

Adult Education as Philosophical Practice**David O'Donaghue**

Today, we are seeing an expansion of the practice of philosophy beyond the walls of the academy. Some trained philosophers are seeking ways of utilising philosophy in a much broader public domain than what is afforded in traditional institutions of higher learning. This reflects certain prevailing economic conditions which allow for a reformulation of the tasks of philosophy itself. I am not an economist, but would suggest that these factors cluster around what has come to be known as 'late capitalism.' The survival of capitalism depends on the expansion and development of new markets and the creation of some sort of 'philosophical need' in the public would be necessary to ensure the survival of alternative philosophical services. This parallels and in many way is dependent upon the earlier development of a 'therapeutic need' in the public that arose in the 60's. Through the exposure in both professional and lay publications of therapeutic models that claim to cure various modern maladies of the soul, psychotherapy built a market that expanded and sustained a relatively small profession of clinical psychology. Cinema, literature, humour and self-help books all reinforced this move to show people that what they really need is some competent therapy to solve the anguish of modern life. Now, philosophy is attempting to do the same thing by claiming that the tools of philosophy can offer the public certain benefits that justify a fee.

This paper will not address whether these claims are justified. In many ways, philosophical counselling will always have to deal with the 'poor stepchild' status with regard to the prevailing psychotherapeutic culture. It is an important question to ask whether philosophical counselling will ever distinguish itself sufficiently from psychotherapy and psychology or whether it will, in time, merely be considered just another form of therapy, like gestalt, transactional analysis, bioenergetics, cognitive-behavioural therapy, or the myriad of other brands offered to the consumer. I am not going to ask that question in this paper. Rather, I am going to suggest a means by which the affiliation with psychotherapy can be de-emphasised and, as a result, perhaps the genuine philosophical article can come to the fore. I want to suggest that the best model for philosophical practice still remains within the educational paradigm, but one that is radically different than what is offered in a standard university curriculum. Through developing alternative models of adult education, I believe philosophy can be instrumental in guiding and informing a process of life reflection and integration which is entirely different from the aims of current educational practices in academic philosophy.

In the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle claims that a young man is not a proper hearer of lectures on political science because he is inexperienced in the action of life and, furthermore, since he follows his passions, his study will be vain and unprofitable (1095a). It is a common Jewish adage that one should not study the Kabbalah until one has passed the age of forty. Most wisdom traditions maintain that it is only appropriate to take up a particular study after reaching a certain age. Our contemporary culture stresses the acquisition of practical knowledge at a young age which can then be readily utilised in the work force. Formal education is, by and large, completed in our culture well *before* the age most of the wisdom traditions recommend *starting* one's serious education. I think modern life suffers from this inversion. Increasingly, we see how young people immediately out of high school are not able to focus and commit to serious study because they lack a sense of personal relevance and ownership of their learning process. Too often undergraduate education is merely an extension of the external demands of a system that never touches the real life of the late

adolescent. American culture, in particular, emphasises the importance of 'making a living' at the expense of gaining wisdom about life and so, as soon as a person is set up in a career, one is ostensibly done with his or her education. Yet today, as never before, one is not likely to be able to rest in a career until retirement. Therefore, strictly according to career development, education needs to be an ongoing process. This paper is an appeal for a restoration of a model of education which recognises that an important, perhaps *the most important*, aspect of learning can occur only later in life, after one has had sufficient experience in the world, perhaps has raised her family or has seen her labour manifest significantly in work.

I maintain that re-visioning pedagogy within the appropriate spectrum of adult learning is primarily a philosophical endeavour in two different ways. First, from the perspective of the system itself, the educational project itself must be re-evaluated. This is so because adequately addressing a broader domain of inquiry than that prescribed by a mode of learning predominantly based on skill acquisition requires a thorough thinking through of what is the function of knowledge in a time of life in which practical utilisation is not the primary aim. Secondly, focusing on the individual learner herself, the process she embarks on is inherently more philosophical because of the reflective nature of the learning at this stage of life. In this paper I will be making preliminary inquiries into both the philosophy of education for communities of adult learners and the kind of personal philosophical journeys individuals may undertake in the process of adult learning. I will show how both these lines of inquiry are themselves forms of philosophical practice that become manifest as activities in the market place.

A number of factors in the situation of the university in American culture present serious obstacles for older adults to take on a study of philosophy. One is that, due to the failure of the American public school system, many undergraduates have insufficient reading, writing and reasoning skills in order to meaningfully engage with the material presented in their classes. This forces instructors to do remedial work to address these deficiencies. This becomes an impediment for the older learner to engage with the material at a level which is meaningful. Another factor that adversely affects the quality of teaching at universities is the emphasis on research and publication. It has been my experience at the two philosophy graduate programmes that I have attended that the professor who actually gives time and energy to his or her teaching is the exception to the rule. Most professors are unavailable and distant and do not take the time to get to know the special interests of their students. This seems true both on the graduate and the undergraduate level and it accentuates the feeling of detachment and alienation commonly felt in the educational process. Perhaps presenting professional papers at conferences and publishing books and articles is important on some level, but the constituents of the university are the students and it is a scandal that teaching becomes such a low priority. People who go into teaching should love teaching. They should not merely use the university to hide away in the ivory tower or their 'research'. There are some dedicated professors out there but many are actually quite lazy and use their status to do as they please with no accountability. A last factor I will mention is that graduate programmes are oriented towards a particular developmental stage of formation and initiation into a particular guild or career. This is not an appropriate model for the older student who has already been in the world for some time. She needs to be able to reflect on her life experiences and draw from them examples to test out the validity of philosophical conceptualisations. In normal graduate programmes, older students are treated as if they must ignore and even erase their prior learning and experience in the interest of attaining some 'pure' approach to philosophy. Professors are either unaware

of how prior life experience could be integrated and utilised in their teaching or they are uninterested and impervious to the background of their students, young or old

It is not a novel idea that philosophy can be taught outside the university. Philosophy has always found a place in other settings, relating to the workplace, the political sphere and religious spheres, in occult circles and revolutionary organisations. Philosophy is expressed in films, on TV, in novels, in pop songs and now, with the world wide web, the public has access to the major philosophers with a click of the mouse. What is needed in this age of 'too much information' is some discernment and organisation so that one's time of inquiry and study is not just a paddling around in the sea of ideas which do not cohere with one another. A major function of a school for adult learners is to provide some organisation to intellectual ideas, whether it be topical, such as feminism, political philosophy, metaphysics; or historical as in recognising how later ideas are built on an acceptance and critique of those ideas that preceded them.

Book groups have become quite popular in the United States over the past ten years. This demonstrates peoples' need to share their learning and reading and ideas with others. With the Internet and the glut of published material, people can have access to reams of information individually, but this does not fill a deeper need for the social dimension of learning. Many look back on their college days as an ideal time when intellectual pursuits were conducted within a shared community. Must we give that up? Or are there ways that we can restore a sense of community among learners even when they are involved in separate work and family lives? E-groups and chat rooms on the Internet just do not fill the need for community. Face to face discussions seem therefore to be an important medium to preserve. Is this happening today at our universities? Sadly no. Classes of 60 - 200 do not allow for any real contact either among students themselves or with their instructors. If you were among the small elite who attended small colleges, you may have been able to find some intellectual community, but it is also likely that the developmental demands of late adolescence may have obscured the value of *intellectual* intercourse. I don't see any reason to let the possibility of intellectual community disappear either for those who never had it in the first place or for those that long for it again. The development of the small schools of philosophical study would be an important means of stemming the tide of depersonalisation that is rife in our contemporary world.

Up until the middle of the last century, education was seen primarily as a form of philosophical practice. Ancient schools, such as Aristotle's Lyceum or the Stoa taught theories of natural science, ethics, politics, psychology and theology which were co-ordinated around a primary philosophy. This brought a high degree of coherence within each system which accounted for a wide spectrum of aspects of the world. In the European and Middle Eastern worlds of the middle ages, systems of science, belief and philosophy were unified around articles of faith and conformed with the prevailing worldview of the established and controlling religious system. Thought that ran counter to the tradition was dangerous, but even renegade philosophers and mystics organised their thought in response to the prevailing position.

The emergence of a reaction against the prevailing scholasticism of the seventeenth century ushered in the view that the methods of inquiry in the young sciences needed to be purified of any blind loyalty to the authority of a system that was itself under critique. Kant and Hegel are perhaps the crowning thinkers in this movement which critically evaluated the taken-for-granted assumptions of pedagogical practices.

The aspirations of the early German idealists to establish a single *Wissenschaftlehre*, a single science of knowledge, gave way to the more pragmatic considerations that, in order for each of the sciences to develop its best methods of gathering, interpreting and concluding from its own significant data, it must be able to conceptualise itself according to regulative considerations within the discipline itself, rather than from abstract universal categories of understanding or being. This produced the separation of the fields of study into highly technical areas, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, chemistry, physics, biology, which had their own view to the world according to different levels of signification. Philosophy was seen as an obstruction to the establishment of the identities of these fields, which were not seen as aspects of the absolute, but as disciplines joined around common significations, methods and notation.

The identity of philosophy in the past two hundred years has changed significantly from being the necessary foundation for a unified exploration of the world to the position of being an adjunct to the sciences, a sort of bumbling blind child who catches up to the discoveries of science too late to actually influence the results and which therefore can only abstractly notate the discoveries in a highly technical language. The owl of Minerva, as Hegel has famously phrased, takes flight at dusk. Philosophy speculates upon the scene after the intellectual structures which have defined the historical moment have already begun to fade. Much of current academic philosophy is searching for an identity within the institutions of higher learning through linking themselves to applied fields, such as bio-ethics and environmental ethics. The technocrising of philosophy is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, through the application of philosophy to current problems, the field may find a new relevancy. On the other hand, through appropriating the language of the sciences, philosophy may lose its critical distance and thereby become a mere ancillary chapter in the great scientific *Weltanschauung*. Whether philosophy comes out ahead in this marriage or not, it nevertheless seems apparent in the trends in the universities in the United States that philosophy is becoming more and more the hand-maiden of other fields.

In proposing a model of adult education as a form of person-centred philosophising, I see that philosophy may likewise be linked to other fields such as psychology, anthropology, cultural studies, literature, and sociology. The interest in this case would be a humanist agenda of understanding the *Lebenswelt*, or life-world, of the student within her own milieu. The goal of academic philosophy may be overwhelmingly more interested in technical advances in the field than in using philosophy as a means of understanding self and others. This I find to be quite unfortunate since late adolescents are at a point in their lives in which they are asking important questions of personal values and self-identity, about which most instructors are quite oblivious.

Karl Jaspers writes that "the individual wants to rediscover as his own truth what comes to him as external authority" (1971, p. 48). I think this captures exactly the purpose of education later in life. Much of early education is based on memorising, utilising, articulating truths that are given from the authority of a textbook. Most students are not encouraged to challenge the authority of the texts because the practical application of knowledge requires that certain axioms are taken for granted as necessary components of a functioning system of thought. Education becomes training for a field of work and learning the trade means one cannot be too critical of its basic assumptions. Perhaps this serves the conditions of the work place and the economic considerations of late capitalism and maintains a social stability but, there may be a time in a person's life where he or she sees behind the curtain and sees the little man working the levers to

maintain the illusion that *this is the way it has to be*. Mid-life crises is a pop-psychological term for an event of disillusionment in which the system falls apart and individuals realise that they have in some way been co-opted into a social, political and economic system that is purely arbitrary in nature. According to Sartre (1964), "the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence...Every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance." We fall into explanations as a means of avoiding the stark freedom that such contingencies burdens us with, but if we can tolerate the freedom which removes us from having to justify the 'given' world in which we have been thrown, then real transformation can occur. A means of reconstructing one's world after it has fallen apart may be to critically evaluate exactly what it is in *the way things are* that does not make sense. This, of course can be done in a therapeutic context or it can be done educationally though an exposure to other minds that have struggled with similar negative epiphanies.

John Dewey writes that "the function of reflective thought is to transform a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled, harmonious (1939, p. 851). Taken in this simple form, Dewey could be criticised for being a bit naive about the complexities of human dissatisfaction. I believe philosophy cannot and should not promise to make everything transparently clear and thereby settle the anguish of the soul. The promise of philosophy may best be to stimulate some authentic, yet problematic, re-engagement with one's life and world. Ultimately, this re-engagement might lead to Nietzsche's *amour fati* or even Spinoza's *Intellectus Dei*. In any case, education after the disillusionment of a mid-life crisis may be instrumental in reorienting individuals to fresh perspectives on meaning and their being-in-the-world.

Jaspers describes the transformation that can occur through education with these words, "As I elucidate the realm of the encompassing for myself, the dark walls of my prison seem to become transparent" (1971, p. 65). I think what he means here is that the various personal conundrums one can find oneself can be opened up through an approach to wider paradigms of meaning, which is the stock-in-trade of philosophy. Alfred North Whitehead describes this stage of expansion as 'romance', when, "the subject matter has a vividness of novelty; it holds within itself unexplored connections with possibilities half disclosed by glimpses and half concealed by the wealth of the material" (1949, p. 29).

According to Dewey, another crucial dimension of learning is that it is inherently social. He writes that "all human experience is ultimately social. Experience does not go on simply inside a person... Intellectual organisation is not an end in itself but is the means by which social relations, distinctively human ties and bonds, may be understood and more intelligently ordered" (1938, p. 34, 103). Another function of adult learning is the important face to face encounters that are provided for people to create in some way a learning community that is not based on pre-established collegiate models typified in undergraduate life. Europe, I believe, has a much different version of university life that may be more diversified and thereby be more hospitable to the older learner than say the model of *Animal House*. State universities in America do offer lots of socialising activities but these are rarely intellectual in nature. The kind of community that may arise with the gathering of interested adults around particular topics can be a fresh model of interactive thinking, as the success of book groups and philo-cafes have shown.

One of the benefits of a so-called 'free-market' is the chance to put a new product on the market and see if it catches on, that is, see if the general public will respond positively and endorse the product and thereby assure its survival against the competition. State institutions no longer hold the monopoly over the granting of higher degrees and there are also a number of 'experimental colleges' that offer hobby-like classes at reasonable tuition. However, I see a need for schools of philosophy which can provide quality rigorous and scholarly education for those older learners who are willing to do the hard work necessary to engage with difficult material but who are not willing to jump through inappropriate and meaningless hoops to be in a degree granting program. Degrees can serve important purposes earlier in life when one is training for a profession, but after one has become established in career and home, degrees serve only a token purpose of conveying a sense of accomplishment. I think there are better ways to feel intrinsic rewards for the diligence of taking on the study of philosophy. The best of these are probably internal and invisible but other rewards and recognition could be papers published in student journals, student presentations and debates before the public. These might give one the sense of being a member of an intellectual community. So I say, within a free economy of education, let the educational options flourish and enable various ways of learning to be available for the general public.

Dewey is known to have been critical of education that only leads to a static social order since such an order does not exist (1934, p. 9), yet in the midst of the forces of ferment and change he also recognised the need for stabilising influences of tradition and rationality. The many voices of philosophy, represented in their historical contexts, can offer both grounds for radical critique of the current culture as well as also grounding methodologies that require a certain amount of reflective distance and analysis. When this is applied to the lives of the older student it can provide both a means of self-evaluation and life-review and offer new models of unity and co-ordination of one's being-in-the-world. Through applying philosophy to current problems and debates thinkers such as Gadamer, Jaspers and Benjamin demonstrated various strategies of recollecting the horizon of historical meanings within the newly claimed contexts of the emergent. These can provide important resource of redescription for adults at the crossroads of their lives.

Often what propels adults to go back to school is some impulse or hunger, the satisfaction of which can only be met through the mind. It may be a call to virtue in the Aristotelian sense, that is, toward the actualisation of one's fullest potential. Education (*paideia*) is the cultivation of human potentials and according to Aristotle, our intellectual capacities represent our highest potentials and the very best form of life. Education comes from the Latin word *e-ducere* which means 'to lead out.' Education therefore is a leading out of each of us what is best within us. Sometimes this cannot take place between the ages of 18 to 24 but requires a life full of experiences in order to provide the material upon which later reflection can work. I am coming to the position that philosophy is not appropriate for the young but is best pursued in later life. Perhaps it is only after years of experiences in the world of work, family relations, public life, and developmental crises that one can return to an educational process which is truly a philosophical practice.

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