

Learning to Live Well: Re-exploring the Connections Between Philosophy and Education

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Dewey defined philosophy of education as a marriage of philosophy and education predicated on a set of primordial conventions. One reason that the marriage is currently on the rocks, and that the spouses are not speaking to each other, is that an intrinsic tension in the second of these conventions has worked its way to the surface and eroded each discipline's confidence in the other's appreciation, while a third suitor has moved in. Educators now tend to look to the social sciences for guidance. So should we accept this silence as progress? Or are there more things in the tradition of philosophy than Dewey dreamed?¹

This essay endeavors to make sense of the marriage of philosophy and education through an exploration of “more things in the tradition of philosophy than Dewey dreamed.” To do so, I explore recent work in philosophy, specifically that of Pierre Hadot, Alexander Nehamas, and Richard Shusterman. These philosophers, discontented with the current state of academic philosophy, are working to recover what they claim to be the real purpose of philosophy, namely to teach the art of living well. This art, now dominated by the massive self-help industry and television talk shows, used to be the domain of philosophy, they say. Meanwhile, philosophy has largely become discourse about philosophy, an internally coherent but externally irrelevant practice. As they redefine philosophy, these thinkers offer something to the self-understanding of philosophers of education. Specifically, they suggest that there is an organic connection between philosophy and education. I am not the first to inquire into the nature of the relationship between philosophy and education.² In his introduction to the *Eightieth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* in 1981, Jonas Soltis encouraged readers to consider philosophy of education, instead, as philosophy *and* education:

We believe that such a title highlights the growing interpenetration of philosophy and education that currently characterizes the field and will force readers consciously to attend to a different way of thinking about philosophy of education.³

Heeding his call, philosophers of education have debated the nature of the relationship between philosophy and education over the last few decades. However, in the spirit of Leonard Waks's “qualified pluralism,”⁴ I think it is fair to say we have not exhausted the ways we can understand this relationship.

Moreover, I worry that past attempts have been limited by (1) assumptions about the dichotomy, or what Chris Higgins calls the “two-worlds” theory, of the two disciplines,⁵ and (2) trends in academic philosophy's own self-understanding, which includes little understanding of its connection to education.⁶ Given this second limitation, those who *have* attempted to dissolve the dichotomy in order to argue that philosophy and education are essentially connected have had few sources — mostly, Dewey and Plato's Socrates — from whom to draw.⁷

The discourse on philosophy as the art of living both underscores and potentially overcomes these limitations. It challenges traditional academic definitions of philosophy and, in so doing, enriches our ability to understand the “and” that

connects philosophy to education. Alven Neiman has already given an excellent account of one way philosophy and education can benefit from the scholarship of Hadot and thinkers like him.⁸ Whereas Neiman focuses on the way this work explains the spiritual elements of teaching philosophy, I draw from this work in order to explore the connection between philosophy and education.⁹

PHILOSOPHY AS THE ART OF LIVING

Although differing in their emphases, Hadot, Nehamas, and Shusterman all argue that philosophy is not a purely academic exercise, but rather, is meant to help people learn to live better.¹⁰ Philosophy engages us in disciplined discourse about everyday concerns, thereby teaching us to combine theoretical and practical life and remedying our tendency to fall thoughtlessly into habits. The connection between philosophy and daily life is not forced, but rather, is essential because how we live is intertwined with philosophical beliefs. Whenever we try to live in a certain way, we depend on ontological and ethical claims. Likewise, when we think philosophically (for example, using logic¹¹), we imply claims about how to live. Thus, Nehamas calls philosophy the “art of living,” Hadot calls it a “way of life,” and Shusterman talks about “practicing philosophy.”

Hadot argues that philosophy originated as an education in living. To be a Stoic, Skeptic, or Epicurean was to enroll in a school of thought and a lifestyle connected to it. This entailed living among a community of other followers and acting in accordance with its rules, which included physical (including exercise, diet, regimented daily schedules), spiritual, or cognitive, exercises. These exercises were intended to align daily life with philosophical theories:

In their [the Stoics] view, philosophy did not consist in teaching an abstract theory — much less in the exegesis of texts — but rather in the art of living. It is a concrete attitude and determinate lifestyle, which engages the whole of existence. The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a process which causes us to *be* more fully, and makes us better. It is a conversion which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it. It raises the individual from an inauthentic condition of life, darkened by unconsciousness and harassed by worry, to an authentic state of life, in which he attains self-consciousness, an exact vision of the world, inner peace, and freedom.... Each school had its own therapeutic method, but all of them linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the individual’s mode of seeing and being. The object of spiritual exercises is precisely to bring about this transformation (*PWF*, 83).

A student’s life was “interrupted” for the sake of exercises that would re-orient his gaze, which had inevitably strayed as a result of the human tendency to see and live falsely (that is, against the school’s theories of knowledge, man, the good life). By seeing the world in its true state (according to the school’s theories) an individual could be transformed.

Although Hadot writes about ancient philosophy, he makes a normative argument that philosophy entails learning to live in accordance with ontological and prescriptive claims about the nature of the world and the good life. He writes:

There can never be a philosophy or philosophers outside a group, a community — in a word, a philosophical “school.” The philosophical school thus corresponds, above all, to the choice of a certain way of life and existential option which demands from the individual a total change of lifestyle, a conversation of one’s entire being, and ultimately a certain desire to be and to live in this way.¹²

The idea that something could “only” be academic or philosophical, he suggests, does not make sense according to this broader, more existential understanding of philosophy: “Philosophy then appears in its original aspect: not as a theoretical construct, but as a method for training people to live and to look at the world in a new way. It is an attempt to transform mankind” (*PWF*, 107). In short, philosophical abstraction should teach us to see, and therefore to live, differently.

DISCIPLINE AND THE ART OF LIVING

Although practical life matters for philosophy, it does not therefore follow that abstract thought and effort are superfluous to it. According to Nehamas, philosophy as a way of living is a deliberate, disciplined, and often difficult endeavor. To read Plato, for instance, requires rigorous study:

The close study of Plato’s texts is mostly a logical exercise; its apparent dryness may disappoint those who expect more of philosophy. But when it comes to justice, wisdom, courage, or temperance — when it comes to the virtues that were Socrates’ central concern — our beliefs about them are central to our whole life, to who we are. To examine the logical consistency of those beliefs, when undertaken correctly, is to examine and mold the shape of our self. It is personal, hard exercise, a whole mode of life (*AL*, 42).

Only if we have properly devoted ourselves to reading Plato will we be changed by that experience. Just as Socrates’ way of talking is out of the ordinary among his fellow Athenians, our reading of him in Plato’s writings takes us out of our everyday lives. Paradoxically, it is by engaging in philosophical exercises that remove one from the ordinary, that one can strive for a better life.

Because out-of-the-ordinariness is part of the philosophical practice, disciplined engagement with its tradition — with the works of others who have been out of the ordinary — is essential to it:

Those who practice philosophy as the art of living construct their personalities through the investigation, the criticism, and the production of philosophical views — views, that is, that belong to the repertoire of philosophy as we have come to understand it...even though philosophers of the art of living often introduce new questions, their inspiration always comes from the tradition that we already accept as the tradition of philosophy....Philosophical lives differ from others, to the extent that they do, because they proceed from a concern with issues that have traditionally been considered philosophical and because those issues provide the material out of which they are fashioned (*AL*, 6).

Traditional philosophical texts are a bridge out of ordinary life into another realm of thinking from which to gain clarity and perspective on practical life (*AL*, 33-34).¹³ More specifically, the philosophers of the art of living identify two activities that are definitive of the discipline of philosophy: engagement with exemplary figures and writing.

EXEMPLARS AND THE ART OF LIVING

To create a good life for oneself requires engagement with philosophical role-models.¹⁴ When we read philosophy or listen to a philosophical exemplar, we do more than learn his views; we witness his own attempts to learn to lead his life:

[The power of Marcus Aurelius’ *Meditations*] is precisely the fact that we have the feeling of witnessing the practice of spiritual exercises — captured live, so to speak. There have been a great many preachers, theoreticians, spiritual directors, and censors in the history of world literature. Yet it is extremely rare to have the chance to see someone in the process of training himself to be a human being (*PWF*, 201).

We learn how to live by watching others in the process of learning to do so as well. For this reason, Hadot describes the philosopher as halfway between an ordinary person and a sage. The pursuit of wisdom as exemplified in a particular human being involves becoming like that person, as wisdom and personality are connected:

To contemplate wisdom as personified within a specific personality [in antiquity] was thus to carry out a movement of the spirit in which, via the life of this personality, one was led toward the representation of absolute perfection, above and beyond all of its possible realizations.... We can know a thing only by becoming similar to our object... both the world as perceived in the consciousness of the sage, and the sage's consciousness itself, plunged in the totality of the world, are revealed to the lover of wisdom in one single, unique movement (*PWF*, 261).

In other words, wisdom is not found in abstract theories, but rather, is embodied in particular human beings who demonstrate what it is to live well. To strive to be like that person is not only literally to try to live like him, but it is necessarily at the same time to come into contact with the philosophical wisdom that shapes his life.

Socrates is the most obvious example of the importance to philosophy of the exemplary human being: "Philosophy began not with a paradigm text, but with an exemplary life, a dramatic model of living — and of dying."¹⁵ Through close engagement with Socrates his interlocutors, and we as readers, are transformed. Socrates' elusive, open-ended, and ironic character lures us into dialogues, but he is just opaque enough to leave us puzzled in spite of our best efforts to understand. Thus, the task of understanding him is endless:

Plato depicts him [Socrates] as the only master of that art [of living]. Socrates' paradox is that he is aware that he lacks what he believes the art of living requires but is still its best practitioner. Socrates is a paradox not only for the dialogues' readers but, more important and also more paradoxical, for his own student, his own author. That paradox animates those works and their hero and makes it necessary to return to them again and again in the search for the 'real' Socrates (*AL*, 86).

Plato's Socrates is a "half-empty page" that we try to complete with our own words (*AL*, 185).¹⁶ He is an exemplar of philosophical living because he is too enigmatic to be understood or copied, and thus we cannot ever be "done" with him. We cannot copy Socrates because what he models for us is the endeavor to fashion a distinct self. Nehamas suggests, "Philosophy might also be an effort to develop a mode of life that is unique to a particular individual, neither an imitation of nor a direct model for anyone else" (*AL*, 97). He argues that Foucault, Montaigne, and Nietzsche use the figure of Socrates in order to define their own selves; Shusterman looks to Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Foucault as models of philosophical "self-fashioning." If we accept this understanding of Socrates as exemplar, then we can say that philosophical living specifically includes the project of self-creation.

WRITING AND THE ART OF LIVING

If the purpose of engaging with an exemplar is to learn to cultivate one's life, then writing is the discipline of carrying that out for and on oneself. Nehamas describes the interrelationship of living and writing:

The art of living, though a practical art, is...practiced in writing...One can either try to apply someone else's conception to one's own life, and to that extent live well, perhaps, but derivatively; or one can formulate one's own art of living. But it is difficult to imagine that one can formulate one's own art of living without writing about it because it is difficult to

imagine that the complex views that such an art requires can be expressed in any other way... The purpose of philosophy as the art of living is, of course, living. But the life it requires is a life in great part devoted to writing. The monument one leaves behind is in the end the permanent work, not the transient life (*AL*, 8).

We saw above that the stoic philosopher interrupted his day for cognitive exercises. The philosophers of the art of living suggest that these exercises include not only attention to the work of others, but also, developing oneself through writing. As Shusterman puts it,

writing is not only a mode of living...an important tool for artfully working on oneself — both as a medium of self knowledge and of self-transformation...Moreover, writing provides a means of recording, communicating, and thus preserving the philosopher's model of life far beyond the immediate circle of his living presence. What would Socrates be for us without the writings of Plato and Xenophon?¹⁷

There are two important points central to both these quotes: first, writing provides a space in which to develop one's philosophical self, and, second, writing is more permanent than life and thereby becomes a gift to others.

Philosophical writing becomes the nexus of abstract views and lived life, the place where a real person works out the principles that guide his life — and therefore define his personhood — in writing. Although what matters to the art of living is the thoughtfulness of one's life, writing is a place in which thinking can be developed more fully. One reason for this is that writing objectifies the self:

Writing, like the other spiritual exercises, *changes the level of the self*, and universalizes it...A person writing feels he is being watched; he is no longer alone, but is a part of the silently present human community. When one formulates one's personal acts in writing, one is taken up by the machinery of reason, logic, and universality. What was confused and subjective becomes thereby objective (*PWF*, 211). While pure objectivity might not be possible, writing provides a relative objectivity that allows enough distance from which to see and judge ourselves. When we write something down, we can look at it repeatedly, and its objectivity and permanency allow us to deal with it at a deeper level than daily life or passing thoughts allow us to do.

Writing not only lets us see more clearly, but it also allows us to imagine a better self toward which we can strive: "Compelling us to go beyond what we already are by expressing something new, writing drives us toward our unattained but attainable self. And, in so showing the importance of this other self, it helps us to appreciate the value of others."¹⁸ I take this quote to mean, first, that writing helps us to describe to ourselves the self we want to become, thereby creating an ideal toward which to strive. In so doing, and second, it helps us see the value of learning from others, since we see our objectified self as other.

Of course, what is written can also be read. Nehamas argues that many exemplary philosophers understood their writing as both an attempt to work on themselves and a way of teaching others. For instance, he describes Foucault's purpose as follows:

And he [Foucault] took his project, his care for his own self, to be to develop a voice that others like him might be able to appropriate in their own terms, use it for their own purposes, and through it care for themselves in the way their own selves and particular circumstances required. He wrote, after all, that he was trying to develop "a way to work on ourselves" that would allow us to "invent — I don't" mean discover — a way of being that is still improbable (*AL*, 169).

Through writing, one's efforts to lead a philosophical life becomes an offering to others who might learn from it.

At the same time, these authors warn that there can be a danger in writing philosophy (hence Socrates' resistance to writing) because writing is detached from lived experience. In spite of this, they assert the importance of writing. Shusterman aptly asks, "But how, then, is philosophy to be communicated beyond the exemplary philosopher's living presence?"¹⁹ The importance of writing reminds us that it is not only the individual life that matters; as part of the practice of philosophy, there is also something beyond individual circumstances that we care about when we try to live well and leave behind a trace for others.

This last point — that the individual's quest to live well also contributes to the life journeys of others — brings us full circle in our discussion of the elements of the art of living: We learn to live well by attending to the works and lives of others who have attempted to live well. However, to cultivate our own lives, rather than merely copy someone else's, requires that we write. Our writing, in turn, can serve as an example for others. Seen in this way, philosophical living involves both learning from and teaching others who, like us, take up the art of living.

CONCLUSION

Hadot, Nehamas, and Shusterman present a picture of philosophy as an education in living.²⁰ Of course, if this is the case, then an implicit definition of education has been sneaked in throughout the discussion of philosophy, namely that education involves learning to live well as a human being. This definition might be puzzling to those concerned with how to improve our institutions of learning in which there are many more pressing matters to think about than some quasi-humanist sense that we should learn to live artfully as human beings. However, my suggestion here is that by asserting something like a primordial connection between philosophy and education, the philosophers of the art of living remind us of something elemental to our field. I do not mean to say that philosophy is the same as education. But I do mean to suggest that education need not be narrowly defined as what goes on in schools, and philosophy might not have to be "applied" or made "relevant" to education because it is already concerned with helping us learn to live well.

Still, an important question remains: if all philosophy is connected to education, then (how) are philosophy of education and philosophy proper distinct? Perhaps the answer lies in a division of labor; we could say that philosophy requires two related but separable efforts: The first is the cultivation of theories as ends in themselves. Without the ability to imagine what does not exist in reality, we mortals would have no reason to strive for anything beyond what we have and who we are. Such imagining, it seems to me, is the work of "pure" philosophers who concern themselves primarily (and I say primarily because I do not think one must choose either/or, but rather, can move along a broad spectrum) with philosophy as theory. The second is the practice of living well and entails the cultivation of theories in everyday life. This could be work of philosophers of education — to help people orient their lives in relation to ideals and thereby to live well. As we have seen,

learning to live well includes both cultivating one's own art of living and, in so doing, helping others to live well.

This is only a cursory answer to a complicated question. And there are many more questions to consider. For instance, must one consciously attempt to teach others through living well, or is the act of living well inherently an act of teaching? Do teaching and learning to live well have anything to do with public schools as we know them, or are we talking here about some other kind of education — a “spiritual” education as Neiman describes it? How is philosophical living other than the “application” of theories to life? How is philosophy of education different from psychoanalysis or other arts geared toward helping people live well?

Although I cannot answer these questions here, I believe that if we take seriously this idea of philosophy as the art of living well, then as philosophers of education we are faced with a new set of questions as we try to understand the purposes and means of our profession and life pursuits. I hope this reformulation of philosophy will help us pursue Arcilla's suggestion that there is more to philosophy and education than Dewey dreamed. I hope it will rouse us to reclaim the relationship between education and humanistic philosophical inquiry so that education's “third suitor,” the behavioral sciences, will not have the final say on living and learning. Mostly, I hope it can help us as we endeavor to practice philosophy of education and to live artfully and well.²¹

1. René Vincente Arcilla, “Why Aren't Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?” *Educational Theory* 52, no. 1 (2002): 11.

2. Socrates could be considered an obvious first in the tradition of thinking about these questions. However, I am interested in more recent discussion within the field of philosophy of education.

3. Jonas Soltis, “Introduction,” in *Philosophy and Education: Eightieth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, ed. Jonas Soltis (Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, 1981), 2.

4. Leonard J. Waks, “Three Contexts of Philosophy of Education: Intellectual, Institutional, Ideological,” *Educational Theory* 38, no. 2 (1988): 172.

5. Specifically, I refer to the debate over “relevance.” For an excellent discussion of this issue see: Chris Higgins, “Educational Philosophy as Liberal Teacher Education: Charting a Course Beyond the Dilemma of Relevance,” in *Philosophy of Education 2000*, ed. Lynda Stone (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2000): 271-79.

6. For discussions of the relationship of academic philosophy to philosophy of education see D.C. Phillips, “Philosophy of Education: In Extremis?” *Educational Studies* 14 (1983): 1-30; Leonard Waks, “Three Contexts”; H.S. Broudy, “Between the Yearbooks,” in *Philosophy and Education: Eightieth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education*, ed. Jonas Soltis; James Giarelli, and J.J. Chambliss, “The Foundations of Professionalism: Fifty Years of the Philosophy of Education Society in Retrospect,” *Educational Theory* 41, no. 3 (1991): 265-86; H.S. Broudy, “How Philosophical Can Philosophy of Education Be?” *The Journal of Philosophy* 52, no. 22 (1955): 612-22; and Soltis, “Introduction.”

7. See, especially, James Giarelli, “Philosophy, Education, and Public Practice,” in *Philosophy of Education 1990* (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1991); Nicholas C. Burbules, “The Dilemma of Relevance,” in *Philosophy of Education 1989*, ed. Ralph Page (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1990); Arcilla, “Why Aren't Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?”

8. Alven Neiman, “Self Examination, Philosophical Education, and Spirituality,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 34, no. 4 (2000).

9. I am deeply indebted to Chris Higgins not only for his exceptional bibliographic references, which introduced me both to the scholarship within philosophy of education and to that of Hadot and Nehamas, but also for his support of my exploration of the interrelationship between philosophy and education, and for many discussions in which he has modeled for me the way that philosophy truly can be the art of learning (and teaching) to live well.

10. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold Davidson and trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). This book will be cited as *PWF* in the text for all subsequent references. Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2002). Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). This book will be cited as *AL* in the text for all subsequent references. Richard Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

11. For instance, the reason to take up logic is to think clearly through matters of importance to everyday life; likewise, what we understand as “living well” will be defined by standards determined by logic.

12. Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* 3.

13. Nehamas suggests that philosophy can be understood on a broad spectrum that includes more than the accepted philosophical canon.

14. This begs the question: What should we do when a philosopher’s biographical life is morally disappointing?

15. Although it is also possible also to see Socrates’ pedagogical methods as non-exemplary, I accept the claims of Hadot, Nehamas, and Shusterman here. Quote from Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy*, 17.

16. Specifically, he refers to Plato’s early Socrates.

17. Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy*, 3.

18. *Ibid.*, 106.

19. *Ibid.*, 19.

20. Although I have largely ignored their differences for the sake of this collective view, there are differences worth pursuing. Dewey’s view is similar, but he is more concerned with communal/social life than these philosophers. Further comparison between Dewey and the art of living philosophers would be interesting.

21. Many thanks to Suzanne Rosenblith and Laura DeSisto for their thoughtful feedback on earlier drafts of this piece.