

Philosopher, Know Thyself: Metaphilosophical and
Methodological Reflection in Philosophy of Education
as Requisite for Successful Interdisciplinarity

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It is wisdom to know others; it is enlightenment to know one's self.

— Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men [and women].

— John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy"

INTRODUCTION

Healthy partnerships require that the parties to them have knowledge not only of the others involved but also, in each case, of herself or himself. Interdisciplinary engagements are most basically about creating unions between diverse communities of inquiry, each with its own distinctive epistemic orientations and methods, as well as professional self-understanding and social location. A requisite component of productive interdisciplinary partnering is a process of coming to an adequately reflective and honest self-understanding. I say "requisite" and not "prerequisite" because knowing one's self is rarely (if ever) accomplished by an isolated individual. Rather, it is through interpersonal engagement and openness to another's assessment of oneself that the individual comes to a more honest and reflective sense of personal identity.¹ Thus, the issue of "new interdisciplinarity" provides a staging point for reflection upon our own disciplinarity — an opportunity I attempt to capture in the title of this essay, a synthesis of the well known Biblical command "Physician, heal thyself," with the dictum that Socrates adopted from the inscription at Delphi as the philosopher's vocational calling: "know thyself."

This requisite self-awareness is something that I do not believe has often been achieved within the discipline of philosophy, or within the subfield of philosophy of education. We philosophers pride ourselves on having the philosophical courage to wade into the messiness of difficult questions, regardless of the personal or social stakes. Yet we display uncharacteristic temerity when facing the prospect of clear and critical inquiry into just what it is that philosophers *do*. So long as and to the extent that this situation persists, aspirations to new interdisciplinarity will remain an idle fantasy of a would-be romancer who fails to undertake the serious effort of self-scrutiny required to become one worthy of the partnership of others.

Efforts to attain a higher level of self-awareness as a discipline must be both critical and constructive, entailing dimensions of *metaphilosophy* — that is, inquiry into the nature and proper aims of "philosophy" as such — as well as *methodology* — that is, reflection upon choices concerning methods of inquiry deployed to attain our aims with an eye toward their warrant or justification. Such self-scrutiny strikes some as unbecoming of a self-confident and mature discipline, even as suggesting

insecurity and self-absorption. And indeed, some discussion of methodology in philosophy is clearly motivated by professional insecurities.² But the self-interrogation that such insecurities instigate need not devolve into the “naval gazing” so endemic in “pop-psych” bestsellers, books whose readers become, in the process of “self-help,” less confident and secure.³ One piece of wisdom gleaned from the self-help literature may, however, serve us well: the first step to recovery is recognizing that you have a problem. To understand our own “problems,” we must see how our professional insecurities and the challenges of interdisciplinarity are interconnected, and that both are rooted in our disciplinary history.

Important work in metaphilosophy and philosophical methodology has been undertaken in many of philosophy’s subdisciplines and specializations. These attempts to contribute to our contemporary understanding of philosophy tend to be, by their very nature, interdisciplinary — historical analysis, empirical findings, experimental results, and political deliberation are all brought within rather than excluded from the extension of the term *philosophy*. In this essay, I make an argument for parallel efforts in philosophy of education. I offer an account of the origins of modern academic philosophy’s disciplinarity in methodological terms, revealing the interdisciplinarity that was lost in a process of academic balkanization. This historical perspective helps to illuminate both our contemporary impoverishment as well as distinctive resources we retain. Then, I briefly highlight what I take to be some of the some of the most promising developments in philosophical methodology across the discipline’s subfields from which we can productively borrow as we seek greater self-knowledge. I finally offer an admittedly partial yet necessary critique of the role — or lack thereof — accorded to methodological reflection in philosophy of education, and argue that remedying this situation is one of the keys to moving forward and creating new interdisciplinaries.

HOW PHILOSOPHY (OF EDUCATION) WAS DISCIPLINED:

ORIGINS OF “THE GREAT PARTITION”

Philosophy, as both an academic discipline and a social practice, is substantially a historical artifact: its unity (such as it is) derives from, to borrow Ortega y Gasset’s phrase, “no nature; what [it] has is — history.”⁴ In the same vein, when A. J. Ayer was reportedly asked, “What is philosophy?” he waved his hand in the direction of his impressively stocked bookshelves and said, “It’s all that.”⁵ A historical account of philosophy in its specificity as a literature and tradition of thought and discourse (“all that”) reveals clearly that it has always cut across our current disciplinary boundaries — adequate appreciation of the philosophical tradition requires regarding it as *more* than philosophy, in the contemporary, more restricted sense of the word.

Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that the “official history” of the scientific revolution has grown up after the fact to explain contemporary disciplinary demarcations.⁶ This means, according to Appiah, that what he terms “The Great Partition” between empirical and conceptual — and, by extension, normative and descriptive claims, and between facts and values — has been read into history to justify divisions in the contemporary academic scene. This perspective helps us to understand the

situation in which philosophers of education find themselves today. I take philosophy of education to refer to both a distinct subfield within the field of education studies (or research) as well as a specialization within the academic discipline of philosophy. While its subject matter is shared across disciplines in education (psychologists and sociologists are as likely as philosophers to take up issues of the identity in education, the nature of consciousness and learning, and so on), philosophers of education draw their methods primarily from the practices of academic philosophy.

While philosophical inquiry into educational issues has a long lineage and can be traced back to the Greeks, especially (as with so many of the questions we consider “philosophical”) to Plato and Aristotle, academic philosophy did not appear in something close to its modern form — a discipline with its own distinctive subject matter, methods, and style — until the sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-centuries. A product of a series of European cultural and institutional revolutions (the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment), philosophy was heavily influenced by the emergence of the natural sciences. In fact, what today is known as the scientific revolution began as the work of “Natural Philosophers,” taking on a recognizably modern form in experiments conducted by Sir Francis Bacon and others, notably members of the Royal Society of London.

As the experimental methods of the natural sciences grew in prestige, the distinction between empirical and conceptual dimensions of inquiry became more sharply drawn. David Hume famously distinguished between “relations of ideas” and “matters of fact,”⁷ and extended this into moral matters by drawing a distinction between “is” and “ought” claims, arguing that the latter cannot be deduced from the former.⁸ In the early twentieth century, the fissure that Hume had opened was systematized in the *logical positivism* developed by a group of European intellectuals known as the Vienna Circle. The logical positivists asserted an influential form of verificationism that had tremendous influence on methodology in the rapidly developing social sciences.

Logical positivism translated Hume’s distinction between matters of fact and relations of ideas into a theory of *cognitive significance*: analytic statements are those shown to be true in virtue of formal logic, or meanings and definitions; synthetic claims are shown to be true in virtue of empirical verification. Thus, the logical positivists held that the analytic-synthetic distinction is dichotomous as well as exhaustive of all (cognitively) meaningful statements. In its extreme formulation, this view judges all non-empirical claims — including all metaphysical claims and value judgments — to be strictly meaningless.⁹ *Emotivism* is an extension of the positivist position, and holds that claims as the rightness or wrongness of a given act are mere expressions of personal preference or feeling, and so not subject to rational debate.¹⁰

Arguably, Hume and his intellectual progeny laid the groundwork for nineteenth- and twentieth-century schism between the two scholarly cultures later described by C. P. Snow.¹¹ This divide, which Kenneth Howe terms “the Empirical-Science/Humanities Dichotomy,”¹² contrasts empirical research (the province of the

natural and social sciences) with “conceptual work” and inquiry into values (deemed the domain of the humanities). As these two types of inquiry were increasingly divorced, the divvying up the Western intellectual estate was markedly unequal. Philosophy was left, in the view of many, stranded on the side of the divide with the wrong subject matter and an ineffectual methodology.

What is worse, as the cultural imperialism of the natural sciences gained momentum these continued (and continue) to overtake subject matter that philosophers previously deemed their turf. For their part, academic philosophers have made the best of a bad situation. At its most disciplined, philosophy now falls into a narrow range of formal logic, speculation in metaphysics and epistemology driven by tautologous analytical clarifications, and intuition-pumping “trolleyology”¹³ in ethics. Empirical findings are often deemed irrelevant distractions, and it is common enough that a philosopher confronted with some (apparently relevant) aspect of how the world actually happens to be, will deflect the critique with: “Well, that’s an empirical question.”

The irony of this state of affairs is striking, in light of the fact that prior to its modern disciplining, philosophy’s integration of the empirical and conceptual and of the factual and normative was thoroughgoing.¹⁴ These were fundamentally linked, for example, in the works of the founding figure of modern philosophy, René Descartes, as famous for contributions to experimental method, geometry, and mathematical physics¹⁵ as for his epistemology-oriented *Meditations*. We should also recall more often that, despite the historical role he plays in the development of positivism, Hume chose for his *Treatise of Human Nature* the subtitle: *Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*.¹⁶ We are guilty of anachronism when we carve up Descartes’s or Hume’s work into separate “scientific” and “philosophical” parts.

THE CHALLENGE OF METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION IN PHILOSOPHY (OF EDUCATION):
GETTING OVER “THE GREAT PARTITION”

Positivism’s influence in philosophy peaked in the mid-twentieth century, when it was decisively discredited in W.V.O. Quine’s classic 1951 essay, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism.”¹⁷ Quine’s critique occurred, however, within already established professional boundaries that are themselves expressions the Great Partition. To some extent it is true that the continued influence of positivism outside of philosophy has to do with a lack of critical reflexivity. As political scientist Steve Elkin writes, “Our disciplines absorbed positivism in the 1950s when it was at its peak of influence, and then stopped thinking about the foundations.”¹⁸ Institutional considerations also help to explain positivism’s continued influence despite its widely heralded decline. Training within academic disciplines tends to reinforce already established boundaries, and so also to initiate new scholars into an *implicit* positivist ideology — as Harry Boyte puts it, “Faculty members undergo an insidious socialization, especially in graduate school.”¹⁹ Thus, while the image of the knower informed by positivist epistemology “may be discredited in theory,” Boyte writes, “it would be a mistake to minimize the challenges of overcoming it in practice.”²⁰

If the legacy of the logical positivists cordoned philosophy off from the threat of contingency by surrounding it with a moat, then Quine drained that moat of water.²¹ Discipline-dictated patterns of professional activity persist out of inertia, even as that shallow ditch grows ever drier. Quine may as well have been Nietzsche's madman: as with the heralded "death of God," the death of empiricist dogmas is already accomplished — news of the deed, however, has yet to reach many ears.²² Old dogmas "die hard"²³ — periodically, they may even rise from the grave. With positivism's recent resurgence in educational research under the guise of what Howe terms "the new scientific orthodoxy,"²⁴ we philosophers of education find ourselves embattled on all sides by epistemological zombies, positivism's living-dead. We must realize, however, that to the extent we conspire in the segregation of empirical from conceptual work, we retrench ourselves within the ghetto of analyticity that positivism designated for us, and that then, we too are such zombies ourselves.

One form that this retrenchment takes is the widespread resistance amongst philosophers of education to discussing the practice of philosophy in terms of *methods* and *methodology*. Consider that, in Paul Standish's preface to a 2009 special edition of *The Journal of Philosophy of Education* dedicated to the question: "What do Philosophers of Education do? (And how do they do it?)," this outstanding philosopher of education acknowledges the growing marginalization of the field and nevertheless remarks that, "Philosophers are rightly wary to be too quick to explicate their methods."²⁵

In Standish's view, raising the issue of methodology at all occurs as an unfortunate concession to an inhospitable intellectual climate. It is as if such discussions require that we put on the ill-fitting and un-becoming coat of "methodology," clothes cut to fit our younger and more popular friends in the natural and social sciences. Richard Smith expresses this view when he writes that, "In doing philosophy we need to be aware of the *awkwardness* of thinking in terms of having a method, still more any kind of 'methodology'."²⁶ Smith goes further, suggesting that to focus on methodological concerns at all risks reducing philosophy to *mere* method.²⁷ In such cases, the word "method" is taken in terms of pejorative connotations of "methodical" and "mechanical." This perspective has been influential across the humanities — as when the cultural historian Jacques Barzun emphasizes the "organic unity" of thought and the "capacity for insight"²⁸ — and rejects what Barzun considers a Cartesian emphasis on *method* in education and academic life.²⁹ "Methodology" perhaps carries for some a dogmatic sense, similar to that of "ideology" — a resonance that Richard Rorty takes a step further when he warns of "methodolatry."³⁰

Such views seem based, at least in part, upon a common confusion between the meanings of the words "methodology" and "methods." Philosopher of science Sandra Harding draws attention to the importance of distinguishing between *methods*, *methodology*, and *epistemology*.³¹ In Harding's definition, methods are any techniques used for gathering and organizing evidence. Since what counts as evidence varies from discipline to discipline, so do the methods for collecting it. Methodologies are theories concerning how research should proceed and how

evidence should be gathered. Methodology is normative and theoretical, keyed to the context of inquiry and its goals, with special attention to the justification of the methods employed. Situated as it is as a kind of bridge between the concrete realm of methods and the more abstract domain of epistemology, which concerns how knowledge claims are justified and on what grounds authority is accorded to a knower, methodological inquiry deals with questions associated with both.

Distinguishing between method and methodology dispels many of the concerns expressed by philosophers of education about the risk of deeper and more frequent methodological reflection. Claudia Ruitenberg carefully makes this distinction, and points out that resistance to narrow characterizations of philosophy in terms of a mechanical or overly formal method or methods *is itself an argument at the level of methodology*.³² We have not, however, answered the question of whether and to what extent philosophers ought to specify their methods of research. Richard Smith's view seems to be that philosophy must be considered less of a science and more of an art — of close reading and listening in preparation for flashes of insight or inspiration — that defies construal in terms of method.³³

There's something to be said in support of such a view. On the one hand, as Thomas Kuhn puts it, there is a sense in which it is when method breaks down and methodologies conflict that philosophy begins.³⁴ Philosophy is in such cases something like a meta-method that only comes into play when paradigms break-down and we are faced with the problem of theory selection. This view is problematic, or at least partial, in that it ignores the "normality" (in Kuhn's sense) of much of what passes as philosophical work. Consider the following short list: The Socratic *elenchus*. Critique. Dialectic. Phenomenological description. Hermeneutics. Archeology/genealogy. Structural analysis. Ideology critique. Conceptual analysis. Linguistic analysis. Deconstruction. Concept creation. Appeal to intuitions. Constructing imaginative examples and counterexamples. Reflective equilibrium. The adversarial method. Conversation. Narrative. It seems odd to insist that philosophy is anti-methodical, given the variety of methods philosophers have developed and employed!

In any tradition of inquiry, the question of the relationship between the process of inquiry and the validity of results and conclusions is central. Even in relatively well-established methodological terrain of the natural sciences, leading thinkers have complained that the stylized form of research reporting common to academic writing often presents a "totally misleading narrative."³⁵ There is often a significant gap between the complexities of scientific practice, which is "seldom pristine, impersonal and fully logical,"³⁶ and the presentation of both method and results that seem to be so. For our part, David Bridges writes that, "Philosophers are on the whole protected from this accusation by their practice of saying nothing by way of preface to their writing about the method which they have employed in its derivation and construction."³⁷

The modern demand for transparency of methods is rooted in the Enlightenment commitment to publicity — meaning, in Simone Chambers's words, "not only bringing something to the public's attention but also requiring or asking the public

to scrutinize critically the object in question.”³⁸ Arising as it did from a medieval context in which knowledge claims rested upon the authority of a religious priesthood, emphasis on the disclosure of methods is thus part and parcel of the modern democratization of knowledge production and epistemic authority. The positivist division of our academic culture has pictured the role of the expert as fundamentally removed from the public, since technical forms of knowledge are not subject to assessment by the non-expert or layperson³⁹ — and increasingly, products of inquiry in one discipline are also unintelligible to experts in another.

Within the essentially hybrid context of education studies, the expectation that researchers specify their methods and (within reasonable bounds) disclose the (contingent and particular) process of inquiry,⁴⁰ is laudable and, to the extent possible, ought to be embraced. Additionally, concerns for publicity and accessibility of the democratic community of inquirers also set reasonable limits on the requirement for transparency of method. As José Ortega y Gasset writes,

I think that the philosopher must, for his own purposes, carry methodological strictness to an extreme when he is investigating and pursuing his truths, but when he is ready to enunciate them and give them out, he ought to avoid the cynical skill with which some scientists, like a Hercules at the fair, amuse themselves by displaying to the public the biceps of their technique.⁴¹

We must resist “methodolatry,” with its modern scholasticism and professional elitism, for precisely the same reasons we must take the difficult task of gaining clarity about our methods and providing publicly acceptable justifications for them so seriously.

CONCLUSION: RECOGNIZING WHAT WE CAN OFFER

Philosophers of education hold a dual intellectual, social, and cultural citizenship.⁴² I have argued that in order to be citizens in an interdisciplinary world, we must embrace the empirical, contingent nature of our discipline, its methods and its themes. We should reject the false choice between, in Nicholas Burbules’s phrase, “relevance and critique.”⁴³ As John Dewey eloquently and concisely recommends in the second epigraph, the pragmatist tradition points the way toward a “recovery” of philosophy in which it becomes grounded in contemporary social problems and the concerns of public life. Within philosophy of education, the pragmatist school is strong and Dewey’s writings are widely cited. A pragmatist philosophical methodology thus represents a resource endogenous to our field.⁴⁴

We can also draw upon developments in other philosophical subfields that are perhaps less well known to philosophers of education. In epistemology, Karl Popper, Quine, and Donald Campbell initiated efforts to naturalize theories concerning what it means to know.⁴⁵ Feminists and some critical theorists have argued that taking seriously the epistemic and ethical implications of our social situatedness means that processes of inquiry must be democratized as well as naturalized.⁴⁶ In ethics, recent attention to the interaction of moral psychology and social context has led to exciting developments in “experimental philosophy.”⁴⁷ In political philosophy key aspects of John Rawls’ method of “ideal theory”⁴⁸ are being eclipsed by a Dewey-inspired nonideal approach⁴⁹ that takes historical context seriously and

orients philosophical inquiry toward amelioration of pressing public problems. All of these promising developments seek to integrate a methodological focus in philosophical work.

New interdisciplinarity also require clarity concerning what we have to offer our partners in inquiry. I submit that the most distinctive and necessary contribution we philosophers make is our unabashed commitment to the carefully reasoned discussion of questions of value. Unlike many education policymakers, researchers, and publics, most philosophers still suppose that meaningful deliberation about normative issues is possible. This philosopher's faith as well as our many methods developed for dealing with normative questions are desperately needed in the current intellectual and educational scene. It could be that philosophy's distinctive contribution to contemporary educational inquiry recalls us to what C.S. Pierce regarded as the ultimate aim of philosophy a century ago: the development of a methodological program for "normative science" that "studies what ought to be."⁵⁰

In order to put these desperately needed resources to fruitful use, we must finally abolish the Great Partition, a project which involves overcoming our own implicitly positivist self-understanding. Recognizing the vital role of method and of methodological reflection in this project does not reduce the "purity" of philosophical inquiry in the field of education; on the contrary, bringing greater self-consciousness to our practice and a heightened awareness of ways in which others' expertise is relevant to our own work, as well as what we have to offer, represents the best possibility that philosophy of education will recover itself and once again come into its own as a major force in the broad field of educational inquiry.

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