

THE USELESSNESS OF PHILOSOPHY

Mario Di Paolantonio

Usually when we talk about the significance of linking philosophy and education together we tend to defend the practical uses of philosophy in education. An education inflected by philosophy is often thought to be beneficial for reproducing our democracy. Martha Nussbaum's work has been exemplary in drawing out this point.¹ Against the prevailing general suspicion, if not outright dismissal, of philosophy's ability of ever being able to engage or do anything useful in the real world, Nussbaum has eloquently and consistently defended the practical role that philosophy needs to play in an education vested with reproducing democratic citizens. For Nussbaum, cultivating the capacities for thinking and imagining, and for making philosophical arguments, crucially contributes to fostering our capabilities for self-reflection, empathy, dialogue and reason. These are all qualities that need to be nurtured in a democracy so that those likely to be affected by a decision can gather to discuss, to give shape, and possibly encounter and learn from other opinions. Accordingly, our ability to deliberate as socially uninhibited and equal citizens is greatly facilitated by an education that makes use of philosophy to allow us to encounter how our own positions are not uniquely reasonable and need further elaboration and justification. Facing contrasting ideas and having to rationally justify and test our own claims and intuitions alongside others – a basic premise of philosophy – consequently nurtures in us a way of living with others in mutual (rational) respect. All this helps us to consciously commit and reproduce the project of sustaining an ever-growing plurality.

There is thus, for Nussbaum, a clear, practical, educational role that philosophy must play in a democracy. There would be dire social consequences, according to her, if we were to elide the usefulness of philosophy for education – deliberative democracy would itself be at stake.

Like many people working in education and committed to democracy, I am sympathetic to Nussbaum's arguments. Admittedly, I often rehearse a version of her argument to my undergraduate students who sometimes lose patience or want to know 'what's the use of philosophy in education anyways.' Indeed, given the pervasive and menacing manner in which the managerial logic of efficiency is undermining the place of the humanities in education, I appreciate her strategic defense for the role of philosophy in education. But, as Theodore Adorno once remarked: to defend something means to give something up in what one is defending. So, while generally supportive of Nussbaum's claims, I think it is important to shift the emphasis and ask, what are we giving up when we make (as Nussbaum does) a practical defense for the usefulness of philosophy in reproducing democratic citizens? What in this defense of philosophy and education are we giving up in philosophy and education? Well, for

¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge M.A.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

one, I want to propose we might be giving up, or, perhaps not accentuating enough, something crucially significant about philosophy and education, which has to do with its uselessness and resistance to practicality.

Rather than hurrying to defend philosophy's use and purpose in producing better citizens, what would it mean to think about the relationship between philosophy and education by considering the significance of the impracticality of philosophy? What happens to our thinking about the relationship between philosophy and education when we affirm uselessness?

There is something about philosophy that seems to escape us and tenaciously resists being likened with use or applicability. Even our tendency to proclaim value to what is useful would be something that philosophy would ask us to unsettle. Philosophy gets going when our self-assurances become unsettled and the self-evident returns as a question. Philosophy seems to be more like a pause, an unsettling question or interruption that vexes, rather than something that can be practically measured, captured or instantly applied. The very frustrations we might have with the pause and inaction that philosophy offers might actually help us put into relief and expose a prevalent and often unexamined impulse in our time: our drive to find practical solutions and answers rather than dwelling with questions. We get frustrated with questions that beget further questions because we live in a culture where everything is apparently in "crisis," where the "emergencies" upon us do not allow us to waste time, where we need to find relevant and purposeful applicable results at once. Admittedly, the consequence of living in a constant state of emergency means that we become ever more prone to oversimplifications and thoughtlessness as we have no time to dwell without answers. This culture of emergency-response seems to be particularly pervasive, I think, in schools and in the teaching profession, which always feels compelled to find immediate novel responses to manage the latest crisis.

While those arguing from Nussbaum's position might propose fostering "deliberative practices" in schools to counter our susceptibility to thoughtlessness, I think such practices in the end translate into a form of "critical thinking." That is, a set of skills for decoding logical inferences, which is another purposeful application to secure results. This task-oriented practice vastly differs from the *sense* of philosophy that I'm gesturing to. By not being afraid to affirm the impracticality implicit in the coupling of philosophy and education we admit a disposition for thinking that is completely different than "critical thinking." What this disposition offers is meaningful to consider. Ron Scapp reminds us that by announcing the impracticality of philosophy rather than "sounding a cynical death knell to the significance of philosophy... we actually assert its value, albeit a value not immediately or directly transposable to the practical affairs of the 'market.'"² According to Scapp, affirming philosophy's impracticality proposes a reversal of intentionality. We do not direct philosophy to this or that purpose but we are instead summoned and led by the time it takes to properly reflect and deeply

² Ron Scapp, "On the Practicality of Practical Philosophy," *Studies in Practical Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (2004): 71.

wonder about what might turn up through our thinking. In this juncture, a different time and disposition towards the world opens up.

What I'm suggesting is that by bringing this sense of philosophy to education we unleash the wondering function so that education can become something more than socialization. With wonder we learn to light up the world, which helps us guard against being thoughtless toward each other and the world.

Dwelling with wonderment, and taking time for thinking, leads us to an older, perhaps forlorn, sense of what it means to be in *skholē* (the etymological root of school). *Skholē* proposes a very un-practical time and place. Eduardo Duarte, drawing on Hannah Arendt's insight regarding the significance of inhabiting the "modality of the spectator" when we think, notes that *skholē* is where one can remain withdrawn from the pressing, hurried and frenzied events of life, action and self-interest.³ And, as such, by being in *skholē* one is empowered by the privilege of cultivating a perspective that enables one to see, understand and sense what the actor caught up in the action cannot perceive. *Skholē* is thus a time and place for igniting a thoughtfulness that, in the shelter of its withdrawal, can dwell with questions in a rapt attentiveness and with a care that extends beyond immediate concerns. Actually, in order for philosophy to be possible, it demands the shelter that the impractical time and place of *skholē* affords. Bringing education to philosophy gives philosophy a time and place to cultivate wonderment, and to think our thinking through in a way that is not possessed by purposes or by the need to jump into action. Here the link between philosophy and education concerns recalling and forging the sense of *skholē* in school by apportioning a dwelling-place that can nourish and sustain the pathos of wonderment. I don't think the concern that mobilizes philosophy and education for the sake of socialization gives enough attention to the significance of recovering this sense of *skholē* in school. Rather, many distrust this time and place of withdrawal and are irritated by the attitude of wonder that spurs ever more questions that make us less assured.

Whereas we cannot teach the pathos of wonderment in the same manner we teach a skill, we can conserve a time and place where the self-evidence of our purposes and of what we think we know can return to us as something strange. In this sense, education gives philosophy a time and place to do its thing, while philosophy can lead education to sense and wonder about the world with an attentiveness and care that, since it need not have any practical purpose or assurances, can always surprise us with the unexpected.

3 Eduardo Manuel Duarte, "Educational Thinking and the Conservation of the Revolutionary," *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 2 (2010): 500.

Biography

Mario Di Paolantonio is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at York University. Drawing on ethical philosophy and innovative methodologies, his award winning research explores the contested and varying manner in which education and memorial sites attempt to come to terms with historical wrongs. He is an International Research Associate with the Unit for Global Justice at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and at the Centro de Estudios en Pedagogías Contemporáneas and the Escuela de Humanidades at the Universidad Nacional de San Martín (UNSAM), Buenos Aires, Argentina.

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