing of new questions takes centre stage.

Now, I find what Masschelein argues for compelling, since it offers a new compass point for orienting ourselves and our work as one that is always drawn to the present, and because his idea of philosophy as exercise is important for making ourselves relevant (as philosophers of education) by, indeed, making ourselves present. Although I am sympathetic to the idea that in order to move beyond our myopic views of education – our taken-for-granted assumptions about education that severely limit our capacity to experience what is happening before us – we need to divest ourselves of our hubris, our arrogance in ‘knowing’ what is right, correct, predictable. I nonetheless want to offer some reflections about the way in which the present is cast here as an unproblematic and unambiguous appearance that is to be ‘experienced’ – immediately, without mediation – as though our stories or narratives are unimportant to ‘who’ we are. That is, what I wish to focus on further below is how we might consider the ‘gap’ between past and future, and our engagement with it, as being far messier than Masschelein lets on, particularly since any engagement is a specific, embodied event.

So let’s turn to some specifics. Let’s say I read Masschelein’s paper with a certain presence – with attentiveness, passion and curiosity – and perhaps even a willingness to have my ideas challenged, to question myself, to test myself. But in so doing, do I come closer to the reality of myself, or to the reality of the world? Or, put in Masschelein’s terms, do I expose myself in such a way to his text, as to a film by the Dardenne brothers, so as to only see – the ethos of looking – what is in front me – the words on the page, the argument presented, the essay as a form of thinking? Well, that depends. And what it depends on, in my view, is context.

Masschelein asks us to leave our stories behind – whether these be in the form of theoretical formulations, practical explanations or personal narratives – and the emotional attachments all these entail, as a condition for experiencing the present. To some degree, many other philosophers have suggested similar things. For example, Emmanuel Levinas makes clear that the alterity of the other is violated once one attempts to contain it within categories, explanations and discourse. However, what makes Masschelein’s plea for experiencing the present different from the work of someone like Levinas is that the Levinasian other is nonetheless in a context that calls upon the self to respond. There is a transactional space, a relational space explicit in the ethic of responsibility. Wishing to move away from – indeed, suspending – this relational trajectory, on Masschelein’s account, we are left with a self who ‘experiences’ an abstract present on non-relational terms. That is, leaving our stories behind in Masschelein’s terms risks translating into an engagement with the present that seems to have no context.

I wish to argue that context – context as literally a ‘with’ or ‘of’ the text – is uniquely specific. To return to my example of reading Masschelein’s essay, this concerns not only what I bring with me into the reading encounter, lugging my biographical baggage, my intellectual preferences, my desire or not to journey into unfamiliar territory; it also concerns how I read this piece knowing I would be responding publicly to it, offering something for others to consider and, hopefully, think about; it also concerns the place and time of reading, the chair, the aeroplane, the darkness of night, my lack of sleep. What I want to suggest here is that this context is not merely incidental to my experience, but is constitutive of it. This context – this ‘with’ the text – is actually constitutive of the gap between past and future. There is no gap without this context. That is, the gap is not really a present in a purified sense, but the space of mediation, the space inhabited by flesh-and-blood persons, who, each in their own way, expose themselves to actual, other flesh-and-blood persons who are also attempting to make a life in the gap. It is a space of exposure in which there is no purity about reality, about what is happening out there; it is a space of context and relationality.

Following Arendt herself on this point, the space between unique beings is a political space, a space constituted by speech and action. And we live best in the gap, according to her, in times of revolution, when we break through the forces of tradition and future expectation. She illustrates this with reference to one of Kafka’s parables, where an unnamed ‘he’ struggles with two antagonists. ‘He’ is pressed from behind, by the origin, while simultaneously the road ahead is being blocked. Caught between the past and future, ‘he’ dreams of jumping out of the fray to take the position of umpire over his antagonists. Arendt is critical of Kafka’s move to remove ‘him’ out of the struggle; instead, she thinks the whole point is to engage in that space in such a way that is directly political – that is, by acting and speaking – and not just thinking – with others.

Of course, to some extent, Masschelein echoes this Arendtian move by insisting on the public nature of engaging the educational present. But what gets left aside, I think, is the explicitly narrative, relational aspects of the public that Arendt is after. The gap is neither abstract nor general, for Arendt, but is a specific space where speech and action occur – and it is messy because it is a plural space – a space in which each one of us is engaged in becoming present.

She sees this relational space as central to political life and is resistant to even well-intentioned attempts to do away with the inevitable antagonism, or ‘calamities’, that arise out of plurality:

The calamities of action all arise from the human condition of plurality, which is the condition *sine qua non* for this space of appearance which is the public realm. Hence to do away with this plurality is always tantamount to the abolition of the public realm itself. (Arendt, 1959, p. 197)

Within the public realm – the polis – there is not only agonism but also a certain unpredictability as to the consequences of our speech and action as they are storied through narrative. Such unpredictability is ushered in first by the fact that the actor is ‘not merely a “doer” but always and at the same time a sufferer’ (Arendt, 1959, p. 169). In this, the actor sets a story in motion – through word or deed – that is composed of its consequent deeds and sufferings. That is, the consequences of who we are as we speak are boundless, and as such, occasion responses that in turn affect us (asymmetrical reciprocity). Second, there is an unpredictability to the story insofar as it leaves behind the intentions of the actor/speaker and becomes articulated in the voice of others. That is, the speaker/actor is not the author of her story, but the story gets made and retold by others, which rebound back to her, hitting her unawares (Arendt, 1959, p. 171).

What Arendt shows us is that the relational space in between us is not only fundamentally political but also narrative in character. It is a space that is necessarily fraught with moments of agonism, since each of us is revealed and discloses herself differently. That we depend on others to hear and respond to our words and deeds, our stories, means that when we speak to others we risk also having to bear the story others have created about us, about who we are.

As the Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero writes, ‘actively revealing oneself to others, with words and deeds, grants a plural space and therefore a political space to identity – confirming its exhibitively, relational and contextual nature’ (Cavarero, 2000, p. 22).

Thus this exchange is also fraught with vulnerability and exposure, as Cavarero – not unlike Masschelein – states it, which, to my mind, is the reason why there can be painful consequences to one becoming present in the gap between past and future. As Arendt says, each act of the speaker/doer occasions suffering, which makes politics also an eminently affective engagement with plurality – in context.

It is not that context is deterministic. It is not about seeing that we are located in positions that then form how we perceive the world and others with whom we live. Rather, it is to do with the unexpected ways in which I appear to others – and consequently to myself – through speech and action. Context is not about prescribing some social essence (which would lead to a simple form of identity politics); instead, context is about the materiality of my becoming present.

Thus, I agree with Masschelein that philosophy is an exercise that engages with the present, but it is always a specific present, in a specific context, that is both political and narrative in character, and which is redolent with the potentiality of suffering. In this sense, if philosophy of education is going to be about attending to this present, of conducting what Arendt calls thought landscapes, then it also needs to concern itself not just with the abstract questions of what education (or mothers, daughters, teachers, etc.) are ‘today’, but with the specific questions of what they mean in their varied material manifestations of public life. For, in my view, the transformation of the researcher is not just about adopting an attitude of openness, it is an exposure that risks the very sense of ‘who’ – not what – she is.

I also agree with Masschelein that the transformations of self that occur in the in-between space of togetherness with others and in the time of the gap between past and future are eminently educational. But I have wanted to suggest here that if we see the gap between past and future as a political space, then philosophy of education’s role is not only an exercise in thought, but an exercise in political thought, one committed to an attentiveness to becoming present in context. And by virtue of the political character of exercises in thought, do we, as philosophers of education, not then take on a more expansive role in public discussions of educational transformation? This is only one of the questions that Jan’s essay has provoked me to consider – and I thank him for that.

References

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Correspondence: Sharon Todd, Professor of Education, Department of Education, Stockholm University, SE-106 91 Stockholm, Sweden (sharon.todd@edu.su.se).