The Right to Philosophy of Education: From Critique to Deconstruction

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Introduction

If we raise the question as to what the task of philosophy of education could be, the critical role is one of the obvious candidates. But *how* can philosophy of education be critical? And how can the criticality of philosophy of education be *legitimized*. What, in other words, gives educational philosophy the *right* to be critical?

In this essay I want to explore the critical possibilities for educational philosophy. I will discuss three critical "programs," namely, *critical dogmatism*, *transcendental critique*, and *deconstruction*. Besides an examination of the critical potential of each program, and of the way in which each program legitimizes its right to be critical, I will compare these programs in order to establish which program might best support the critical work of educational philosophy.

Within the scope of this essay, I will not be able to spell out the practical implications for the critical work carried out by educational philosophers. Yet, I hope that my reflections will provide a meaningful framework for further discussion.

Critical Dogmatism

I propose to define critical dogmatism as any style of critique in which the critical operation consists of the application of a criterion. The operation is *critical*, in that it gives an evaluation of a specific state of affairs. The operation is *dogmatic*, in that the criterion itself is kept out of reach of the critical operation and is applied to this state of affairs "from the outside." Critical dogmatism, so we could say, derives its right to be critical from the *truth* of the criterion.[1]

Critical dogmatism is quite common in educational philosophy. Critical work is, for example, carried out by means of a definition of what counts as education.[2] Such a definition is used to evaluate educative practices and theories, which can then turn out to be, for example, non-educative or indoctrinary. Critical dogmatism can also be found in the work of those educational philosophers who see themselves as children's advocates. Here, the basis for critique is the conviction that the child represents a value of its own; a value that must be respected in educational theory and practice. A third example is the work of those educational philosophers who take "emancipation" to be the general criterion for the evaluation of educational theory and practice.[3]

Although I refer to this style of criticism as "dogmatic," there is, as such, nothing objectionable to this approach. That is to say, there is nothing objectionable to critical dogmatism *as long as one recognizes and accepts its dogmatic character*. As Hans Albert has expressed in his "Münchhausen trilemma," any attempt to articulate foundations — and in critical dogmatism the criterion founds the critical operation

— leads "to a situation with three alternatives, all of which appear unacceptable."[4] The trilemma forces one to choose between (1) an *infinite regress*, because the propositions that serve as a fundament need to be founded themselves; (2) a *logical circle* that results from the fact that in the process of giving reasons, one has to resort to statements that have already shown themselves to be in need of justification; or (3) breaking off the attempt at a particular point by *dogmatically* installing a foundation.

Albert argues, that the only possible foundation of critique *is* a dogmatic foundation, so that the only possible form of critique is dogmatic critique. Of course, this conclusion raises some problems. If dogmatism appears at the heart of the critical enterprise, the critical operation seems to be immediately subverted. How can critique be effective — or even more: How is critique possible — if its ultimate foundation is merely conventional?

I believe that critical dogmatism is in trouble once it is acknowledged that the criterion itself can only be installed dogmatically. This is not to suggest, that the application of such criteria has never had any positive effects or that any critical work in educational philosophy along these lines has been in vain. But we should be aware of the paradoxical character of this style of critique.

Although this brings critical dogmatism into a difficult position, it does not mean that the possibilities for critique as such are thereby exhausted. What has been argued so far, is the paradoxical character of critique as the application of a criterion that is itself beyond critique. There is, however, a critical style which claims that it can circumvent the paradox of critical dogmatism. This is *transcendental critique*.

Transcendental Critique

Transcendental critique has its roots in the emergence of the scientific worldview. From then onwards, philosophy could no longer claim to provide knowledge of the natural world (physics), nor of a more fundamental reality (*meta*physics). Philosophy thus lost its role as a foundational discipline. It was Kant who put philosophy on a new track —the *transcendental* track — where it became the proper task of philosophy to articulate the *conditions of possibility* of true (scientific) knowledge.

Kant's program was almost immediately criticized for the reflexive paradox it contained. It was Hegel who pointed out the problematic character of the attempt to acquire knowledge about the process of knowledge acquisition. The reason why Kant did not perceive this paradox had to do with the framework of the philosophy of consciousness in which he operated. For Kant, the "Ich denke" (I think), was the "highest point, to which we must ascribe all employment of the understanding, even the whole of logic, and conformally therewith, transcendental philosophy."[5]

The work of Karl-Otto Apel can be seen as a (re)articulation of transcendental philosophy that tries to circumvent this "dogmatic element" in Kant's position by making a shift from the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of language.[6] The main difference between Apel and Kant lies in Apel's recognition of the fact that all knowledge is linguistically mediated. While Kant assumed that the acquisition of knowledge is basically an individualistic enterprise, Apel argues that our

10.47925/1998.476

individual experiences must be "lifted" to the level of a language game in order to become knowledge. The link between experience and language is, however, not established automatically. The question of the validity of our individual experiences has to be answered by means of *argumentation*. Because argumentation only makes sense within a language game, within a "community of communication," Apel concludes that this community is the condition of possibility of all knowledge.

Apel's "linguistic turn" results in the recognition of the *a priori of the community of communication*. Because we can never get "before" the actual use of language in a specific community of communication, any reflection on language can only take place in a specific language game or community of communication.[7] The pragmatic dimension is therefore the most basic dimension of language, for which reason Apel refers to his position as *transcendental pragmatics*.

Although Apel establishes a strong link between transcendental pragmatics and really existing communities of communication — a maneuver which seems to give his project a strong conventionalistic basis — he introduces a critical element that is meant to enable transcendental pragmatics to go beyond convention. This element is the *ideal community of communication* or the *transcendental language game.*

Apel claims that a participant in a genuine argument is at the very same time a member of a concrete community of communication and a counterfactual *ideal* community of communication, a community which is, in principle, open to all speakers and which excludes all force except the force of the better argument. This community "is, at least implicitly, anticipated in all human actions claiming to be meaningful and it is explicitly anticipated in philosophical arguments claiming to be valid."[8] Any claim to intersubjectively valid knowledge therefore implicitly acknowledges this ideal community, as a "meta-institution" of rational argumentation, to be its ultimate source of justification.[9] Communication would lose its meaning when one no longer aims at this ideal.

The idea of the ideal community of communication provides a criterion which makes critique possible. What distinguishes Apel's position from critical dogmatism is that this criterion is not installed dogmatically but by means of a process of *reflexive grounding* ("Letztbegründung durch Reflexion"). With respect to this process Apel claims that he can circumvent the dogmatic implications of the Münchhausen trilemma.

The first thing that has to be acknowledged, is that the first and the third option of the Münchhausen trilemma (infinite regress and dogmatism) hang together. Both are connected to Albert's contention that the process of foundation must necessarily be understood in terms of *deduction*. If we talk about foundations in a deductive style, that is, if we raise the question of the "foundation of the foundation," it is clear that we enter an infinite regress which can only be stopped arbitrarily. Apel admits that if we understand foundations in this sense, we will never find them. But this does not mean that we should give up the idea of foundation as such, only that we need another way to bring foundations into view.

Apel starts from the recognition that the conditions of possibility of argumentation have to be presupposed in all argumentation (otherwise they would not be

10.47925/1998.476

conditions of possibility). But if this is so, then it follows, that one cannot argue against these conditions of possibility without immediately falling into a *performative contradiction*, that is, a situation where the performative dimensions of the argument (the act of arguing) contradict the propositional content (what is argued). From this, Apel concludes that *all contentions that cannot be disclaimed without falling into a performative contradiction, express a condition of possibility of the argumentative use of language*. The principle of performative consistency is therefore the criterion which can *reveal* the ultimate foundations of the argumentative use of language, that is, those propositions that do not need further grounding, because, so Apel argues, they cannot be understood without knowing that they are true.[10]

Although Apel articulates the way in which the ultimate foundations of the argumentative use of language can be *revealed*, he does not say much about what these foundations actually are. Yet, it is not difficult to see that what the application of the principle of performative consistency can bring into view are the foundations, or, so we could say, the "meta-rules" of all argumentative use of language. These meta-rules, which include such things as the contention that all communication aims at consensus, that all communication rests upon the validity of claims to truth, rightness and truthfulness, and that these claims can in principle be redeemed, outline the *ideal* community of communication.[11]

Apel's program tries to argue for the possibility or articulating criteria for critique non-dogmatically. More than just another style of critique, Apel suggests that critical dogmatism — at least in so far as it concerns the dogmatic choice for rationality — is an untenable position, because "any choice that could be understood as meaningful already presupposes the transcendental language game as its condition of possibility."[12] From this it does not follow that every decision is rational, but it does follow that a decision in favor of the principle of rational legitimation of criticism is "rational *a priori*," because "reason...can always confirm its own legitimation through reflection on the fact that it presupposes its own self-understanding of the very rules it opts for."[13]

These remarks reveal that the criticality of transcendental pragmatics is motivated by *rationality*. After all, the "sin" of the performative contradiction is a sin against rationality, and it is for this very reason that the contradiction has to be avoided. Rationality therefore gives transcendental critique its "right" to be critical. This becomes clear when we look at the way in which the transcendental style of critique is applied in educational philosophy. In a more strict sense, we can see this style of critique at work in discussions about critical thinking and education. Here the work of Harvey Siegel stands out as a continuous attempt to spot the performative contradiction in any challenge to rationality.[14] In a wider sense, the critical potential of the idea of performative contradiction is used as a form of internal critique, where the main critical work consists of a confrontation of a position or argument with its (often implicit) conditions of possibility.

Transcendental critique presents itself as a "stronger" conception of critique than critical dogmatism, primarily because it claims to be able to articulate its choice for rationality non-dogmatically. Compared to critical dogmatism, I want to argue

10.47925/1998.476

that transcendental critique indeed is a more sophisticated critical program. But transcendental critique is not (yet) the last word about critique.

Deconstruction

The writings of Jacques Derrida — to which I will refer as (the philosophy of) deconstruction — articulate yet another critical program. Like Apel, Derrida rejects the possibility of a grounding by deduction. But unlike Apel, the conclusions he draws from this rejection are quite different.

Derrida sees the history of Western philosophy as a continuous attempt to locate a fundamental ground which serves both as an absolute beginning and as a center from which everything originating from it can be mastered and controlled. Since Plato, the origin has always been defined in terms of *presence*. This "metaphysics of presence" includes a *hierarchical axiology* in which the origin is designated as pure, simple, normal, self-sufficient, and self-identical, in order *then* to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, and so forth.[15] This is "*the* metaphysical exigency," that which has been "the most constant, most profound and most potent."[16]

Derrida wants to put this metaphysical gesture into question. He acknowledges that he is not the first to do so. But against Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger, and all other "destructive discourses" that wanted to overcome metaphysics, Derrida argues that we can never make a total break. "There is no sense," he argues, "in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We…can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest."[17] While Derrida definitely wants to "shake" metaphysics, he acknowledges that this cannot be done from some neutral and innocent place outside of metaphysics. Derrida wants to shake metaphysics, to put it simply, by showing that metaphysics is itself always already shaking, by showing the impossibility of any attempt to fix being through the presentation of a self-identical, original presence.

One way in which Derrida articulates this impossibility and its predicaments, is through the "notion" of *différance*, which he articulates in discussion with the structuralist semiotics of Ferdinand de Saussure.[18] Contrary to the idea that language is a naming process, attaching words to things, Saussure argues that language is a structure where any individual element is meaningless outside the confines of that structure. In language there are only *differences*. These differences, however, are not differences between positive terms, that is, between terms that in and by themselves refer to things outside the system. In language there are only differences *without* positive terms. From this two conclusions follow.

First of all, the idea of differences without positive terms entails that the "movement of signification" is only possible if each element "appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself." What is called "the present" is therefore constituted "by means of this very relation to what it is not" (*MP*, 13). This contamination is a necessary contamination: For the present to be itself, it already has to be *other* than itself. This puts the non-present in a double position, because it is the non-present which makes the presence of the present

10.47925/1998.476

possible, and yet, it can only make this presence possible by means of its own exclusion. What is excluded thereby, in a sense, returns to sign the act of its own exclusion. And it is this apparent complicity, which "outplays the legality of the decision to exclude" in the first place.[19]

If this is what deconstruction can bring into view, we can already get an idea of its critical potential, because at the heart of deconstruction, we find a concern for the "constitutive outside" of what presents itself as self-sufficient. This reveals that deconstruction is more than just a destruction of the metaphysics of presence. Deconstruction is first and foremost an *affirmation* of what is excluded and forgotten. An affirmation, in short, of what is *other*.[20]

There is, however, a complication which concerns the question of *how* deconstruction can bring that what is excluded into view. For if it is the case that in language there are only differences without positive terms, then we have to concede that we can no longer articulate the differential character of language itself by means of a positive term (like, for example, "differentiation"). Difference without positive terms implies that this "dimension" must itself always remain unperceived, for strictly speaking, it is unconceptualizable. The "play of difference," which is "the condition for the possibility and functioning of every sign, is in itself a silent play" (*MP*, 5).

If we would want to articulate that which does not let itself be articulated and yet is the condition for the possibility of all articulation — which we might want to do in order to prevent metaphysics from re-entering — we must acknowledge that there can never be a word or a concept to represent this silent play. We must acknowledge that this play cannot simply be exposed, for "one can expose only that which at a certain moment can become *present*" (*MP*, 5). And we must acknowledge that there is nowhere to begin, "for what is put into question is precisely the quest for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure" (*MP*, 6). All this is expressed in the new word or concept — "which is neither a word nor a concept" but a "neographism" — of *différance* (*MP*, 7, 13).

The reason why Derrida introduces that "what is written as *différance*" is not difficult to grasp (*MP*, 11). Although "the play of difference" is identified as the condition of possibility of all conceptuality, we should not make the mistake to think that we have finally found the real origin of all conceptuality. The predicament is this: because we are talking about the condition of possibility of all conceptuality, this condition cannot belong to that which it makes possible (the "order" of conceptuality). Yet, the only way in which we can *articulate* this condition of possibility is *within* this order. Because the condition of possibility is always articulated in terms of the system that is made possible by it, it is, in a sense, always already "too late" to be its condition of possibility (which implies that the condition of possibility is at the very same time a condition of impossibility[21]).

At this level, the critical potential of deconstruction returns in an even more radical way. The point here is, that because conditions of possibility are always already contaminated by the "system" that is made possible by them, this "system"

10.47925/1998.476

is never totally delimited by these conditions. *Différance* is therefore a quasi-transcendental or quasi-condition of possibility, because, as John D. Caputo aptly describes, it "does not describe fixed boundaries that delimit what can happen and what not, but points a mute, Buddhist finger at the moon of uncontainable effects."[22] Deconstruction thus tries to open up the system in the name of that which cannot be thought of in terms of the system (and yet makes the system possible). This reveals that the deconstructive affirmation is not simply an affirmation of what is known to be excluded by the system. Deconstruction is an affirmation of what is wholly other (*tout autre*), of what is unforeseeable from the present. It is an affirmation of an otherness that is always to come, as an event which "as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations."[23] Deconstruction is an openness towards the unforeseeable in-coming (*l'invention*; invention) of the other.[24] It is from this concern for what is totally other, a concern to which Derrida sometimes refers as *justice*, that deconstruction derives its right to be critical.

From Critique to Deconstruction

In the preceding pages I have discussed three ways in which philosophy of education might perform its critical role. I have argued that these programs derive their right to be critical from three different sources, namely, truth, rationality, and justice.

I have shown that the existence of critical dogmatism depends on the fact that the critical criterion is itself kept out of reach of the critical operation. Although this situation is rather unsatisfactory, I have presented Albert's Münchhausen trilemma to suggest that a dogmatic installment of the critical criterion is perhaps inevitable. The work of Apel implies a straightforward rejection of this suggestion. Apel shows that it is possible to articulate a critical criterion in a non-dogmatic way, at least in so far as we are concerned with the criteria that govern the argumentative use of language. Apel argues that the principle of performative consistency can bring into view the "meta-rules" of all argumentation. These meta-rules outline the ideal community of communication. What can deconstruction add to this picture?

It is not difficult to see the profound differences between deconstruction and critical dogmatism. Like transcendental critique, deconstruction problematizes the dogmatic installment of the critical criterion. As Derrida writes, deconstruction "always aims at the trust confided in the critical, critico-theoretical agency, that is, the deciding agency," for which reason he concludes that "deconstruction is deconstruction of critical dogmatism."[25] Further, deconstruction challenges the idea that there are pure, uncontaminated criteria that we can simply apply. At the basis of our decisions, Derrida argues, lies a radical undecidability, which cannot be closed off by our decisions, but which "continues to inhabit the decision."[26]

The critical distance between deconstruction and transcendental critique is perhaps less easy to grasp. Yet this distance is also substantial. Derrida and Apel agree on the fact that we are always already on the "inside" of language, so that the language game that has made us who we are is, in Apel's words, unsurpassable ("Nichthintergehbar"). Difficulties arise as soon as we want to say something about

10.47925/1998.476

what makes our speaking — and more specifically in the case of Apel, argumentation — possible. Although Apel hesitates to give a positive description of the conditions of possibility of the argumentative use of language, he believes that these conditions can be identified by means of the principle of performative consistency. This eventually leads him to the meta-rules that constitute the ideal community of communication.

The crucial difference between transcendental critique and deconstruction lies in the way in which the idea of conditions of possibility is understood. If I see it correctly, Apel has to assume that conditions of possibility control the system that is made possible by them, because it is only on this assumption that the idea of performative consistency makes sense. After all, a performative contradiction, a propositional sin against the conditions that make the performance of the proposition possible, can only occur when all performances in the "system" are controlled by these conditions. What Derrida brings into consideration, is that conditions of possibility are never totally external to the system. They are always already "contaminated" — if not "controlled"— by the system, and it is precisely because of this, that they cannot have total control over the system. What is possible, so we could say, is always more than what the conditions of possibility allow for. Deconstruction wants to do justice to this unforseeable excess, it wants to keep the possibility for an incoming of the wholly other open.

At this point, it becomes clear that deconstruction poses a serious challenge to the program of transcendental critique. This at least suggests — although further discussion is needed — that deconstruction is a stronger, and, in a sense, more coherent critical program than transcendental critique. What is crucial to see, is that deconstruction puts its challenge to the "iron grip" of rationality out of its concern for what (or who) is structurally excluded. It puts its challenge to rationality, in short, in the name of justice.

This leaves me with one final observation. I have argued that what motivates deconstruction is its concern for the unforeseeable invention (in-coming) of the other. In conclusion, I want to suggest that this very concern can also be understood as the central concern of education. It is for this reason that I want to urge educational philosophers to further explore the critical potential of deconstruction. It could well be that deconstruction then will turn out to be the most adequate critical style for a philosophy of education that does not merely want to be critical *about* education, but first and foremost *for* education.

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1. See Jan Masschelein and Michael Wimmer, *Alterität, Pluralität, Gerechtigkeit* (Sankt Augustin: Academia Verlag, 1996), 21.

2. See, for example, Richard Peters, *Ethics and Education* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), 45.

3. See, for example, Klaus Mollenhauer, *Erziehung und Emanzipation* (München: Juventa, 1973); Peter McLaren, *Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995).

4. Hans Albert, *Treatise on Critical Reason* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 18.

10.47925/1998.476

5. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929), B134n.

6. Karl-Otto Apel, *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1980).

7. See Karl-Otto Apel, "The Problem of Philosophical Foundations in Light of a Transcendental Pragmatics of Language," in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 257.

8. Karl-Otto Apel, "The Transcendental Conception of Language — Communication and the Idea of a First Philosophy," in *History of Linguistic Thought and Contemporary Linguistics*, ed. Herman Parrett (Berlin: De Gruyter), 57.

9. Apel, *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy*, 119.

10. See Karl-Otto Apel, "Fallibilismus, Konsenstheorie der Wahrheit und Letztbegündung," in *Philosophie und Begründung*, ed. Forum für Philosophie (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp), 185.

11. See René van Woudenberg, *Transcendentale reflecties. Een onderzoek naar transcendentale argumenten in de contemporaine filosofie, met bijzondere aandacht voor de transcendentale pragmatiek van Karl-Otto Apel* (Amsterdam: VU), 134-35.

12. Ibid., 281.

13. Ibid., 282.

14. See, for example, Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

15. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 281.

16. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press), 93.

17. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 280.

18. See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 1-28. This book will be cited as *MP* in the text for all subsequent references.

19. See Geoffrey Bennington, *Derridabase* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 217-18; also Jacques Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 41-42.

20. See Rodolphe Gasché, *Inventions of Difference* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

21. See Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 316-17.

22. John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 102.

23. Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 27.

24. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 42.

25. Jacques Derrida, *Points…Interviews, 1974-1994* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 54.

26. Jacques Derrida, "Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism," in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1996), 87.

10.47925/1998.476