

Public Thinking in the Gap Between Past and Future: Fieldwork as Philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

If “public thinking” about the good carries the potential to “open the gap between the past and the future,”¹ then current educational policy debates may give rise to pessimism. What hope is there for philosophers to deepen public dialogue on education in a period dominated by the call for evidence-based practice and the “gold standard” of randomized controlled trials? In the anxious debate over how to ensure that students are, in the lingo of the Common Core, “college and career ready,” it may sometimes seem that there is little interest among policymakers and the public in questioning the purpose of education or, more fundamentally, in understanding what is good for us and how we flourish. The emphasis instead is on how to best implement goals already agreed upon or on the political implications of those goals.

If philosophers such as Charles Taylor are right, however, it is not that policymakers and others engaged in such debates have no regard for questions about what is good. An orientation to some good, he argues, is inescapable for human beings. This is so even if we do not recognize each other as conforming to any ideal. Indeed, conceptions of the good may be inchoate and implicit. It is through dialogue with others that we uncover what we believe and align our lives to.²

But if our public debates about education tend not to explicitly address it, how might explorations of the good become part of our “public thinking?” I suggest that one way to make this thinking public is through a growing body of work that examines how philosophical beliefs inform daily life. I draw on Charles Taylor’s understanding of the dialogical self³ to expand upon the purposes served by this scholarship, and argue that it is especially important to conduct inquiries into the philosophical commitments of people who are the subject of educational efforts to change their beliefs.

I argue, first, that efforts to reform a group of people, be they students, teachers, or state officials, are particularly likely to be premised on a narrow conception of ethics that excludes other possible conceptions. Revealing the commitments of those whom educators seek to change draws attention to the complexity of such efforts. Second, I contend that reform efforts risk dehumanizing their subjects by viewing them as objects to be transformed rather than as people with whom one could be in conversation. Attention to the substantive commitments of those subject to reform can mitigate this tendency. Third, reform efforts tend to occur in the midst of heated controversies. Research on the philosophical premises of these debates can enrich the conversation by moving it beyond polarization.

EMPIRICAL PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

Educational researchers have long studied the beliefs of students and teachers. But such studies are typically premised on the claim that beliefs drive behavior.⁴ In this view, students' beliefs inform how they respond to lessons, teacher candidates' beliefs shape what they eventually do in the classroom, and teachers' beliefs offer insight into how they teach as well as how they implement educational reforms. As such, researchers argue, understanding their beliefs can improve the delivery of lessons and policies.

This supposes a collusion between the people who implement initiatives and the researcher. Ideally in this scenario, these implementers draw from research on their subjects' beliefs to better achieve goals such as the delivery of a lesson or the success of a curricular reform. The researcher remains a neutral arbiter of facts about the world, while the policymaker, administrator, or educator is understood as a technician whose work will be improved through access to those facts.

Recently, there has been a growing awareness of work in the philosophy of education that examines normative commitments for reasons unrelated to reforming those commitments. These commitments include not only the explicit but also the implicit ethical premises or "moral horizons" in which people live. Philosophers understand ethical views not as instrumental to the goal of changing the people who hold them, but as worthy of consideration in their own right, for the substantive contribution they might make to the world of ideas.

Terri Wilson, for example, has analyzed the ethical considerations that inform the choices parents make about their children's schooling, in order to illuminate, in her artful phrase, the "normative dimensions" of daily life.⁵ Amy Shuffelton observed an afterschool program in order to understand children's conceptions of what is right. Setting out to understand the relationship between ideals of solidarity and justice, Shuffelton found her attention drawn to the good of kindness.⁶ These studies examine the substance of beliefs, not in terms of their causal role, but in view of enriching our understanding of what is good and true.

THE DIALOGICAL SELF AND THE STUDY OF BELIEFS

In a recent article in a Special Issue dedicated to empirical research undertaken by philosophers of education, Shuffelton notes:

The actual world is not the only possible world, and one of the most important projects of political and ethical philosophy has always been to remind readers that our social and political landscape could be otherwise.⁷

Shuffelton suggests that research on the philosophical beliefs held by different people in their everyday lives can expand the "bandwidth" of our repertoire of the possible.

I build upon this insight by explaining why qualitative interviews can serve this goal especially well, drawing on Taylor's concept of the dialogical self. For Taylor, the autonomous self is a modern fiction that obscures the ways in which we are co-constructed through interchange with others. But, he argues, since identity is rooted in a conception of the good, it is made not only through dialogue but also through the self's moral orientation. Our conception of the good is illuminated by the accounts we give others and by hearing their accounts.

Interviews conducted and analyzed by philosophers can uncover these inchoate (or in some cases, fully formed but unnoticed) conceptions of the good. Indeed, the in-depth interview can approximate a two-person version of Habermas's criteria for communicative action.⁸ Unlike most public discourse, which can be dominated by political maneuvering and usurped by those who argue the loudest, the interview creates a space that allows individuals to question and reflect. Moreover, freed from the need to prove her own point, the interviewee can give herself over to listening, and attend to the detail of the interviewee's ideas.

As it is private, and untethered to the work of solving immediate problems, the interview cannot produce the goods of public discourse, such as broadening participation in governance and cultivating trust between citizens and the state. But the interview also avoids the constraints of public discourse. Habermas has controversially argued that public deliberation should not include religious views, because they are often grounded in untranslatable experiences and affiliations.⁹ Hence, any policy arising from such views could not garner consensus through reasoning with diverse others. Although this claim has been heatedly contested, it remains that the content of public deliberation linked to policy decisions is fraught.

In an interview, no such constraint exists. An interviewer focuses on understanding the reasoning *internal* to the speaker, rather than trying to constrain their reasoning to particular norms. The interviewer might ask questions about, for example, why it is good to follow God's will, whether there are ever times when God's will is unclear, how those moments can be identified, and what to do in such moments.

This may have the effect of opening the speaker to deliberation about her reasons. But, in doing so, it can bring into relief her ethical stance in its depth, rather than allowing it to remain either unspoken or as a mere counterpoint to a secular argument. Once published, this can enrich democratic citizens' understanding of each other, which, according to political theorists such as Danielle Allen, is the first step in cultivating people's willingness to cooperate with and make sacrifices for each other, the cornerstone of democracy as she sees it. But it can also enhance our ability to identify and commit to our own conceptions.

Indeed, both the interviewer and the interviewee can be changed by the process of articulating and listening to conceptions of the good. Those with whom we might never normally converse, in either the public sphere or in private friendships, become our interlocutors, broadening our sense of the possible conceptions of the good, which might help to illuminate our own.

REFORM EFFORTS AND PHILOSOPHICAL FIELDWORK

While such interviews could be illuminating in any circumstance, I suggest that they are especially important to conduct with people who are the focus of reforms. Whether they are students whom educators wish to make into responsible citizens (or productive workers, as the case may be), teachers whom policymakers hope will conform to new standards, or state officials whom civil society groups aim to make more democratic, the beliefs of those we most hope to change are especially important to understand, for the three reasons I mention above: it is in efforts to

change people that conceptions of the good become narrowest; the humanity of those subject to reform is often obscured in the rush to make them other than they are; and, while reform often takes place in the midst of heated public debates, the protected dialogue of the interview can offer the space for a less polarized conversation about public goods.

To illustrate these points, I draw primarily from two studies I conducted on the beliefs of people subject to educational interventions aimed at changing what they think and do. I first consider a case that is likely familiar and congenial to educational researchers: the beliefs of teacher education faculty whose approaches to teacher preparation the State attempted to change through a series of educational workshops. Scholars of education are unlikely to object to the idea that faculty who object to reforms have philosophical beliefs that are worth understanding, that such understanding has the potential to illuminate our own conceptions of the good in education, that such understanding can humanize these faculty members and reveal them as people who are more than obstacles to progress, and that these goods could lead to a less polarized and enriched public discourse.

My second case tests the limits of the argument, however; it concerns police officers participating in human rights education intended to stop or prevent their use of torture. That there is merit in understanding their beliefs for any reason other than to improve anti-torture interventions is a harder case to make.

TEACHER PREPARATION

The first study was carried out in New York State and involved two rounds of in-depth interviews with 42 teacher preparation faculty. The interviews occurred in 2013-2014, as the state was in the midst of an intense controversy over edTPA, a new performance assessment to evaluate teacher candidates. The State funded workshops at schools of education to help faculty to change how they prepare teachers in response to it. If faculty did not attend the workshops or failed to adjust their work in response, this was understood either as a technical problem of insufficient information or of recalcitrance on the part of faculty.

Similarly, the public debate on this reform has focused primarily on issues of implementation, as well as on the politics of a private company (Pearson) administering an assessment for public certification. Both are immensely important issues, as many others have rightfully argued at length.¹⁰ But they do not encompass all of what Terri Wilson aptly calls “normative dimensions” of faculty members’ experience.

Interviews with faculty revealed a complex array of normative issues at stake related to how they view knowledge. Faculty who supported the assessment tended to articulate a positivist conception of knowledge, viewing it as stable enough to identify “best practices” that can be standardized. Hence, they believe that teachers grow by learning the skills associated with these best practices. Relatedly, they tended to believe that the best way to protect their profession is through a collective self-policing, in which both teacher candidates and faculty are held accountable to standards. Moreover, they saw social justice in education as best pursued by ensuring that all students have equal access to teachers who have been held accountable to the same standards.

In contrast, faculty who oppose edTPA tended to see knowledge as too elusive to be solidified into “best practices” that apply universally. They saw teachers as developing through the cultivation of demeanors such as inquisitiveness that will help them respond to the uncertain work of teaching. Likewise, they believed that the best way to protect their profession was by ensuring the autonomy of individuals within it to question each other and express a diversity of perspectives on how to prepare teachers. On this view, social justice will be attained when students are provided with equally enriching experiences that allow them to question the society in which they live.

Faculty beliefs about knowledge are not a causal mechanism that can explain their different stances on assessment, however. They often express appreciation for competing views and, unlike in public debate, these views are not polarized. So when discussing them, faculty tended to depart from the circulating “script” of opposition and wrestle with their own questions. Moreover, just as these beliefs could not predict how faculty judge edTPA, they would also fail to predict what faculty did about it, as faculty viewed their commitment to students as more important than their beliefs about the new assessment.

But understanding these beliefs is productive nonetheless. For one, their articulation reveals more of what is at stake in the reforms. In this case, a discussion of the status of knowledge and in what conditions teachers thrive is rarely the subject of public debates on assessment. Philosophically-minded interviews can draw attention to such stakes, which can deepen the public conversation.

But as might be anticipated based on Taylor’s work, such studies do not simply reveal beliefs that were always present, but rather help people discover what they think. Faculty often remarked after interviews that they had not previously “thought of it in that way before.” Likewise, this reflection could prompt the interviewer and the readers to reflect upon their own conceptions of the good in education. By making philosophical reasons explicit where they normally remain inchoate and implicit, interviews have the potential to create a public sphere where respondents, interviewers, and readers can co-construct their understandings of what is good.

In addition, it becomes difficult to assume bad faith on the part of one’s opponents when listening to them grapple with questions of meaning. Often, debates over education policy presume that self-interest alone motivates the other side. Such assumptions make it easier to disregard their substantive arguments. This disregard can narrow one’s own ethical life by eliminating the motivation to reflect upon one’s own reasons, emptying the conversational space of the possibility of co-constructing one’s view through dialogue. But it can also dehumanize one’s opponents, with the assumption that they are not also wrestling to decipher the best way forward.

These two possibilities, drawing nearer to our own sense of the good through the articulation of others’ senses of it and the humanization of those others, can lead to a third good. Both can create the conditions for a reform environment that is less about shaming, and more about “agonizing together,”¹¹ regarding the complexities inherent in any change effort. But if that sounds idealistic in regard to debates about

standardized assessment, it may seem worse – even unethical – in regard to debates over torture.

POLICE TORTURE AND HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

Over twelve months between 2010-2012, I conducted 60 in-depth interviews with 33 police officers in India who were participating in a two-year human rights course that awarded them a Master's degree in Human Rights. In spite of their hope that the degree would aid their professional advancement, the officers did not feign support for human rights. Most spoke in support of torture. While the human rights movement is premised on the idea that all people are equal and deserve protection from harm, the police interviewed for this study see the world as divided between different types of people. For them, what matters is not protecting people from harm but harming the right type of people for the right reasons.

This ethos does not operate in isolation from officers' lives. Police see certain problems as intractable: political corruption, judicial inefficiency, and material resource deficiencies plague their working lives. They believe that they should respond to these problems by using even more violence than they would in ideal circumstances. Police use violence both because they think it is the right thing to do and because they think they have no choice.

But could reformers – in this case, human rights educators and perhaps also the researchers who hope their work will inform human rights interventions – ever come closer to their own sense of the good through dialogue with these officers? I suggest that they could.

While many commentators criticize the politics of human rights, or argue that they should be broadened to encompass greater cultural diversity, few disagree publicly with their premise: that all people deserve to be equally protected from harm. As such, human rights workers have few opportunities to reflect upon and articulate afresh the meaning of this premise. This may be part of the reason that human rights workers often position themselves not as moral authorities but as technical experts, positing a vision not of the good life but of the rational one.

Indeed, the moral core of human rights is sometimes obscured by a technical-rational language of neutral interventions. A genuine dialogue with those who oppose human rights could breathe fresh life into the crucial struggle against torture by moving activists to come closer to an articulation of their own sense of the good.

Even if one accepts this premise, however, does it mean that human rights educators should humanize perpetrators of torture? In his work on Japanese war criminals, James Dawes articulates the paradox of understanding brutality with particular elegance. He writes: "Conceptualizing perpetrators as people we can understand is a moral affront, and refusing to conceptualize perpetrators as people we can understand is a moral affront. In other words, we must and must not demonize them."¹²

Dawes reflects that recognizing the humanity of perpetrators and seeking to understand their acts risks collapsing crucial moral distinctions. By naming what they do as evil, he reasons, we commit ourselves not only to maintaining those distinctions but also to actions that promote the good and resist what is wrong. The

condemnation of evil can both clarify and energize this effort, while trying to understand it can come “perilously close” to excusing it.¹³ Moreover, Dawes cautions, putting that which perhaps *should* “defy comprehension” into relatable terms can obscure its true horror.

Yet I share Dawes’ conviction that the effort to understand is still worthwhile. He pursues his book on Japanese war criminals because, in spite of the dangers of the endeavor, he feels that to recognize others’ humanity and seek to understand them has implications both for our own ethical position in the world and for preventing brutality.¹⁴ For Dawes, we run the risk of becoming inhumane in our rejection of others’ humanity, , and moreover, when we view brutality as inexplicable, we weaken the possibility of stopping it.

But even if one accepts that human rights educators should recognize the humanity of the police, does it follow that understanding rather than condemnation and accountability should be educators’ method of attempting to change police officers’ beliefs?

Many activists understandably see Human Rights Education as a chance to do activism with the police, providing them with information to “raise awareness” or to convince them that what they do is wrong and will lead to punishment.¹⁵ To them, a focus on understanding the police may seem unethical. But the importance of upholding a code of justice such as human rights depends upon whether one understands codification as desirable in regard to ethics. Charles Taylor worries that, although it has the potential to protect people from abuse, the “code fetishism ... of modern liberal society is potentially very damaging.”¹⁶ He wonders: “could one, by transcending / amending / re-interpreting the code, move us all vertically?”¹⁷ Taylor’s hope is that by aspiring to forgiveness, humility, and understanding, by “renounc[ing] the right conferred by suffering, the right of the innocent to punish the guilty,” we might reduce violence more effectively *and* more ethically than if we retain the rights of victims to punish perpetrators.¹⁸ He says of those such as the Dalai Lama, whom he sees as having achieved such a move, that “their power lies not in suppressing the madness of violent categorization, but in transfiguring it in the name of a new kind of common world.”¹⁹

If the possibility of a common world of mutual understanding seems idealistic in regard to education reform, it seems doubly so in regard to police reform. Here, lives are literally at stake, and those who are the focus of reform hold a power that makes punitive measures seem all the more important. Indeed, agonistic approaches such as naming and shaming and legal prosecution likely do play a crucial role in changing state behavior. But there may be room for a different way to approach reform.

In a third study, I am examining an effort to do precisely this: to create, through communicative dialogue, the conditions of mutual understanding that will reveal the humanity of the police and the community to each other, thereby diminishing tension and, hopefully, the violence that accompanies it. This study is based in the United States, where a police department has initiated a series of forums to bring together people of color with police officers. The forums were created in response

to the murders by police of African Americans across the country, such as in Ferguson and Baltimore. In this study, I observed the forums and interviewed police and community attendees afterwards.

In collaboration with my colleague Stephen White, I draw on Habermas's theory of communicative action to understand what occurs at these forums.²⁰ We are investigating whether the kind of truth-seeking Habermas describes can transpire in what he would consider the least ideal conditions for deliberation, where imbalances of power are dramatic, the subject of speech is highly politicized, and the dialogue occurs not in civil society but in a venue organized by the State.

Here, there are two levels at which it may be possible to illuminate beliefs in order to clarify the good, humanize others, and offer a promising way forward for participants, as well as for the researchers and the public. The designers of the forums attempt to achieve these aims through structured deliberative dialogue. But this is also what we as researchers attempt in our interviews with participants.

Interviews reveal that participants have different beliefs about how social change occurs, especially in a city with a long history of racism. Some believe that the cultivation of trust will create the conditions for change in how police and community members treat each other outside the forum. Others believe that the "other side" must earn their trust by first changing their behavior outside the forums. Hence, some people participating in the forum attempt to understand police, searching for consensus in spite of generations of oppression at their hands. Others withhold such consensus-seeking until they see proof that the police have changed.

We argue that both perspectives can result in communicative action, as the refusal to grant trust until changes occur is also a form of engagement. Indeed, saying "no" may be as important as saying "yes."²¹ In this case, it can guard against the potential for communicative consensus-seeking efforts to delegitimize criticism of the State. Moreover, participants on both sides engage in a dialogue in which they give each other reasons, possibly honing their own conceptions of the good. The interviews provide participants with a further opportunity to do so. And while they disagree on whether it will prompt further change, most agree that the forums helped them to see each other as more human.

Whether this will prompt changes in street-level policing remains an open question. If it does not, community-police relations will remain polarized. But the study of beliefs – in this case, through interviews with participants – has the potential to aid this effort by providing further space for people to articulate what they think, and by then sharing these articulations in writing with this community and the wider public.

The research in this sense can maximize the potential for deliberative encounters to deepen understanding by drawing out the substantive commitments of participants, and reflecting back to participants the ideals they express. Just as interviewees can expand philosophers' repertoire of available meanings, philosophers who conduct interviews can offer back to participants their reasons and how they relate to one another. In this way, empirical research in the philosophy of education can create an extended public sphere made up of private interviews and public publications, heightening everyone's sense of the goods at stake in our lives.

1. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin, 1993).
2. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).
3. Charles Taylor, "The Dialogical Self," in *Rethinking Knowledge: Reflections across the Disciplines*, ed. Robert F. Goodman and Walter R. Fisher (New York: SUNY Press, 1995).
4. Frank M. Pajares, "Teachers' beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct," *Review of Educational Research* 62, no. 3 (1992): 307-332.
5. Terri S. Wilson, "Exploring the Moral Complexity of School Choice: Philosophical Frameworks and Contributions," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 34, no. 2 (2015): 181-191.
6. Amy Shuffelton, "Estranged Familiars: A Deweyan Approach to Philosophy and Qualitative Research," in "Philosophy Pursued through Empirical Research," ed. Doris A. Santoro and Terri S. Wilson, Special Issue, *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 34, no. 2 (2015): 137-147.
7. Shuffelton, "Estranged Familiars," 146.
8. Jürgen Habermas and Thomas McCarthy, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason, Vol. 2* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 42.
9. See, for example, Ulrike Spohn, "A Difference in Kind? Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor on Post-secularism," *The European Legacy* 20, no. 2 (2015): 120-135.
10. Deborah Greenblatt and Kate E. O'Hara, "Buyer Beware: Lessons Learned from edTPA Implementation in New York State," *Thought and Action* (Summer 2015), <http://www.nea.org/home/63423.htm>: 1; Wayne Au, "What's a Nice Test Like You Doing in a Place Like This? The edTPA and Corporate Education 'Reform'," *Rethinking Schools* 27, no. 4 (2013), <https://www.rethinkingschools.org/articles/what-s-a-nice-test-like-you-doing-in-a-place-like-this-edtpa-and-corporate-education-reform>.
11. I borrow this term from its use by Steffen Jensen and Andrew Jefferson, eds, *State Violence and Human Rights: State Officials in the South* (New York: Routledge, 2009). For its original use, see: Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?," *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999): 745-758.
12. James Dawes, *Evil Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 34.
13. *Ibid.*, 35.
14. *Ibid.*, 34.
15. Personal interviews with human rights educators, New Delhi, 2012.
16. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 707.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, 709.
19. *Ibid.*, 710.
20. Habermas, *Communicative Action*.
21. Stephen K. White and Evan Robert Farr, "'No-Saying' in Habermas," *Political Theory* 40, no. 1 (2012): 32-57.