

# Education as a discipline of thought and action: a memorial to John Wilson

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The late John Wilson has long been a champion of education as a human undertaking with an integrity of its own, as distinct from one that is essentially subordinate to extrinsic interests and influences (e.g. religious, political, commercial). He has also been a fearless critic of forms of thinking that he regarded as failing to articulate adequately that integrity. In keeping with this view he has boldly argued that the philosophy of education must be conceived and practised as a *sui generis* activity.

In this memorial essay I am keen to show that Wilson is right, and crucially so, in arguing that education is a field of action in its own right and in maintaining that the philosophy of education is a *sui generis* activity. I am also keen to illustrate however, that Wilson is wrong in decisive respects in how he conceives of the *sui generis* character of the philosophy of education and in the restricted understanding of education as a practice that flows from this conception. Acknowledging a debt to Wilson's writings, the essay seeks to pursue further some of his more incisive insights and to connect these to some promising inspirations for educational thought and practice that have their origins in the distinctive, but largely eclipsed work of the historical figure Socrates. To argue thus is to highlight the radical nature of the claim that educational thought and action constitute a *sui generis* undertaking and to call into question any claim that philosophy of education is 'a branch of' one or other form of academic philosophy.

## Introduction

For more than three decades before his death in 2003, John Wilson was a ceaseless advocate of education as a coherent enterprise in its own right or, more concisely, of the integrity of education as a human undertaking. He was also a fearless critic of anything he viewed as compromising that integrity, whether springing from the actions of policymakers on the one hand or from unacknowledged incoherencies within the philosophy of education on the other. Wilson held a firm and abiding conviction that if education as a field of study could be distinguished by clear-sighted and authoritative forms of thinking, unambiguously centred on questions of teaching

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and learning, education as a practice could proceed in happier circumstances. It would thus be better equipped, he maintained, to pursue its own goals robustly in the face of the designs of those in positions of power (political, economic, religious etc.) who regarded education chiefly as a subordinate instrument for advancing their own large-scale priorities.

Wilson's criticisms, characteristically presented in the pages of this journal, tended to focus more on the intellectual disarray he perceived among scholars in the field of education than on flaws in the designs of educational policymakers. It is not that he was unconscious of the latter; rather that he felt it of primary importance that philosophical discourse on education should address the 'quite scandalous' confusion besetting it and put its own house clearly in order (2003a, p. 282). But in the last two decades the international tenor of educational reform has significantly strengthened the influence of economic and social policy within the arenas of public education. By the same token it has largely obscured anything like a voice that might claim for education a sphere of liberty of its own, or an integrity of its own. The task of reclaiming such a voice carries therefore as much practical urgency as scholarly importance, as does the articulation of an almost forgotten idea that may now seem a little strange, if not eccentric: namely that education as a human undertaking might actually *possess* an integrity of its own. My purpose in this memorial is to review some of Wilson's decisive contributions to advancing such a task, though this will not amount to an overall assessment of his work. The latter undertaking would be too large for an article such as this and would have to deal with aspects of Wilson's wider labours, such as his writings on moral education for instance. My purpose has a more practical character: to highlight some characteristic themes in Wilson's work and to show that an active and critical engagement with such themes would richly repay the efforts of those for whom education is both an occupation and a field of study. At a time when both the occupation and the field of study have endured much stormy weather, this might well be the most appropriate memorial to a redoubtable champion of education.

### **Education as a coherent enterprise in its own right**

Wilson's strong convictions about education as a form of action possessing an integrity of its own, and accordingly about philosophy of education as a *sui generis* activity, became clearly evident in his books of the 1970s like *Educational theory and the preparation of teachers* (1975), *Philosophy and practical education* (1977) and *Preface to the philosophy of education* (1979a). These convictions also underlay his many writings on educational studies and his work as a founder editor in 1975, and later as General Editor, of the *Oxford Review of Education*. Informing these convictions was a wary insight, reminiscent of Michael Oakeshott's criticisms some decades earlier, that 'education is a natural stage for the dance of fashion and fantasy' (Wilson, 1980, pp. 47–48), and that a failure to take up arms against the consequences of this allowed the field of educational studies to become beset by incoherence. Secondly, Wilson's determination to confront the dance of educational fashion took shape as a

sense of mission to provide a more disciplined and a more promising environment for educational thought and action. Towards the end of a 1980 essay in this journal, titled 'Philosophy of Education: retrospect and prospect', he voiced his concerns frankly:

I see little hope for the future unless and until the staff of institutions concerned with the study of education and the preparation of teachers themselves, individually and collectively, display a good deal more interest in the rational and intellectual discussion of educational issues, and a good deal more anxiety to sophisticate the level of that discussion. (1980, p. 51)

In the decades since the mid-1970s the distinctiveness of Wilson's mission could be discerned in two prominent features of his work. The first of these was his insistence that serious thought about education as an undertaking must intentionally disavow the popular fancies, intellectual fashions, subjective loyalties and ideological preconceptions that habitually throng the public arenas of educational debate. The second feature can be described as the constructive corollary of the first—namely that serious thought about education must first and foremost be a strict and circumspect *logical* discipline, informed by a facility for reasoned argument; argument that is as self-critical as it is incisive.

Notwithstanding his declared mission, his prolific writings and his prominent standing as a figure in the philosophy of education, it is significant that Wilson's arguments on education as a coherent enterprise in its own right did not give rise to what in intellectual life is called 'a school of thought'. In this his work differed from the more influential currents of linguistic and conceptual analysis in the philosophy of education; currents that became especially associated with the names of R. S. Peters and P. H. Hirst and their many followers, especially from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Though Wilson was sympathetic to the promise of clarity that philosophy as conceptual analysis might bring to education, both as a field of study and a form of action, he remained critical of what he saw as a failure of the bulk of such analysis to make good that promise (Wilson, 2003b, p. 288; 2003a, p. 103). To honour such a promise, Wilson persistently argued, 'our first priority in the philosophy of education is to determine what "education" means, along with its cognate terms ("educate", "educational", etc.)' (2003a, p. 104). On the face of it, this may seem to us to be more a rudimentary task of consulting a dictionary than a probing philosophical one. But Wilson is ever quick to remind his readers that very large quantities of educational research literature, and even the philosophical work of 'Peters and his associates', fails to achieve—though in varying degrees—the kind of clarity that is necessary here (Wilson, 1975, Ch.1; 1979b, p. 21; 1980, pp. 43–44; 2003b, p. 288). That is to say, conceptions of education that equate it with what currently goes on in schools, or with the current priorities of a ministry of education, or with one's preferred intellectual leanings, are all too often taken as unproblematic by the research literature itself. In his 'retrospect and prospect' essay Wilson criticised this tendency in the following terms:

the idea is that either the content of education or (worse) what is to count as education must in the last resort depend on one's ideology, ultimate values, or beliefs about what

constitutes the good life. ... Very few have treated education in its own right, or seen it as much more than a means of implementing their preferred ideology. (1980, p. 43)

To the extent that it seems natural, or somehow inescapable, to think of education as a vehicle for transmitting an ideology or a favoured set of beliefs, Wilson's insistence to the contrary may seem odd, or even obstinate. That he is aware of this is evident from Wilson's own characterisation of the alternative to 'ideological' conceptions of education: 'The alternative view, of which (for lack of others) I have to quote myself as a defender, would be that "education" marks a certain kind of human enterprise, perhaps inevitable for all societies, with its own logical limits, its own necessarily connected concepts, and its own virtues and vices' (1980, p. 43).

There is an acknowledgement here by Wilson that his is a lone voice, and the acknowledgement might seem to offer confirmation that his stance is an eccentric one. This impression might be strengthened moreover when one takes account of Wilson's declarations that the work of the educational philosopher who sticks conscientiously to his trade can 'include a certain dourness and puritanism', or is likely to be 'somewhat monastic' (1980, p. 48). Yet, when one stands back a bit to interrogate Wilson's acknowledgement more objectively, what is really a little strange about it is just this conclusion that his is actually a *lone* voice. It may be a somewhat lone voice in the context of contemporary scholarly discourse on education in the UK, or even amid the inherited conventional wisdom about education in Western societies. But in essence, the voice that Wilson articulates and defends here finds its *locus classicus* in the educational work of Socrates of Athens. Critically viewed, the latter's famous *Apology* (Plato, 1969) stands as an eloquent and suggestive testament to the integrity of learning and teaching. It is notable moreover that human learning, and the kinds of action that most worthily advance it, reveal themselves here not mainly as a field of skills, or even as a profession. More importantly, they become disclosed as active interplays that offer possibilities for a *distinctive way of life*. I will return to the educational significance of this a little later. For now, it is sufficient to emphasise that Wilson's claim that education has an integrity of its own, far from being a peculiarity of a lone philosophical voice in our own time, finds its natural home in the singular, if largely neglected legacy of Socrates to Western civilisation. Though he does not take the work of Socrates as a major theme for exploration, most of Wilson's publications on philosophy of education make one or more illustrative references to Socrates.

### **Philosophy of Education as a *sui generis* pursuit**

Historians of Western education have pointed out that, following the transition from the ancient world to the Middle Ages, the Christian church (later churches) gained a thousand-year monopoly of educational power. Historians also stress that one of the lasting consequences of this was that the school became the 'adjunct of the church' (Boyd & King, 1966, p. 101). What is rarely highlighted in the historical accounts, however, is that the waning of church power in education during the modern historical era was not accompanied by a decline of the hierarchical conceptions of education on which this power was based. Thus it seems somehow to be in 'the order of things'

that, in a more secular age, education should become, not the author of its own affairs, but the instrument of a different power, such as the state, or a political party, or some prominent corporate interests in society. It is because of the apparent naturalness of this inherited state of affairs that it may seem peculiar or counter-intuitive to suggest, as Wilson invariably has done, that education is properly a field of human action *in its own right*, with 'its own logical limits, its own necessarily connected concepts, and its own virtues and vices' (Wilson, 1980, p. 43). I am keen to show that Wilson is right, and crucially so, in arguing that education is a field of action in its own right and in maintaining that the philosophy of education is a *sui generis* activity. I am also keen to illustrate, however, that Wilson is wrong in decisive respects in how he conceives of the *sui generis* character of the philosophy of education and in the restricted understanding of education as a practice that flows from this. My criticisms of Wilson's arguments bear some parallels with those of Paul Standish in his companion article to my own (Standish, 2006).

Wilson has deployed many arguments in his writings over many years, in support of his *sui generis* claim. His most recent and arguably his most forceful effort in this connection is the 2003 essay referred to earlier 'Perspectives on the Philosophy of Education' (2003b). Accordingly that essay will be the main focus of attention here. Wilson begins the essay by providing a review of what he sees as the still-confused state of affairs in the philosophy of education more than twenty years after his 'retrospect and prospect' article of 1980. Perusing an issue of the proceedings of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain from the opening years of the 21st century, Wilson observes wryly that now 'more or less anything goes' (2003b, p. 280). He notes a bewildering variety of contributions, from 'Foucauldian influences in the turn to narrative therapy' to 'The Promise of Bildung', to 'Waiting on the Web', to 'Reconsideration of Rorty's view of the liberal ironist as the post-modern ideal of the educated' (p. 280). Lamenting the lack in all of this of 'a single perspective on the philosophy of education', or 'a single genre of discourse', Wilson's conclusion is a grim one. 'An outsider, or even a fashion-conscious insider, will be baffled both by the question of what the philosophy of education is supposed to be about, and by the question of how it is supposed to deal with whatever it is supposed to be about' (p. 280).

My own first response to Wilson's 'anything goes' charge is to call attention to the point that a similar diversity (though others, including Wilson, might say disparity) is now to be found in much of the scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, and indeed in Western philosophy itself as practised outside of the UK. Here are fields currently marked as much by a ferment of novel intellectual energies as by any authoritative influences received from Western intellectual tradition. And it is important to stress that this new diversity, most often one or other genre of critique, be viewed positively; for instance as the articulation of previously marginalised voices which have now arrived to stay in the critical conversations of humankind. Remaining with the philosophy of education, however, there is a core to Wilson's criticism that cannot easily be discarded. For example, suppose one was to be presented solely with the texts of the articles included over the last decade or so in the half dozen international

journals in this field (in the English language). Next, suppose one was asked, having read them, to identify the field of study of each article, and to give an approximate title for the journal in which it might have appeared. Though some journals would fare better than others here, the task as a whole might yield as many puzzling as clear-cut instances. In those less clear-cut instances, it is likely that terms like ‘culture criticism’, ‘political theory’, ‘feminist ethics’, ‘applied philosophy’, would feature quite frequently as the probable field of study. From an editorial exercise of this kind it is difficult to deny some telling substance to Wilson’s charge that specifically educational concerns are too little in evidence in contemporary philosophy of education, or his related charge that most of such philosophy has little to say to educational practice.

Wilson then seeks a strategy that would successfully tackle his two-fold charge and provide the philosophy of education with a context in which it might fruitfully develop. His preliminary move is to identify four criteria, which I have paraphrased as follows. The philosophy of education is to be an activity: (1) which can properly, not misleadingly, be called such; (2) which is not already identified under some other title; (3) which is a *sui generis* activity and therefore different in purpose and scope from other disciplines; (4) which has something valuable to offer to those involved in educational practice, including teachers, student teachers, educational researchers and policy-makers (2003b, p. 281). He sketches four broadly-conceived forms of philosophy and reviews each against the four criteria just outlined: (a) philosophy as a personal creed, (b) philosophy as a discipline for value judgements, (c) philosophy as an empirical discipline and (d) philosophy as a logical discipline. He then concludes with some arguments on what the subject matter of philosophy of education should properly deal with (pp. 289–293).

In his appraisal of the first of his four forms as a basis for the philosophy of education—namely philosophy as a personal creed—Wilson acknowledges that most educators have some personal ‘philosophy’ in this sense, and suggests that this is probably inevitable; even desirable insofar as it gives a coherence to choices and actions on the educator’s part that might otherwise be arbitrary. But he points out that a personal creed cannot properly merit the name ‘philosophy of education’, as it does not provide the resources for an objective critique of the substantive influences (ideological or otherwise) that inform the creed in question. The necessity for such a critical discipline brings him to discuss the second of his four forms, namely ‘philosophy as a discipline for value judgements’. Here Wilson points out that ‘the criteria of reason’ move to the fore in importance. He sees substantial merit in this second form, in that philosophy as a critical discipline can ‘help us with our judgements of values, not by handing us a set of values on a plate ... but by showing us how to operate reasonably in this particular field’ (p. 284). I will argue a little later that Wilson’s view of the ‘criteria of reason’ is an attenuated one and may be too optimistic, but he is right in pointing out that even if philosophy as a critical discipline has supplied the kind of help he expects of it in handling value judgements, this is not enough to qualify this form of philosophy as a paradigm for the philosophy of education. This is because value judgements encompass a far wider field than education—for instance,



political, moral, aesthetic, religious values. And this very awareness raises a question about the nature and scope of educational values themselves. Wilson now puts this question in the form of an either/or: 'Are there educational values in their own right, perhaps enshrined in the concept of education itself? Or are educational values just a mishmash of moral and political and other values, as these happen to crop up in the practice of education?' (p. 284). Consistent with his stance that education is a coherent enterprise in its own right, he maintains that the first rather than the second question must be answered in the affirmative if the philosophy of education is to be a *sui generis* discipline. He points to some work of his own, most notably *Preface to the philosophy of education* (1979a), in support of his affirmative answer and goes on to claim that an enormous amount of further work needs to be done by philosophers of education to strengthen the case for 'educational values in their own right', and thus to strengthen the discipline itself. In my own view, Wilson's call here (and elsewhere in his writings) to fellow philosophers of education to concentrate their energies on questions that are demonstrably and importantly educational ones, is both apt and courageous. It remains a timely call and may yet prove to be a historic one. Much of the 'further work [that] needs to be done' however involves critical investigation of Wilson's conclusions, and presuppositions, about 'educational values in their own right.' Paul Standish's companion article to my own in this issue provides some incisive illustrations of such further work.

In his review of the third form of philosophy he has sketched—philosophy as an empirical discipline—Wilson concludes that the kinds of truth to be disclosed by empirical enquiry, especially in the humanities and social sciences (history, psychology, sociology, anthropology) are of a different nature than those that concern philosophy. Philosophical concerns, he continues, should not therefore become confused with these empirical disciplines. He claims that it was partly a recognition of this point that led to a development of the 'conceptual analysis' movement in philosophy from the 1930s onwards, and in philosophy of education from the late 1960s. Acknowledging that 'conceptual analysis' has been widely criticised by more recent generations of educational philosophers, Wilson adds the perceptive point that the most serious charge to be made against philosophy as conceptual analysis, and particularly in the field of education, is that 'it does not really offer an escape from the empirical' (p. 286). Truths about the rules for the use of a particular concept are, at the end of the day explains Wilson, empirical truths. For instance, the most such a 'conceptual' enquiry can legitimately offer in relation to the concept marked by the word 'education', is information on how this word is used in contemporary English—as distinct from something more certain (p. 286). This he concludes, does not sufficiently distinguish philosophy of education from enquiries that are essentially empirical in character and thus fails to identify it as a *sui generis* discipline. Noting that something more radical is called for, Wilson now moves to examine the fourth form in his sketch, namely philosophy as a logical discipline.

The main point of merit that recommends the philosophy of education as a logical discipline, Wilson argues, is that it seeks to establish with clarity 'logical distinctions that are time-free and culture-free, and hence not in the normal sense of the word

empirical' (p. 288). Important examples he mentions are the distinction between education and training and between education and indoctrination. He stresses moreover that what is being established in such instances is not a point about contemporary usage of language, but important distinctions that exist in their own right and that have decisive practical consequences. Less obvious, but no less important examples are to be found, he continues, in the everyday conduct of education, such as the distinction between a 'well-disciplined' class and a class that is kept under control by terror, or charm, or other dubious means. He suggests further that the field of education, far from needing just a few major distinctions of this kind, supplies an embarrassment of riches for such logical work. Here he brings together his second form of philosophy with his fourth, since the 'logic of value judgements' includes in its subject matter the making of 'distinctions that seem peculiarly relevant to education' (p. 289). This confluence of 'a discipline for value judgements' and 'a logical discipline' offers the most promising prospects, Wilson claims, for the form that the philosophy of education should take. He points out that it meets the four criteria he outlined, including the important final one—the question of its practical value to educators. In case his readers have difficulty in seeing this last point, Wilson makes it explicit with the following examples.

How a teacher conceives of 'discipline' will profoundly affect what he aims to achieve in the classroom, and what the educational researcher takes to be the subject of his research under that title. What we decide to mean by (for instance) 'spirituality', or 'citizenship', or 'moral education' will govern what we actually do under these headings. The way in which we classify pupils as having 'special needs', or a 'disability', or 'learning difficulties', will in itself single out certain types of pupils for certain kinds of treatment. (p. 289)

Having highlighted something of the substance and significance of Wilson's main criticisms of the philosophy of education, and having elucidated in summary his constructive proposals for fruitful work in the discipline in the future, I want to turn now to engage more critically with these proposals.

### **The practical character of philosophy of education**

Wilson has repeatedly stressed his view that education is not a 'contestable' concept. In other words he has insisted that its meaning is *not* to be essentially linked to the perspectives of different cultures or different historical eras. Acknowledging the empirical fact that there might be important differences in what different cultures might understand by 'a happy marriage' or by 'democracy' or by 'education' Wilson nevertheless insists that such different *conceptions* do not displace—because they do not reach—the heart of the particular *concept* in question. Accordingly, his own 'culture-free and time-free' definition of the concept of education goes as follows: 'a process of serious and sustained learning for the benefit of people as such [as humans], above the level of what they might naturally pick up for themselves' (p. 290). Wilson seeks to provide here a definition that is not open to the charge that education is a 'contestable' concept. Critics might point out here that the notion of a 'culture-free' understanding of anything raises issues that are more problematic and



contestable than Wilson acknowledges; a point that I will return to directly below. Because it reveals important *features* of the concept of education that are not easily contestable, Wilson's definition identifies in a succinct way helpful parameters within which questions that are properly educational might pertinently and profitably be addressed. There may of course be additional features to attend to; features associated with the fact that education is a *practice* and therefore invariably embedded in one or other historical context. Insofar as education as a field of study—whether approached in philosophical, sociological or other mode – fails to attend to the kinds of features he has highlighted, Wilson would hold that the field itself is ill-served by its scholars. Though this is a rebuke to an 'anything goes' mentality, it should not be a controversial point to say that his reminder here is a salutary one.

We have noted earlier the four criteria that Wilson has sketched for the philosophy of education as a coherent and worthwhile enterprise: (1) that it can properly (rather than misleadingly) be called philosophy of education; (2) that it is not already identified under some other title; (3) that it is a *sui generis* activity; (4) that it has something valuable to offer to those involved in educational practice. We have also explored in summary Wilson's constructive proposals to advance a form of philosophical thinking that would meet these criteria. We have seen that in pursuit of this end he rules out philosophy as a personal creed and philosophy as an empirical discipline, advocating instead a combination of philosophy as a critical discipline for the appraisal of value judgements and philosophy as a logical discipline. At this point I want to suggest that, although these moves mark a notable advance, there is something in them that also places constraints on Wilson's own best purposes. In particular I want to argue a case for three related points: (a) that a 'culture-free' and 'time-free' understanding of education, though apparently desirable as a corrective to bias, is probably unattainable, and in any case would miss much that is of inestimable importance; (b) that some sense of personal conviction, but one that remains open to criticism and self-criticism, remains crucial to anything called philosophy of education; (c) that Wilson's acknowledged attraction to an academic form of philosophy that he himself calls 'Oxbridge philosophy' (1980, p. 42) hinders his twin efforts to establish the philosophy of education as a *sui generis* discipline and to disclose education as a coherent undertaking in its own right. I shall explore each of these briefly in this final section of the article and, in doing so, try to recover some insights from what I have called above the neglected legacy of Socrates.

Let us start with the issue of an understanding of education that seeks to be 'culture-free' and 'time-free'. Because education is a human practice, as distinct from a phenomenon or logical entity that can be neatly circumscribed, it is not something that can be adequately understood if it is divorced from the historical contexts and cultural circumstances in which it is carried on. This is not to subscribe to the view that education is essentially a 'contestable' concept. Rather it is to say that a philosophical understanding of education that seeks to be an adequate one (i.e. not lose sight of education as a practice) will properly view education as something involving an inherent tension; indeed an inescapable tension. This is a tension between ideals of learning that seek to escape the hold of history and culture on the one hand and,

on the other, attitudes and practices that are deeply embedded in tradition and custom, or in inheritances of learning themselves. Perhaps the best example in the Western world of learning of this active tension, and of how it can be made fruitful, is that of Socrates. Recall that Socrates had an enormous respect (notably in *Apology* and *Crito*, Plato, 1969) for what inheritances of learning had to address to human understanding and sensibility. Coupled with that respect however were two features that well illustrate the inherent tension to which I have just referred. The first of these is his questioning disposition towards what such inheritances left unexplained. The second is his critical questioning of those who sought to peddle ready-made answers to what remained most thought-provoking and question-worthy in such inheritances.

Drawing these points together, to understand education as a discipline of thought and of action is to understand something that is more an active human interplay than a process; an interplay in which tensions between ‘tradition and the individual talent’, as T. S. Eliot put it, remain central to the arena in which teachers must think and work. Educational practice has ever been attended by powerful forces—whether institutionalised cultural and historical ones or more personal or spontaneous ones—that would close off the interplay or divert it to ends other than educational ones. A lesson that the philosophy of education might profitably learn from the example of Socrates is how best to identify and cope with such forces, thereby affording to education at least some measure of space in which it might properly enjoy an integrity of its own.

Let us turn now to the second issue, namely my claim that some sense of personal conviction remains crucial to anything called philosophy of education. Wilson is correct to point out that ‘philosophy as a personal creed’, though supplying a rationale of one kind or another for a teacher’s actions, does not supply the resources for an objective critique of such actions. But *any* critique of action must itself spring from some kind of conviction, as for instance does any ‘critique of ideology’. Unless it steps outside of history moreover, and assumes something like a ‘God’s eye’ view of humanity and its affairs, neither can such a critique be objective except in some *degree* or other. There is something of an illusionary reassurance, therefore, in the weight that Wilson is prepared to place on answers that ‘satisfy the criteria of reason’ (p. 284). For instance, a quick retort to Wilson here might be to ask: The criteria of *whose* reason? This puts it perhaps too strongly, for it is no more a case of granting the argument to a relativist stance than of claiming that humans can be in possession of ‘pure reason’. I am keen rather to point out that the criteria of human reason are only as strong as the (often unacknowledged) presuppositions from which they spring. To this one might add that such presuppositions are not something ‘merely subjective’ that can be set aside, but are a constitutive feature of human rationality itself. This means that a form of argumentation that includes a self-critical standpoint towards its own presuppositions is probably the most objective and most sustainable form of argumentation of which human reason is capable.

To illustrate this point and its crucial significance for the philosophy of education, let me draw again on Socrates. I would like to quote a memorable passage from his defence of his life’s work to a jury of 501 fellow citizens. In this instance, however, I would like the reader to substitute the word ‘reason’ wherever Socrates uses the word

‘wisdom’. This does not disfigure anything, since for Socrates, reasoning featured very largely in anything meriting the name wisdom.

Real wisdom is the property of God and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value. It seems to me that he is not referring literally to Socrates but has merely taken my name as an example, as if he would say to us: ‘The wisest of you is he who has realised, like Socrates, that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless’.  
(*Apology*, 23a)

To respond to this by saying that one does not believe in God or in oracles is to miss the critical point, just as it is to miss the irony in the remark that human wisdom (or reason) is ‘really worthless’, coming as it does from one who spent most of his life trying to nurture human reason to the best of its capabilities. The critical point concerns the inherent limitations and partialities in human understanding itself. Socrates proceeds to reveal cogently to the court his abiding conviction that a life spent in trying to advance with others the cause of learning with the kind of intellectual modesty that he and his associates have tried to practise, is the most worthy kind of life for humans. From Socrates’ arguments here I would just wish to make explicit, and to stress, two brief conclusions. First, the philosophy of education, in the degree that it fails to embrace a conviction of this kind as a defining feature of its own work, becomes in that degree enfeebled *as* philosophy of education. Second, John Wilson’s writings and arguments over many decades reveal, despite his own disclaimers, that in his case the philosophy of education involved not merely a logical discipline, but also a strong moral conviction that went beyond the confines of formal logic; one that contained more than a few echoes of Socrates as thinker-cum-educator.

Now to the third and final issue—my claim that Wilson’s intellectual leanings toward a particularly academic form of philosophy tend to hinder his own best purposes as a philosopher of education. From the references that have been made in recent paragraphs to the example of Socrates, readers will gather that the practical form of philosophy embodied in his life’s work provides a context that is more than a little hospitable to Wilson’s concerns. Wilson indeed makes many references to Socrates in his writings, and draws approvingly on Socratic insights. He does not, however, see Socrates adequately as a practical philosopher in his own right. Neither does the bulk of Western philosophical scholarship, chiefly for the reason of the ‘neglect’ I referred to in passing earlier. By this neglect I mean the manner in which the most distinctive features of Socrates’ (non-metaphysical) thought became eclipsed by the overwhelming influence on Western philosophy of the metaphysical theories of his most distinguished student, Plato. There is of course an intriguing irony in all of this, since it is to the dramatic early works of Plato that we owe our best gleanings of the historical figure Socrates—works like *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, *Euthyphro*, *Apology* and *Republic Bk1*. And the irony is compounded if we take an educational perspective here as distinct from that of philosophical scholarship. To put it concisely, the enduring influence of Platonism on Western traditions of philosophy beclouded what was most distinctive in the thought and practice of Socrates. To add to that, the institutionalising of Platonist forms of thought in European centres of learning during

the centuries-long era of Christendom helped to push towards oblivion a true appreciation of a Socratic approach to educational thought and practice.

The reclamation of what is distinctive in the thought and work of Socrates, especially in contrast to Plato, has been advancing in recent decades, most notably perhaps through the writings of the late Gregory Vlastos (1991) and Alexander Nehamas (1998, 2000). I have been attempting to add my own efforts to this reclamation where the philosophy of education is concerned (Hogan, 1995, Ch 1). But if the philosophy of education is to be a *sui generis* activity—or as John Wilson puts it, ‘different in purpose and scope from other disciplines’—then it cannot find its most fruitful sources in another ‘branch of philosophy’, especially one that is not given in any major way to the concerns of practice, educational or otherwise. That is not to say that ‘Oxbridge’ philosophy has nothing to say to the study of education. Wilson’s own work has shown that it has, but a critical study of his arguments also reveals some of its more important limitations. In my own engagement with these arguments I have been interested not in any adversarial pursuit, but in trying to identify such limitations so as to enable educational thought and action to get beyond them. In short, I have been trying to outline at closer range the important landscape into which Wilson’s enquiries have boldly sought to bring an educational thinking that is worthy of the name.

### Notes on contributor

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