

The Non-Normative Voice of “Situated Philosophy”

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Nicholas Burbules and Kathleen Knight Abowitz present a conception of philosophy that attempts to situate it somewhere between the extreme views that philosophy is (1) a view from nowhere that is committed to distanced objectivity and timeless standards, or (2) a historicized expression of a particular cultural and historical context that can make only contingent claims. There are two concerns, however, that I have with their conception of this “situated philosophy.” The first is that it is not clear to me how such philosophy substantively differs from the second, historicized view. The second is that situated philosophy seems highly problematic in that it precludes philosophy from being able to make any compelling normative claims.

With regard to the first of these concerns, the four definitional conditions under which situated philosophy is to be carried out are all reducible to critical self-awareness. Philosophy is to be aware of its status as a human practice, realize its nonuniversal particularity, recognize the integral role reproduction plays in its nature, and pay close attention to the effects it has on society. I do not understand, however, how such critical self-awareness is incommensurable with the historicized view. Being self-reflective does not disqualify situated philosophy from being historicized philosophy — it just gives such philosophy a richer understanding of its own historically contingent context.

The argument that is offered to explain the difference between situated philosophy and the historicized view is that the persistence of the practice of philosophy over time

shows that its activities and regulative norms are not merely contingent and arbitrary... The continuity of philosophy and its manifest success in attracting and socializing generation after generation into its activities shows that its beliefs and norms are, while not transcendental or universal, certainly generalizable over a very broad range of participants, contexts, and concerns.

If this generalizability is, in fact, “the most persuasive kind of substantiation possible,” then it seems to me that by their reasoning we could easily argue that the regulative norms of such practices as slavery, patriarchy, and religious bigotry are equally valid as nonarbitrary and noncontingent. Even if we are willing to accept these conclusions, however, a practice’s generalizability over multiple historical contexts still does not in any way exempt that practice from being historically contingent.

In order to further demonstrate how situated philosophy differs from either of the extreme views, Burbules and Abowitz offer the example of logic requirements. A situated philosophy, we are told, would self-critically examine the social, racial, and gender implications of requiring logic courses, and the results of this deliberation would be a balancing of judgments that “are inherently imperfect and do not have clearly right or wrong answers.” While this description is clearly at odds with

the first extreme view of philosophy, it seems that this is exactly the sort of analysis that reflective proponents of the historicized view would endorse. Thus I see no reason why situated philosophy, given the ways in which it is presented, cannot be quite accurately described by the same definition given at the outset to the historicized view. On both views philosophy is "the expression of worldviews within a particular cultural and historical context, always partisan and implicated in social dynamics of power, and merely contingent in its ability to persuade or compel assent."

It is precisely this contingent ability to persuade or compel assent, however, that makes situated philosophy so highly problematic. If from the outset situated philosophy defines itself as unable to make any claims that are not historically contingent, then from the outset it strips its claims of all normative force and accepts its inability to be compellingly persuasive. While Burbules and Abowitz do at times seem to recognize this problem, throughout their essay they repeatedly try to have it both ways. In other words, they attempt to hold both that their claims are intrinsically contingent and at the same time that they carry compelling normative force. The inconsistency of such attempts, however, cannot be avoided.

Consider, for example, the critical self-awareness that is presented as an essential characteristic of situated philosophy. In order for this awareness to influence action, as they clearly think it should, it is necessary that it involve some measure of self-evaluation. Any such evaluation, however, is possible only with reference to a standard. Thus while on the one hand there necessarily must be a standard by means of which we make evaluative judgments of ourselves, on the other hand there is said to be no standard by which our judgments could be determined to be right or wrong.

Another passage that demonstrates this inconsistency is the treatment of logic requirements. Here they claim on the one hand that logic is important and should not be denigrated as a regulative philosophical norm, but on the other hand that it is "only one such norm among many — and not necessarily the essential one." The problem with this series of claims is that if logic is just one historically contingent norm among many equally valid norms, then there can be no reason why it *should* be recognized as regulative.

Consider finally the penultimate paragraph of the essay in which they argue that, "It is *imperative*, we believe, that..." (emphasis added). Two sentences later, however, they claim that the situated perspective for which they are arguing is not "some kind of moral or political *imperative*" (emphasis added). If their perspective carries no imperative force, then on what basis can it make imperative claims? How can they go on in the closing sentence of the essay to make multiple assertions about what philosophy of education "ought" to be, if according to their own view, there are no transcendental standards by which those normative claims have any compelling force?

In an attempt to avoid this self-contradiction Burbules and Abowitz acknowledge that while they clearly think their perspective "has merit...there could not be

an authoritative argument that this is the way things must be, if we are to remain consistent.” The problems with this acknowledgement, however, are twofold. In the first place, “merit” is an evaluative term that is only meaningful given some external standard to which it refers. If the standard is not external, then to say that a view has merit is merely to say that it approves of itself. Thus if their view can meaningfully be said to have merit, there must be some external standard on the basis of which such an evaluation can be made. Secondly, in expressing a desire to remain logically consistent they betray their own assumption that such consistency is of noncontingent value. My point, to repeat, is that we cannot have it both ways. If logic has no categorical value then there is no compelling reason to defend our views against logical absurdity.

I want to be clear that in making these points I am not advocating the first extreme position. Since G.W.F. Hegel we have understood that our ideas do not come from nowhere but always arise in response to particular other ideas within a particular historical context. We are therefore right to humbly recognize that as steps in the historical dialectic our ideas are fallible. What I am asking, however, is that we not ignore the implications that follow if we further reject the existence of anything noncontingent toward which this dialectic is directed. If we deny that our ideas are ultimately accountable to standards that transcend the contingent historical context in which they arise, then we must recognize that in so doing we are stripping those ideas of all normative force. The possibility of philosophical debate between people from different contexts is thereby undermined as well, for without the existence of shared evaluative standards there can be no such thing as persuasive argument (or maybe, à la Gadamer, any understanding at all). We cannot, on such a view, offer an evaluative critique of our discipline; we cannot make a call for change or explain how the future could be better than things currently are; in short, we cannot compellingly claim that anything *ought* to be, at all.

In closing, I fully agree with Burbules and Abowitz that as philosophers of education we are being marginalized. I strongly disagree with the suggestion, however, that we should respond to this marginalization by redefining our discipline based on what will most likely garner us jobs in education programs or by our desire to be present in national debates. Rather we must first and foremost address the fundamental problem I have outlined regarding whether or not we truly believe that our ideas have any compelling normative force. The proposed view of philosophy as a situated practice is, I think, an unsatisfactory answer to this problem, and I can conceive of no better way to further marginalize ourselves and make our voices irrelevant than by admitting from the start that we have nothing compelling to say.