

Among All the Philosophers, Is There a Philosopher?

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The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein¹

In his thought-provoking essay, Charles Bingham offers us an important reminder of what it means to do philosophy and to be a philosopher of education. His starting point is the much discussed “dilemma of relevance” in philosophy of education.² If we philosophers of education emphasize our practical contribution to education, we risk appearing as clumsy curriculum theorists; if we stress our disciplinary rigor, we come off as a philosophical junior varsity. To help us get a fresh look at this well-worn problem, Bingham explores an extended analogy between the predicament of educational philosophy and that of modern art (particularly literature).

Following Jacques Rancière, Bingham’s story goes like this: for centuries, art was inherently elitist, with only a small subset of human actions, thoughts, and sensibilities deemed worthy of literary treatment. No one confused epic poetry with the “prose of life.” With the rise of the novel, however, literature came to embrace everyday life and attract ordinary readers. With this new accessibility, though, came a crisis in aesthetic status. Thus we arrive at the characteristic drama of modern aesthetics. The *dramatis personae* are *the poet*, who continues to make art whose distance from life means that its aesthetic status is never in question; *the literalist*, who blurs the distinction between art and life; and *the connoisseur*, who protests too much against literalism, ardently upholding art as an autonomous realm, the proper response to which is refined appreciation of specifically aesthetic choices. Finally, we come to the hero of this story, the *novelist*, who rejects both the connoisseur’s dichotomization and the literalist’s conflation, ensuring artistic vitality by maintaining a permeable, but not too permeable, membrane between art and life. Such constant boundary work makes novelistic art self-reflective, aware of its nature and conditions. Thus, far from being watered-down poetry, the novel is art distilled to its essence.

Bingham then maps this drama onto the one that plays out in philosophy of education classrooms. In the background is our version of the poet, the mainstream philosopher. In the role of the literalists are those practitioners who “find a way to map Freire or Noddings precisely onto the way that they already teach.” Our connoisseurs are those graduate students who prefer to read texts precisely as moves in the game of philosophy. Finally, there is educational philosophy, which involves boundary work akin to the novelist’s. When done well, educational philosophy maintains a semi-permeable membrane between the artificial world of pure philosophy and the unphilosophical world of everyday practice, resisting both literalizing and “scholarizing” responses.

Bingham suggests that adopting this picture of our work frees us from our constant crisis of authenticity. We need not worry that our connection to education makes us less philosophical since, like the novelist, our openness to practice makes us “hypervigilant about [our] own artistic genre.” Precisely because we are always asking whether what we do is still philosophical, we represent “the vanguard of philosophy *per se*.” Meanwhile, “philosophers of education are successfully educative not because educational philosophy is applied, but because it is *not too* applied” (emphasis in original). The aim of philosophical teacher education is thus “becoming philosophical,” something that “happens when a person’s real life becomes *informed* by philosophy, but not *guided* by it” (emphasis in original).

I would now like to raise three questions about this argument by analogy. First, it is not clear how well the roles in the two dramas actually line up. Bingham assigns Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* to teachers in order to inform, but not prescriptively guide, teachers’ practice. So what counts as philosophy of education here: Rancière’s writing of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, or Bingham’s teaching of Rancière? Presumably, Rancière is the equivalent of the novelist. What, then, is Bingham’s role? There is no teacher of the novel in the literary half of his analogy. So perhaps the educational philosopher is like an artist when she writes, but like a museum docent when she teaches? Or is Rancière meant to represent pure philosophy, while Bingham’s pedagogy is meant to represent educational philosophy? This would be odd, since Rancière offers an artistic representation of pedagogical practice, just as the novelist offers an artistic rendering of ordinary life. And wouldn’t this mean, switching back to the other half of the analogy, that novelists translate poetry to the masses, rather than representing a distinctive art form, as Bingham claims?

My second question can be put dramatically: Whom does Bingham want us to kill? In Rancière’s account, Flaubert kills Emma in order to provide a warning to literalizers and preserve the novel’s needed distance from the everydayness it represents. What, on Bingham’s analogy, would be the equivalent of this symbolic sacrifice in our work?

My third question concerns the idea that educational philosophy is somehow more philosophical than pure philosophy. The argument seems to be that (1) the more a genre is aware of itself as art, the more it counts as art; (2) the more a genre blurs the art/life boundary, the more it must be aware of what makes it art; (3) the novel blurs the art/life boundary more than poetry; (4) therefore, the novel is more artistic than poetry; and (5) by analogy, educational philosophy is more philosophical than philosophy. There are a lot of problems with this set of claims. Against the first premise, one might argue that it is often the unselfconscious works that are the most powerful, and that art has lost force as it has increasingly addressed the artworld. But even if we accept the self-awareness argument, I do not see how we can conclude that “prosaic” arts encourage this awareness more than “poetic” ones. Was Aaron Copland more aware that he was making art than Arnold Schönberg? Is Bruce Springsteen more self-aware about his artistry than either Schönberg or

Copland was? The same problem exists on the philosophy side of the analogy. The history of philosophy is, among other things, one long debate over the nature of philosophy.

These questions notwithstanding, I do find the basic insight of this paper intuitively appealing. We might say that someone immersed in a world of practice and someone immersed in the world of academic philosophy might each, if for opposite reasons, have a road to travel before they become philosophical. If philosophy becomes an enclosed world that says nothing to us about how we should live, then it ceases to be a search for *wisdom* and, indeed, ceases to be philosophy at all. On the other hand, people sometimes forget the other half of this equation: philosophy is the *search* for wisdom. If one expects philosophy to provide immediate, practical guidance, then they will be tempted to resent or ignore precisely those aspects of philosophy that make it capable of informing our lives: its novel language and perspectives, its complexity, and its distance from our familiar ways of making sense of things.

But notice that I am speaking about philosophy in general, and not about educational philosophy in particular. Indeed, it seems to me that Bingham's point is broader still. What is at stake is the basic hermeneutic/pedagogical principle that a discussion ceases to be educative to the degree that it collapses into presentism or historicism, self-confirmation or tourism. We can certainly imagine a philosophy class that becomes fussy and formalistic and fails to find any points of connection between the texts and the lifeworlds of students, but that is bad philosophy. If the contrast is between good educational philosophy and bad philosophy, then it will not be very instructive.

In the end, I am unsure if the argument ends up being about what distinguishes us from philosophy proper, and I am unsure about how much work the Rancière-inspired analogy really does. But I am confident that Bingham has offered us a very important reminder. As my title suggests, I found his notion of "becoming philosophical" reminiscent of Søren Kierkegaard's idea of "becoming subjective."³ For Kierkegaard, this type of question has the power to wake us up from our nominalist slumbers, to remind us that business cards and degrees do not help when it comes to the task of living into and up to a category like "philosopher." For me, Bingham's paper was a resonant reminder that we are not already philosophical, and that each time we become philosophical, it is like remembering something that we did not know we had forgotten. Sometimes this happens when we are brushing our teeth and looking in the mirror; sometimes it happens when we read something we wrote when we were twenty; sometimes it happens in a discussion about pedagogy; and sometimes it even happens at a philosophy conference.

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and Rush Rhees, trans. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), §127.

2. I offer my solution to this dilemma in 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, 2001). See the notes for a bibliographic history of the debate.

3. On becoming subjective, see, for example, Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments* (1846), vol. 1, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1942), 127–360. For this reading of Kierkegaardian irony, see chapter 2 in Jonathan Lear, *Therapeutic Action: An Earnest Plea for Irony* (New York: Other Press, 2003).