On the Pedagogical Moment in the Care of the Soul

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With this insightful and thought-provoking essay, Stefano Oliverio offers an important contribution to what can be described as an emerging counter-discourse to the prevailing discourse of the learning society. Oliverio has done so by bringing the thought of the Czech phenomenologist Jan Patočka to bear on arguments put forth by two of the leading advocates of this counter-discourse: Jan Masschelein and Gert Biesta. As Oliverio successfully demonstrates, Patočka's ideas can help us rescue education from the "world-consuming dynamics of the learning society."[1] Specifically, Patočka helps us recognize that at the very heart of the Western tradition is a "pedagogical movement"—or, as Oliverio also suggests, a "pedagogical moment"—which, along with the inauguration of philosophy and politics, signals the foundation of the history of subjectivity as our passage from the domestic sphere to the public sphere—which is to say, the movement from our obsession with securing bare life and survival in relation to an often precarious natural environment to the emergence of our authentic relation to worlds of meaning. This deeply inscribed pedagogical movement, or moment, is represented by Socrates, and in particular, the Socratic deed of the care of the soul.

To be sure, by pointing us to this pedagogical moment by way of Patočka, Oliverio is truly making a discovery that is all his own. For as Oliverio suggests, the significance of pedagogy and education as they are intimated in the movement from the domestic to the public, from the environment to the world, is ultimately underdeveloped and underestimated

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION 2019 | Kurt Stemhagen, editor
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in Patočka's thought, even while it is clearly and unmistakably implied. While Patočka sees the simultaneous and unitary origin of the philosophical and the political with this passage from the concern for bare life to the concern for truth and meaning, Oliverio is keen to include pedagogy alongside philosophy and politics. As Oliverio asserts, "[Pedagogy] *qua* the movement of education… should be aligned with politics and philosophy."[2] As I understand Oliverio's argument, pedagogy—in the sense of being a project which seeks to advance human subjectification and world disclosure—was born together with philosophy and politics at the very dawn of history.

It is on this discovery of the pedagogical being born alongside the philosophical and the political that I wish to focus my response. For one, I wonder what is at stake in making this discovery—why does it matter for us today that we recognize pedagogy as there at the very beginning of the history of who we are? Consistent with those origin myths in which the founding of a city is marked by the killing of a twin sibling, is it perhaps to avenge the exclusion of pedagogy from the realm of the care of the soul brought about by the hand of philosophy and politics?[3] My sense, however, is that the reason we would do well to go back to the care of the soul, and to recognize just how imbedded pedagogy is there, is that the crisis which confronts us today—the crisis of the "world-consuming dynamics of the learning society"—bears a remarkable resemblance to that pre-historical stage prior to the emergence of the care of the soul, in which all human arrangements did aim toward the mere sustaining of life for the sake of life itself. Pedagogy, along with politics and philosophy as care of the soul, brings us beyond this level, revealing the full humanity of humanity. Pedagogy—in spite of the demands of the learning society—is called upon today (along with philosophy and politics) to confront the crisis of our bondage to life in much the same way that Socrates was called upon by the Delphic Oracle to confront the

same crisis as it appeared in his Athens. If I am able to deduce a moral from Oliverio's essay, then it would certainly be this.

However, there is another question that remains nagging for me in the light of Oliverio's essay. One of the concerns that Oliverio raises about the prevailing discourse of the learning society is its tendency to put the specificity of pedagogy (and education) at risk, particularly through its privileging (to use Biesta's terms) of *qualification* and *socialization* over and above pedagogy's other purpose of cultivating *subjectification*. Similarly, the question I have for Oliverio also concerns the specificity of pedagogy, and whether we put its distinctiveness at risk if we are inclined to see pedagogy as being born alongside philosophy and politics. In this matter of the care of the soul, could it be that pedagogy turns out not to be the sibling of philosophy and politics, but instead resembles them more as a parent? In other words, when it comes to the project of the care of the soul, does pedagogy have an altogether different mode of relation to the care of the soul than do philosophy and politics?

To unpack this question, I would like to insert into the conversation with Oliverio and Patočka Michel Foucault's ideas on the Socratic injunction of care of the soul.[4] Like Oliverio and Patočka, Foucault also understands Socrates as marking a beginning in the history of subjectification precisely through the peculiar way in which Socrates appears as one who practices care of the soul. Foucault, naturally, turns to Plato's *Apology* and the well-known passage at 29d in which Socrates offers an account of his practice before the Athenian assembly. As you recall, Socrates declares that he would rather go on practicing the care of the soul even at the cost of his life, warning that he will never stop practicing philosophy or pointing out the truth to anyone he meets, and then adds, "For I go about doing nothing else than urging you, young and old, not to care for your persons or your property more than for the perfection of your souls."[5]

From Socrates' account, Foucault identifies two distinct modes of care being considered: on the one hand, there is the care of the soul proper, which is to say the actual practice of philosophy as an *askesis* of the soul; on the other hand, there is the mode of care that is in this case unique to Socrates, which is the activity of encouraging others to care for their own souls. In the former case, philosophy as care of the soul entails a mode of relation to oneself; in the latter, Socratic care of the soul entails a mode of relation to others. While this distinction in no way suggests that Socrates *does not* practice care of the soul in the philosophical sense, it does suggest, however, that the pedagogical practice of caring for the care of the soul of others is a distinct activity. Foucault puts the matter in the following way:

> If Socrates cares for others, then this obviously means that he will not care for himself, or at any rate, that in caring for others he will neglect a range of other activities that are generally thought to be self-interested, profitable, and advantageous… Thus the problem arises of the relation between the "caring for oneself" encouraged by the philosopher, and what caring for himself, or maybe sacrificing himself, must represent for the philosopher, that is to say, the problem, consequently, of the position occupied by the master in this matter of "caring for oneself.[6]

If the care of the soul—as the activity of philosophy and politics—is the exceeding beyond the decadence of bare life, then the activity of pedagogy, it seems to me, is precisely the attempt to exhort, stir, awaken, and then lead others from the mere fact of life to a uniquely human form of life. Such pedagogical attempts will often resemble the practice of philosophy proper—dialogue, examination, analysis, the adherence to

non-knowing, and so forth. But there also seems to be the potential for a set of sacrificial practices that are uniquely pedagogical insofar as they serve to model care of the soul *for others*, and at the same time establish the contours of a fully human life and the potential for living differently. In the case of Socrates, we might look, for example, at his poverty through his refusal to accept fees, or his understanding of being appointed by the God in order to serve a pedagogical purpose.

I wonder whether Oliverio agrees that there is, in fact, a meaningful distinction to be made between the care of the soul of philosophy and politics, on the one hand, and the care of the soul of pedagogy on the other; and, if he does agree, what are the stakes for those of us who work today at the nexus of philosophy and pedagogy?

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1 Stefano Oliverio, "Beyond Learning, Back to the Care of the Soul? Socrates, Patočka and the 'Worldward' Movement of Education," *Philosophy of Education 2019*, ed. Kurt Stemhagen (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2020).
2 Ibid.
3 For the relationship between twin siblings and foundation myths, see: René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (New York: Continuum, 2005), 59-71.
4 Though not altogether pertinent to the matter at hand, Foucault consistently uses the term "care of the self" instead of "care of the soul" in order to emphasize that in ancient philosophy the soul consistently references subjectivity rather than metaphysical substance. See, for example, Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France: 1981-1982*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 56-57.
5 Plato, *The Apology*, trans. H.N. Fowler (London: William Heinemann, 1917), 109.
6 Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 7.