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## **Is it possible to live a philosophical, educational life in education, nowadays?**

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I consider if and how far it is possible to live an educational philosophical life, in the fast changing, globalised world of Higher Education. I begin with Socrates' account of a philosophical life in the *Apology*. I examine some tensions within different conceptions of what it is to do philosophy. Then I go on to focus more closely on what it might be to live a philosophical, educational life in which educational processes and outcomes are influenced by philosophy, using examples taken from published sources and from conversational interviews with philosophers carried out by myself with Kenneth Wain, Bas Levering and Richard Pring. I then outline the directions of current European policy for Higher Education. Finally I discuss how far current policies and trends leave room for doing philosophy of education, concluding that it is possible, but only for individuals who are in very much in sympathy with current policy trends or who are creative in constructing smoke screens.

*Key words:*

Educational life; philosophical life; philosophical pedagogy; research assessment; quality assessment; educational policy; Higher Education.

## **Is it possible to live a philosophical, educational life in education, nowadays?**

### **1. Being a philosopher of education**

To understand education necessitates understanding a complex interaction of practices, theories, ethics and politics. To be an educator is to do something: to undertake a practical activity with a view to making a difference. The kinds of differences that educators make can never be epistemologically, ethically or politically neutral. So such practical activities are complex, and always ethical and political. I use the term 'educators' rather than 'teachers' because the former has a broader signification. It includes school teachers. It also includes tutors in adult and community education, pre-school staff, policy makers, administrators and university lecturers.

It is possible to be an educator without paying attention to explicit theories of education, or to the reasons behind policy changes which affect practice. Indeed some educators prefer to see education as a severely practical activity, without need of complex theorisation. However when educators take this view they severely curtail their understanding of their own practices and so their capacity for reflection and examination of what they are doing. They miss the opportunity to engage with research and explicit theory in order to improve what they do. They also miss the opportunity of making their own implicit theories explicit in order to bring them into articulation with a diversity of perspectives based on practice, research and scholarship.

Those whose roles mean they spend a considerable proportion of their time researching and theorising education are often engaged in educational practices themselves, as university teachers, policy makers or consultants. Clearly there are logical links within a role which combines theorising education and practicing it, even if some theorists do not make this connection. Just as with educators who see their work as severely practical, those who see their theoretical work as disconnected from their own practices miss the opportunity to reflect on and examine what they are doing as educational professionals. For educational theorists, epistemological, ethical and political reflexivity about their own professional lives is relevant to their research

as well as to their educational practices. They are called on to live their conclusions and understandings in a way that few other areas of scholarship share.

In short, educators live educational lives. They have responsibility for what they are doing, regardless of whether they are among those who are primarily engaged in practice or among those who are primarily engaged in theorising. This means that they cannot escape the significance of ethical and political reflexivity.

The focus in this paper is on one subset of educators for whom there is a further complexity: philosophers of education. Philosophy itself may be understood to be a responsible practice as well as a theoretical pursuit. Thus to be a philosopher can be understood as living a philosophical life, just as being an educator is to live an educational life. Both kinds of lives are self-constructed. There can be no universal, timeless meaning for either of the phrases, 'living a philosophical life' and 'living an educational life'. Their meanings are contingent on the historical, geographical, personal, social and cultural circumstances in which that life is being lived. To paraphrase Marx, philosophers of education live philosophical, educational lives, but not in circumstances of their own making.

In this paper I consider how far and in what ways it is possible to live a philosophical, educational life, nowadays. I will not be arguing that philosophers of education ought to 'practice what we preach' (though I think we should) because to argue that ethical position is well beyond the scope of this paper. In the next Section, I consider some answers to the question of what it is to live a philosophical life, starting with the Socrates of Plato's *Apology* who claims to have spent most of his life living what he saw as a philosophical life, attempting to influence the political life of Athens, rather than taking part in public life directly. In Section 3, I focus on what it might be to live a philosophical, educational life in which educational processes and outcomes are influenced by philosophy. However I do not consider other aspects of what it is to live an educational life, and the many possible interpretations of that phrase. I use examples taken from published sources and from conversational interviews I have carried out with some philosophers of education. In Section 4, I discuss the implications of current policy, since the hope of being able to live a philosophical, educational life is constrained by policy. I outline the current world-wide tendency

among policy makers to embrace a view of education as having clear objectives and specifiable outcomes and which is primarily concerned with being useful for the State, especially in economic terms. I briefly discuss what kind of philosophy of education fits well with current policy contexts, focusing first on pedagogy and secondly on policy. I point out that few philosophers of education would wish to embrace such a conception. Finally, I consider if current policies and trends within education leave room for these alternative conceptions. So I return to the issue at the heart of the *Apology*: Is it possible to live a philosophical, educational life nowadays?

## **2. What is it to ‘live a philosophical life’?**

What is it to live a philosophical life? Socrates gave an answer in his speech to the City during his trial for corrupting the young and teaching them to not believe in the gods. Plato reports his speech in the *Apology*.<sup>1</sup> For Socrates, a philosopher is a lover of wisdom, who should not only try to know what wisdom is, but also to pursue it through talking. Such talk is a dialogue from which both parties hope to learn. A philosopher also has to try to persuade others to value wisdom (*Apology* 29d). Moreover, philosophy is not just a matter of theorising and conversing with individuals about virtue, but also of the public good more generally, the good of the city (36d). He was clear that living the philosophical life included the doing of philosophy through talk: a commitment to debate and to the deep concern for the good of the polity and the individuals within it. He was keen to point out that he was willing to debate with any and everybody, not just with those willing to pay (33a). It was arguable that he wanted to distinguish ‘sophists’ who earned money from teaching their claimed superior wisdom, in contrast to ‘philosophers’ who loved and sought wisdom. For Socrates, the commitment to seeking virtue could not be separated from the practice of philosophy.

Socrates’ speech about the nature of a philosophical life remains influential. However, people have been doing philosophy for over two and a half thousand years since Socrates’ time. Even a glance at that history shows that there is very little agreement about what philosophy itself is. Philosophy may still be characterised as the love of wisdom – but such a statement begs the questions of what counts as love, as wisdom, and, of course, promising ways of expressing or acting on such a love.

Socrates' view about the philosophical life has held up well. In the early twentieth century Dewey (1916) argued that since philosophy is a love of wisdom, it holds implications for the conduct of life. He still needed to argue the point because any one view about the nature of philosophy is bound to be contentious. Indeed, the question 'What is philosophy?' is itself a philosophical question. One often quoted remark (attributed to various philosophers) is that philosophy is what is found on the bookshelf in a philosopher's study. However, this remark is less than helpful because it gives no insight into the passionate arguments philosophers have about what content and method properly features in philosophical writing and debate. Examples abound from the second half of the twentieth century. Witness the debates about whether feminist philosophy could properly be called philosophy. It was argued strongly that philosophy could have no gender, for instance, as reported in an educational context by Jane Roland Martin (1994). Witness also the furore sparked in the early 1990s by the initial refusal of the Philosophy Faculty at Cambridge university to give Derrida an honorary degree because they found his work lacked academic rigour. This was just one example of rifts between the Anglo-Saxon, analytic tradition and so-called 'continental' philosophy, rifts that dominated philosophy in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Within philosophy of education, evidence for such a rift and differing perceptions of it can be found in the exchange between Standish (2007) and White (2010).

Plato seems to have taken rather a different view from Socrates, and he too has been hugely influential. A well known characterisation of philosophy is Whitehead's famous comment:

The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. (1979, p.39)

Not he hastens to add, though this is less often quoted, that such footnoting entails adopting Plato's own system. On the contrary he says:

I do not mean the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from his writings. I allude to the wealth of general ideas scattered through them. (1979, p.39)

True to Whitehead's observation, Plato's often quoted comment<sup>2</sup>, 'For wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder', is itself taken as a general

idea rather than a specific one. In context, wonder is seen as the attribute of a diligent beginner learning from, rather than with, a master. The context is one of dialogue but one in which there is an interlocutor who is speaking from a position of greater knowledge rather than one which is a joint search between two people who both stand to learn from the conversation, still less one in which everyone can benefit (*Theatatus*, 155d):

Soc. For I suspect that you have thought of these questions before now.

Theaet. Yes, Socrates, and I am amazed when I think of them; ...

Soc. I see, my dear Theaetetus, that Theodorus had a true insight into your nature when he said that you were a philosopher, for wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder. But do you begin to see what is the explanation of this perplexity...?

Theaet. Not as yet.

Soc. Then you will be obliged to me if I help you to unearth the hidden "truth" of a famous man or school.

Theaet. To be sure, I shall be very much obliged.

Soc. Take a look round, then, and see that none of the uninitiated are listening. Now by the uninitiated I mean: the people who believe in nothing but what they can grasp in their hands, and who will not allow that action or generation or anything invisible can have real existence.

Theaet. Yes, indeed, Socrates, they are very hard and impenetrable mortals.

Soc. Yes, my boy, outer barbarians. Far more ingenious are the brethren whose mysteries I am about to reveal to you.

Aristotle can be said to have begun this process of footnoting to Plato using general ideas rather than specific ones. His idea of wonder seems to be far more related to puzzlement, and indeed to facts yet to be discovered rather than to mathematical or logical ideas. This leaves Aristotle as far from Socrates' concern with individual and collective virtue to be continually sought in dialogue with anyone willing to engage in it as he is from Plato, his own teacher.

Different answers to the question, ‘What is philosophy?’ seem to reflect a number of continuing tensions within philosophy and philosophising. These are the kinds of tensions that can already be seen in Plato as he moves away from Socrates, but continues to be influenced by him. They can then be seen again in Aristotle as he in turn moves away from Plato but continues to be influenced by *him*. The term ‘tensions’ is used because they are precisely that: tensions. That is, they exist because there is more than one force. So they are not either/or positions. They are better understood as positions in the force fields. Such positions are analogous to, for instance, the position of a weight on a spring which responds to the force of gravity and also to the force of the spring. And there are usually more than two forces, for instance if someone pulls on the weight. Similarly the alignment of iron filings in a magnetic field depends on the existence of at least one North and one South pole, but is affected by any other magnetic material in the vicinity.

In what follows I draw attention to some of these tensions, especially the ones that have a particular bearing on what it is to do philosophy of education. I consider: engagement and contemplation; process and product; reasons in words, stories and images; the true, the good and the new. I will argue that to do philosophy necessitates the philosopher resolving these tensions and dilemmas, if only provisionally. And these resolutions result in a particular interpretation of what it might mean to live a philosophical life - in particular, to live a philosophical, educational life. My argument is not intended as an exhaustive analysis of tensions that arise within the understanding of what philosophy is. For instance I consider neither the role of tradition nor political stance. Equally, I barely consider tensions that arise within an understanding of educational practices.<sup>3</sup> A full discussion would be beyond the scope of this paper.

A tension which is particularly significant for educators is related to the extent to which philosophy is taken to be something which springs from and engages with the everyday world. Philosophers differ in how far they take what they do to be something which is intended to make a difference to that world and how far they take it to be a contemplation of it. Plainly, educational philosophers are less likely to position themselves close to the contemplation end of this tension. I am of the view that research and scholarship carried out as ‘educational’ is intended to make a



difference. Of course it may be that it is carried out about education without being 'educational' (Griffiths, 1998). Research and scholarship about education may be carried out without any intention of making a practical difference, but be done, perhaps, out of curiosity, or from the joy of understanding the logic of some area of it. Simone Weil is an example of a philosopher who felt the force of both engagement and contemplation, while mostly working with a resolution in terms of the former. She says:

The proper method of philosophy consists in clearly conceiving the insoluble problems in all their insolubility and then in simply contemplating them, fixedly and tirelessly, year after year, without any hope, patiently waiting.  
(Quoted in Cameron 2003, p.250)

This remark is significant because Weil put her own health and security at risk in order to engage politically in education as a philosopher/teacher, and again later as a manual worker. Philosophising was an integral part of her activism (Weil, 2005).

Another significant tension is between philosophy as process and as product. I use the terms, 'process' and 'product' to emphasise the link with education and educational theory and practices, where these terms are often used to distinguish different understandings of the curriculum. They are not the terms popular in current mainstream philosophical writing where it is more usual to talk of 'methods' and 'systems'. Some descriptions emphasise product: the kinds of understanding that philosophy engenders and the systems it has developed in order to do so. Other descriptions of philosophy emphasise process: that to learn and understand philosophy necessarily implies doing it, and further, that the method of doing of it just *is* the philosophy.

The resolution towards product or process is related to the resolution of the tension between engagement and contemplation. If the resolution is towards process (method), tensions arise about what might count as a dialogue and a rational argument. Differences occur about the role of imagery in argument, as pointed out by Le Doeuff (1989). The nature of rationality itself is also in question. Lloyd (1984) is one of many examples of philosophers raising general issues about currently accepted criteria for rational discussion and argument. If the resolution is towards product (system), the wished for outcome of philosophy may be a better characterisation of

the true or the good. Arguably, in an educational context, this is what R.S. Peters took himself to be doing in relation to educational concepts. Alternatively, it may be something more creative. Deleuze and Guattari's answer to the question, 'What is philosophy?', is that philosophers are engaged in the creation or formation of concepts (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994). According to this resolution, great philosophers are those who create fertile, explanatory concepts.

Heidegger, Arendt and Jaspers are three philosophers whose philosophies were formed in relation to each other and they provide an interesting example of different ways of resolving these tensions. Heidegger developed systems of thought while also teaching and taking the post of rector of his university. The degree to which his philosophy is embedded in its Nazi context is a continuing subject of debate, but he never claimed that his philosophy was concerned with politics. Jaspers, on the other hand, thought it more important to teach and to engage politically, rather than to create a philosophical system. Arendt's resolution in *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1958) was to create a system which was embedded in the world, but to call it 'political theory' rather than philosophy. Philosophy proper, she thought was more abstract<sup>4</sup>. However, others generally take her to be doing philosophy in her more political as well as in what she, herself, considered to be her philosophical writing.

So far the discussion has mainly focused on philosophy in general but my interest in this paper is philosophy of education. Education has been of interest to philosophers through the centuries. Their different approaches demonstrate how differently they have resolved the tensions inherent in answers to the question of what philosophy is. Hogan argues that Plato and Socrates differ on the specific question of teaching. Hogan argues that the historical Socrates, as found in the dialogues generally believed to be early, had a view of teaching which was coherent with his view of philosophy as a collaborative search for wisdom or truth. Hogan argues that for Socrates, teaching and learning are a process, a philosophical way of life based on dialogue. He then goes on to argue that Plato had a very different view of teaching, as found for instance in the opening sections of the *Republic*, or in the quotation from the *Theatatus*, above. In Plato can be found a conviction that the best teachers have the best grasp on truth and should tailor the students' experiences and direction of argument accordingly. This view can also be attributed to Rousseau, in relation to the education of both boys and girls. Both are required to follow the strictures of their

teachers. A boy is required to learn from nature and not allowed to read anything except *Robinson Crusoe* until he attains puberty in case he learns anything second hand. A girl is required to become accustomed to restraint, since the teacher, her mother, knows that she needs to be docile as an adult woman. It seems that both Plato and Rousseau required education to fit into their more general systems of political philosophy – the kinds of men and women needed for their ideal polities. These three philosophers seem to resolve the tension about what counts as philosophical discussion and argument in different ways. Socrates appears to favour short, spoken questions and answers, explicitly so in the *Protagoras*. Plato wrote dialogues. Rousseau wrote a story about two imaginary pupils, Emile and Sophie.

Differences continue to fuel debates about how to resolve the tensions underlying the question about how best to characterise philosophy of education. Since the 1950s, philosophical writing on education has largely become the separate sub-discipline, ‘philosophy of education’, with its institutional home in Faculties of Education rather than in Faculties of Philosophy, both in Britain and in the USA (Chambliss, 2009; Oancea and Bridges, 2009). Recent collections of papers show that within the English language tradition at least, there is little agreement about what should count as philosophy of education, and the diversity within the field is commented on in the introductory sections of recent overviews of the field (Blake, Smeyers, Smith and Standish, 2003; Carr, 2005; Curren, 2006). At least part of this diversity is attributable to different ways of resolving tensions between contemplation, engagement, process, product, truth and rationality. For instance, in Blake *et al.* (2003), Hogan and Smith argue for philosophy of education as a practice, while in contrast, Noddings and Slote explain systems of ethics and apply them to education..

As I am doing philosophy of education myself, I shall place myself along the different dimensions, at least provisionally. I do this, reflexively, because how I do so must influence my understanding and presentation of philosophy of education. I align myself with engaged, dialogic, process-oriented approaches, always embedded in some specific context. For me, doing educational philosophy necessitates always asking the question, ‘So what?’; and looking for an answer in relation to educational theory and practice beyond philosophy. However it is rarely something to be straightforwardly applied. It is less about producing a series of outcomes and more a way of understanding, of being in

the world. For instance it includes awareness of some relevant logical and conceptual distinctions and also a willingness to continue looking at their fit with current educational contexts. This is what I have called elsewhere a ‘practical philosophy’ (1998; Barr and Griffiths, 2007; Leicester, Twelvetrees and Bowbrick, 2007).

### **3. Examples of living a philosophical, educational life**

The philosophical, educational life in education will include writing for and/or debating with other philosophers and educators, in particular, educational philosophers. But it will also include activities intended to make a difference. These may include specifically pedagogical activities, especially teaching students on accredited courses. And they may include attempts to influence policy and/or public opinion about education in various ways. In this section I look at some examples from Europe and North America, to see how understandings of philosophy of education have been expressed in educational, philosophical lives in the not too distant past, both through teaching and through attempts to influence educational policy.

#### *3a. Pedagogy*

There seem to be very few accounts in the educational literature about the connections between philosophical and pedagogical practice. The connection between a particular way of doing philosophy and a particular way of teaching are rarely made explicit, at least in writing. There is, of course, an extensive literature on what philosophical conclusions might mean for pedagogy. Most of this literature is not focused on the contexts in which philosophers themselves teach. A great deal of it focuses on schools. Some of it focuses on higher education including teacher education. But there seems to be very little published material about what a philosophical, educational approach might be when embodied and enacted. This seems to be so both for philosophers of education and also for philosophers in Departments of Philosophy.

Campbell (2002) provides an interesting insight into how mainstream philosophers in North America have viewed the relationship between philosophy and pedagogy. In his article on the history of the teaching of philosophy in America since the late nineteenth century he shows that while some philosophers have seen links between doing and teaching philosophy, others think that the latter gets in the way of the

former. He describes how the American Philosophical Association (APA) was founded in 1901 because those supportive of it:

were rebelling in part against the felt inadequacies of their own undergraduate educations.... instead of 'real' philosophical questioning, these philosophers felt that they had been offered a kind of apologetics for religious and political conservatism. (Campbell, 2002, p.54)

He goes on to explain that at the same time that the APA was being founded, research universities were being set up. These research universities saw their primary teaching focus to be graduates, but also considered that time spent teaching was time away from high quality scientific inquiry, including in philosophy. Currently, there is some interest among a few philosophers in how to teach, but there is little sign that this is related to their philosophical lives. This is demonstrated by most material published in the journal *Teaching Philosophy* (published since 1975) and in the blog *In Socrates' Wake* (on the web since 2007). The listserv PHILOS-L also regularly discusses teaching. However all of these publications appear to assume a consensus about what needs to be learnt and how. The suggestions, comments and questions are overwhelmingly technical, focusing on immediate questions about pedagogical strategies rather than on the educational or philosophical reasons behind them. Similarly, there is very little on the teaching of philosophy of education, though it is possible to find philosophically informed articles about introducing initial and in-service teachers to theory in general (e.g. Dewhurst and Lamb, 2005).

A possible source of information about philosophical, educational approaches can be found in biographical material. Michael Peters (2001) has explored the connections to be found between Wittgenstein the philosopher and Wittgenstein the teacher. Peters argues that Wittgenstein's dialogic style in the *Investigations* can be seen as both his philosophy and his pedagogy. Similarly, Burbules (2008) argues that Wittgenstein was, consciously or not, modelling how to do philosophy in both his writing and his teaching. Another philosopher who seems to have lived a philosophical, educational life is Geoff Midgley as reported by Mary Midgley (2005). She makes it clear that he saw both philosophising and teaching as engaged, serious, oral processes of dialogue rather than doing philosophy in the pages of Journals and teaching it didactically.

Published material from philosophers of education is equally rare, except, arguably, in relation to Philosophy for Children. An exception is a chapter by Hogan and Smith (2003). They argue that if philosophy is seen as the ‘under-labourer’ clearing the ground, as the 1960s London school tended to argue, then a philosopher has firstly to clear the ground, secondly, to tell others what to do in education, now that the ground has been cleared, and thirdly explain to newcomers to philosophy of education how that under-labouring had been achieved. In contrast, Hogan and Smith take the view that philosophy should be seen as a process of doubt and openness. So dialogue must be encouraged in the classroom for educators and would be philosophers of education (insofar as there is a distinction) in order for the class as a whole to re-think and re-fashion their ideas. They use the example of a class in initial teacher education discussing moral education to show how it can become a process of open-ended inquiry, using Socratic dialogue, in order to clarify an important practical question.

### *3b. Policy*

For policy, as for pedagogy, it is relatively easy to find published material on how philosophy should influence policy. But there is little on how that is done and even less on how that fits with the philosophical views behind it. So in what follows, again I turn to personal accounts, this time drawing more on interviews than on biography. Recent research on how social science research, including theoretical research, can influence policy indicates that it does so in a way which leaves space for philosophy (Nutley, Walter and Davies, 2007). Most often, policies emerge piecemeal and by accretion, becoming shaped by dialogue with many actors and through a process of implementation (Nutley, 2009)<sup>5</sup>.

Naturally, the opportunities for dialogue that present themselves vary with country, as well as with the philosophical commitments of individual philosophers of education. In Malta, Kenneth Wain described how he experienced being part of a high profile policy making team. He reported the experience as being both difficult and worthwhile, He pointed out that when he participated in governmental policy discussions, he could not go public with his critique when he disagreed with the outcome. However he does not regret the participation. He is pleased that he had some influence ‘even though I did not get my way all the time’. (Wain,

conversational interview, April 2009). On the other hand, the balance is only worth it for some policies. More recently he has relished providing critique through the media:

A few months ago at a business breakfast with the Press, there was a presentation about the state of State schools. The prime minister said, ‘Any comments?’ I took the mike and lambasted him. Next thing it was on the News. What I said was in editorials. ... I was invited on the most popular programme, with a panel of experts, and the public. The Education Division and the Minister were there. It becomes more effective. People are talking about it. (Wain, conversational interview, April 2009)

Bas Levering in the Netherlands also uses the media as a means of influence:

Yes. When there is big news for instance from the minister making a statement, they come to me. I talk a lot and they [the reporters] make their own stories. I have no problem with this. I demand to see it before it goes out and sometimes I re-write it... I am the person in Utrecht who is almost always asked. I am a philosopher: I can do three sentences. They phone saying there is a new problem and I say it is not a new problem because I know some history. Colleagues refuse saying there is no research yet. When the media ask me I say I’ll know tomorrow. This is philosophy of education. There is always an opportunity. Another way of looking at the same thing. That’s a very nice thing: some opportunity to say something short and direct. I use my experience as a teacher and a politician. (Levering, conversational interview, April 2009)

While he is not a member of any policy team, the media exposure has meant that he is often asked to advise on government policy.

Probably the most common way of trying to influence policy is through membership of a research team. Richard Pring is an example. Most recently he has headed the six year Nuffield Review of 14-19 education. He describes how it may have influenced policy.

We produced a report. The difficulty with reports is they get published, you get a bit of notice in the newspapers, and then they sit on shelves. And so I don’t think just producing books is really going to influence anybody very much. We produced a synopsis with our recommendations and made sure that it got very wide circulation. ... You have to produce the argument but then you

have to give a good synopsis. ... You are influencing people in different sorts of ways. ... We had several seminars with civil servants. ... Certainly getting to know the civil servants gave us access to the ministers. ... I've given evidence to three select committees. ... So in a way it's getting to know civil servants, key people, politicians and so on. (Pring, conversational interview, November 2010)

In a similar vein, Pring describes the significance of having conversations with key people when the opportunity presents. For instance he has had a series of discussions with senior politicians and policy makers visiting Oxford University. He describes how over the soup at one dinner, Keith Joseph, then the Minister of Education:

waved his finger at me and said, 'You've caused all the problems in our schools.' I said, 'Why, what have I done to deserve this?' He said, 'Because you introduced teachers to John Dewey.' And we had a conversation about it. Keith Joseph was a really fascinating person because he believed in arguments and discussion. (Pring, conversational interview, November 2010)

It is arguable that these three philosophers have a view of influence which can be seen to be congruent with their philosophical positions. Wain particularly emphasises critique and that both education and philosophy are embedded in community, as he does in his philosophical writing. Levering's work shows him to favour phenomenological and conceptual methods in order to come to some objective understandings. This fits well with his willingness not only to provide brief statements for the media but also to engage in argument about them. Pring discusses the issue directly:

Raising these questions about the aims of education, the broader aims and not having those aims impoverished by a very narrow view of academic learning, is one of our main messages. I think another one is in that wider vision of learning, coming from those wider aims, we emphasise the importance of practical intelligence and so on. ... I think it's a lot to do with philosophy in so far as we do put forward an argument. (Pring, conversational interview, November 2010)

#### **4. Nowadays.**



This paper has presented some differing views about what it is to live an educational, philosophical life as a philosopher and as a philosopher of education. These accounts are all, necessarily, describing the past, sometimes the recent past. In the rest of the paper I consider whether such approaches are still relevant, given how fast the world of Higher Education is changing. This is not just a local question. In our globalised world of fast communication, educational policy travels nationally, regionally in Europe, and globally.

Global educational policy has been tending towards centralised policy initiatives, often designed to put learning and any associated teaching directly in the service of the government, very often in relation to the national economy. Within the European Union (EU), and then more widely in Europe, this instrumental perspective informs the Lisbon strategy which was adopted in 2000. It was intended to deal with a perceived failure of economic growth in the EU. It called for the development of various policy initiatives, including within education. Following this, the European Commission called for the ‘modernisation of universities’ which it says is ‘a core condition for the success of the Lisbon strategy’ and ‘part of the wider move towards an increasingly global and knowledge-based economy’ (Commission of the European Communities 2006, p.2). In short, EU policy advocates a view of education - or to use the preferred terminology, ‘life-long learning’ - as being mainly instrumental: useful for the economy and for advancing government interests. It may be worthwhile to point up the terminology used here. The policies avoid using the term ‘education’ so perhaps notice has been taken that it has not often been conceptualised so narrowly (Wain, 2007, p.46). The EU’s re-conceptualisation has been powerful (Boulton and Lucas, 2008; Delauré, 2010; Geschwind and Larsson, 2008; Maasen, 2000). As Maasen argues for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs):

The traditional underlying idea of the European HEI as a public, democratically run, social institution is clashing with the instrumental vision of the HEI as a professionally managed, autonomous ‘enterprise’ operating in various markets as a service industry. (2006, p.4):

Universities increasingly see themselves as brand labels operating in a market (e.g. Morgan, 2011)

This service industry is expected to operate in relation to both students and research. The levers that governments operate to implement the policies are a mixture of government (through funding regimes) and governance (through a range of mechanisms, especially

league tables). Quite often a kind of Faustian pact is made, in which HE is given a steer from government but itself determines the details of benchmarks and measures, for fear of anything worse being imposed. These pacts operate in relation both to teaching and to research, and also tend to drive a wedge between these two activities.

Students are conceived as learners, customers and future contributors to the economy through paid employment. The impact on pedagogy can be felt in Higher Education, through processes of standardised benchmarking, league tables of student satisfaction and surveys of the career destinations of recent graduates, focusing especially on paid employment. For instance the Lisbon strategy has inspired the Bologna process and the setting up of the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) which focuses mainly on teaching and learning. In the UK the body which assesses the quality of teaching and learning is the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA),

Research is increasingly subject to policy constraints which are related to the Lisbon strategy and the ‘modernisation’ project. In the UK an exercise to measure research output by individual academics and their institutions has had a huge impact. This was called the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) – and is now re-named the Research Excellence Framework (REF). It is intended to measure the quality of research at different universities. Panels of academics make judgements about a submission by an individual university department. They judge individual publications. They also judge whole submissions using criteria designed to measure research income and also research impact on business, industry or policy (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2009). These exercises have had a huge influence on how individuals and institutions carry out and fund research.

Government has a limited but significant ability to force change. An example is provided by the 2010 UK Browne Report on funding in Higher Education. It has generated serious questions about the future of the arts and humanities in British universities (Collini, 2010). Governance has proved even more effective. Standardised quality criteria for teaching and research are used to construct league tables and universities are keen to be seen near the top of national and international league tables. That said, not surprisingly, since there is a plethora of available tables on the web, each institution strives to spin such information to its own advantage.

#### 4. Does a kind of hemlock beckon?

I now return to the question which was posed at the start of the paper: How far and in what ways it is possible to live a philosophical, educational life, nowadays? It may be that it is possible only for some conceptions of education and only for some resolutions to the tensions of philosophy. Both teaching and research are expected to serve the needs of the government and economy, as perceived by government and employers. The pedagogy that is recommended is one that focuses on clear, measurable objectives and outcomes, which include transferable 'graduate skills' and which are specified in advance. Students are asked to evaluate a course in terms of whether these specifications have been met. Outcomes such as 'thinking more deeply', or which are 'to be determined in discussion with the class' are not acceptable. Equally, research outcomes are expected to be measurable. In the UK, they are assessed in relation to their influence ('impact') other than through scholarship and teaching. They also contribute to the reputation of a university, improving its ability to attract fee-paying students. These approaches do not encourage philosophers like Socrates or Plato who were critical, and tolerant of open-ended arguments. It is difficult to imagine either of them producing bullet-pointed lists of objectives for QAA or executive summaries of their investigations, suitable for REF-able proof of impact on policy. Indeed while both of them were keen to influence policy, their success rating must be rated as low in the time-scale allowed by government. Socrates was put to death, and Plato was sold into slavery. While such fates do not threaten present day philosophers of education, contemporary policies of education do not encourage a critical, open-ended, provisional approach to pedagogical practices or dialogues with policy makers. Nor do approaches that do not produce material in forms suitable for busy policy makers. There are few philosophers of education who can work whole-heartedly within these constraints.

I began the article with the *Apology* but my question is focused on current dilemmas in Europe (and similar areas of the world). I am not considering the situation in those parts of the world which more closely resemble the troubled city of ancient Athens, enduring the effects of military defeat, devastated by civil war and decimated by disease (Hughes, 2010). My question is addressed to philosophers of education of all ages (as perhaps it might have posed itself to Socrates if he had been younger, and perhaps posed itself to Plato, his student). Socrates was old at the time of the trial, as he himself remarks, and

nowadays too, age matters. The dilemma is sharper for those near the start of their lives and careers, who have not had the experience of different ways of being academics, and who are still severely subject to institutional constraints.

The examples I have given show that space for wholeheartedly living a philosophical, educational life is under threat. It has become a life that requires being somewhat subversive and, perhaps, not daring to speak its name. Space may be created in Departments of Education because it is common for a philosopher of education to have knowledge in areas other than philosophy. It is this that may give her room to teach or to influence policy. Practical issues in education always include philosophical ones. Educational research is often done in teams. Individuals speak as both educators and philosophers, whether or not they claim to be one or the other. As Wain puts it:

I can't detach myself from being a philosopher. I bring all my baggage with me to bear on any educational question. (Conversational interview, April 2009)

However, philosophising on the quiet is not easy because of requirements for specific forms of educational research, for performance indicators in teaching and for evidence of impact on policy and on 'users' outside the academy all of which take up the time. And doubts and uncertainties take time if they are to be raised and discussed in class or in research teams. It takes time to understand what other perspectives philosophers have brought to the issues. And it takes time to work out how to work with performance or quality indicators which are designed for quite a different way of living. It is all too easy for the busy work of academic life nowadays to erode and corrode a philosophical, educational life and mould it into something else altogether.

My argument shows that opportunities to live a philosophical life depend on the context. They also depend on the creativity of individual philosophers to see and seize their chances. Individuals may be able to continue to find ways of introducing their philosophical understanding into their professional practice. At the same time, being creative depends on there being time and space to think deeply and discuss arguments with peers, through conferences, seminars and Journal articles. Fortunately, even a 'modernised' university has some reason to support such activities owing to its wish to improve its market position through its academic reputation. However there is always a considerable danger that when somebody lives with, but tries to subvert, a hostile

environment, that she deceives herself about who and what she becomes. It is possible to live an educational, philosophical life but it must mean expending considerable energy producing smoke screens behind which to do it, and a vigilant reflexivity about the shape that the life has become.

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## Endnotes



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<sup>1</sup> A Socrates of Athens gave this speech, but its content was not recorded directly at the time. In this paper I am discussing the Socrates reported by Plato rather than in the only other surviving account by Xenophon .

<sup>2</sup> I am taking it that this is more a Platonic rather than Socratic view, since it comes from the *Theaetetus*, which is usually agreed to be one of the later dialogues.

<sup>3</sup> Educational practice is full of tensions that need to be resolved in context and always provisionally. Berlak and Berlak (1981) remains an exemplary example of such an approach to understanding school teaching.

<sup>4</sup> Though springing from life, as I understand it – see Arendt (1961).

<sup>5</sup> I say more about policy in Griffiths (2012)