

Relevance, Pluralism, and Philosophy of Education

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It is a pleasure to reply to Chris Higgins's stimulating essay. Higgins offers a challenging analysis of a long-running meta-methodological debate concerning the nature of philosophy of education (henceforth "PoE"), arguing that the triumph of methodological pluralism in PoE is both problematic and reflective of a destructive "two worlds picture" which needs to be abandoned if PoE is to be able to engage important normative/methodological issues. He offers a vision of a way forward for PoE that he thinks both abandons the two worlds picture, and promises the prospect of effective engagement with critical methodological matters. I agree with Higgins on many matters, and applaud his central claim that we abandon methodological debate at our peril. In what follows I note some small problems I find in Higgins's account, and suggest that his positive vision for PoE does not escape the two worlds picture as neatly as he thinks. The theory/practice split, and so the dilemma of relevance, is not so easily done away with as Higgins suggests.

As Higgins rightly notes, "monist" and "pluralist" are both multiply problematic. If the choice is between pluralism, which holds that "there is room for a diversity of voices in PoE," and monism, which insists "that everyone think exactly like" the monist, pluralism wins. But monists should not be understood as advocating that everyone think alike. The (or at least a) serious "monist" position is rather that there are criteria that are legitimately applicable to work in PoE, such that if candidate work fails to meet (one or more of) them, that work is deficient. In particular, decent work in PoE should (according to this view) meet standards of scholarly respectability. An example of such a criterion is *clarity*: as I was taught in graduate school, one's scholarly writing should be sufficiently clear so that, if one is wrong, one's readers can tell. One can endorse this sort of monism, and still acknowledge a legitimate pluralism, in so far as alternative views meet this criterion. So monism should not be understood as requiring that everyone think exactly alike, but rather as holding that legitimate work in a field should meet relevant criteria.

This acknowledges Higgins's important points that there are "very good reasons for exchanging normative visions of the nature and purpose of our field for critical consideration," and that we ought not allow this project "to be redescribed as anti-pluralistic." Methodological and meta-methodological debate are crucial to the health of PoE; to ban such debate as anti-pluralistic would be disastrous. The issue is not monism versus pluralism, but rather the acknowledgement of criteria governing work in the field versus the relativistic rejection of the relevance or force of such criteria. Monists and pluralists can and should unite in championing the former (while acknowledging that debate concerning the character and legitimacy of proposed criteria is always legitimate).

I find disturbing Higgins's disparagement of "what passes for philosophy in most philosophy departments." He offers no reason for thinking that what so passes

is not the genuine article. Why is work produced in such departments *not* “real” philosophy? Higgins darkly suggests that philosophy faces some sort of “crisis about [its] meaning and value,” but philosophers have always worried about philosophy’s nature and value. Contrary to Higgins’s suggestion, there is no general crisis facing the field that calls for PoE distancing itself from (general) philosophy. PoE’s striving to distinguish itself from “what passes for philosophy in most philosophy departments” amounts to nothing less than its striving to cut its own throat: such a move would be both politically, and (especially) intellectually, suicidal.

Higgins claims that “[i]mpaling ourselves on the rigor horn of the dilemma [of relevance] and turning philosophy of education into a franchise of academic philosophy is not an acceptable solution.” Why not? He continues: “Many of us were drawn to the field [PoE], in the first place, precisely in the hope of doing something more ‘real’ philosophically than what passes for philosophy in most philosophy departments.” One problem here is the dubious claim that “what passes for philosophy” in philosophy departments either is not philosophy at all or is an inferior sort of philosophy. A second problem is that of identifying the work, done outside philosophy departments, which is nevertheless “more ‘real’ philosophically” than the work done within them, and articulating the criteria which pick out that work as more “real.” But a third problem is Higgins’s attempt to speak for “us” all. I was not drawn to the field in the hope Higgins articulates; I doubt whether such generalizations concerning the motivations of philosophers of education can be either justified, or shown to be relevant to the issue. Whether or not philosophers of education should, for example, embrace rigor or clarity as methodological desiderata does not turn on their motivations for entering the field. Nor does the genuineness or legitimacy of work in the field so turn, any more than it does in biology or literary theory.

In any case, Higgins suggests that the dilemma of relevance cannot be overcome until we successfully challenge the two-world picture, which both horns of the dilemma presuppose. In his diagnosis PoE remains “all too monolithic” because both sides of the debate between philosophical rigor and educational relevance are alike in accepting that picture. In the spirit of “genuine pluralism,” he proposes that we give up the two-worlds picture, and instead regard PoE as “liberal teacher education.”

Essential to his proposal is his suggestion that we “reject the founding premise that philosophy constitutes a kind of discourse or tool and education a set of practices or institutions and the problems in them,” because “[e]ducational philosophy is itself an educative practice.” We should, consequently, reject the philosophy/education split which gives rise to the dilemma, and instead “attend to the way that philosophy and education are already inseparably related in our practice as teacher educators,” because “[t]his practice...is central to who we are as philosophers of education.”

I see three difficulties here. First, Higgins’s proposal slides between “philosophy” and “educational philosophy:” even if we grant that educational philosophy is itself an educative practice, it is far from clear that philosophy generally is rightly

so regarded. Second, the proposal in effect persuasively redefines the crucial terms “philosophy,” “educational philosophy” and “education” in ways which seem either arbitrary or question-begging (or both). An advocate of the two-worlds picture will reject the suggestion that PoE is an “educative practice,” conceiving it instead as a scholarly discipline linked inexorably to its parent discipline, philosophy. Higgins of course wants to challenge that picture. But he cannot do so effectively simply by redefining these key terms. Third, the link between PoE and the practice of teacher education is far too weak to support this conception of PoE. Plato, Aristotle, and Rousseau did not engage in teacher education; does that make their work not part of the literature of PoE? Many philosophers of education, myself included, do not engage in teacher education; does that make these philosophers not philosophers of education? I fear that what Higgins regards as “central to who we are as philosophers of education” is both overgeneralized, and mistakes an accidental bureaucratic fact as something essential to the nature of PoE. It is true, apparently, that here, now, many philosophers of education are employed in schools of education, and participate in teacher education programs as part of their professional responsibilities. But it seems clearly mistaken to regard this contingent fact concerning the current employment contexts of philosophers of education as an indication of the fundamental character of the discipline.

Despite these misgivings, I find much to admire in Higgins’s proposal that we think of PoE as “a paradigm of liberal teacher education.” That teachers should be seen as, and encouraged to be, intellectuals, is exactly right. Many others, including Israel Scheffler, have joined Higgins in championing this vision of teachers.¹ That they be encouraged to love and pursue “questions worth loving” suggests a noble vision of teaching, and of teachers. But it must be pointed out that, should this vision grip teachers, they might well pursue the questions they love in ways that do not inform their practice as teachers. For the pursuit of questions worth loving must follow the dictates of that pursuit. But then the dilemma of relevance is not resolved after all, since teachers might well carry out their intellectual work independently of concern for practice. Indeed, conceiving of teacher education in terms of encouraging in teachers a love of the questions worth loving seems to amount just to conceiving of it in terms of encouraging teachers to loosen the grip of practice, and pursue theory for its own sake. Insofar, conceiving of PoE as liberal teacher education does not succeed in abandoning the two-worlds picture, and so does not resolve the dilemma of relevance.

I applaud Higgins’s heroic attempt to overcome the two-worlds picture. His essay is full of important claims, and good arguments in support of those claims. I am with him completely in his effort to make the world of PoE safe for normative (meta-)methodological inquiry and debate. Despite the attractiveness of the alternative vision of PoE he provides, however, I do not think that his attempt to resolve the dilemma of relevance succeeds.

1. Israel Scheffler, “University Scholarship and the Education of Teachers,” in *Reason and Teaching* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 92-93.