

EDUCATION AND PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS

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David Blacker warns us of the many ways in which the vocabulary and logic of scientism have penetrated our public discourse and practice and how this transmogrifies the meanings of our work and associations. His beginning example of “money back guarantees” on high school graduates is telling, if obvious, but there are many others, more subtle though no less dangerous. The widely held views that our intellectual work as scholars is a form of private property, that teaching is a knowledge and skill delivery system, and that our public service is an instrumental exchange of and for commodities all corrupt the meanings of our work as intellectuals and teachers and distort our associations as public educators.

Gadamer helps here by pointing to forms of quality which emerge in dialogue. Rather than the model of the professional, one dedicated to transmitting expert knowledge for a fee to those who stand in ignorance, Gadamer offers a model of the amateur, one dedicated to advancing the possibilities of re-creation through the play of free dialogue.

Yet, I wonder whether Blacker and Gadamer’s interest in advancing a justification for education in itself, apart from any consideration of use, is coherent and desirable. I find inconsistencies, perhaps tensions is a better descriptive term, in Gadamer’s account and in Blacker’s re-telling. Some of this may result from ambiguous language or my own misunderstanding and, if so, I welcome the chance to be educated. However, I believe that some of these tensions come from a failure to take a dialectical view far enough, with the result the reification of long-standing dualist traps. In the first part of this essay, I will simply point to a number of these tensions and how, for me, they misdirect the argument. Finally, I will very briefly suggest a different problematic which emerges by honoring the full sense of a dialectical view.

Blacker begins by worrying about the ways in which the aims of education are linked to utilitarian considerations. While he certainly appreciates the differences between those who would justify education by an appeal to narrowly economic or industrial consequences and those who make appeals to broader considerations of community and citizenship, Blacker believes that both misunderstand the purpose of education. Against these consequentialist views, Blacker argues that there is “a sense in which education is not justified by anything outside itself; a sense, in other words, in which education is thought of as intrinsically valuable.” Thus, at the outset, a tension is posited between some internal correlates and signifiers of value and worth which are intrinsic to the phenomenon of education itself and some external correlates and signifiers which are extrinsic to the activities of educating. Can the distinction between these realms be maintained and is this something a dialectical view of education would want as a problematic?

Consider a few points from later in the analysis of Gadamer’s view of dialogical education and the hermeneutical circle. Blacker tells us that Gadamer identifies some conditions that mitigate against edifying dialogue. One is the kind of experience through which participants seek “knowledge of human nature,” that kind of law-like knowledge which treats the other as a generalized object whose behavior can be predicted and modified; that is, “it treats other persons as means rather than as ends in themselves.” While Blacker notes that the problem with this kind of typification is that it “flattens out the hermeneutical circle” and impoverishes the quality of edifying dialogue, he also suggests

that for Gadamer this “objectifying stance is indeed *morally wrong* insofar as it endangers the very preconditions for the exercise of practical reason, viz., *phronesis*, the *sine qua non* for the solidarities forming an authentic community life.” While I agree with this, it seems clear that this analysis of the conditions and aims of edifying dialogue makes at least some appeal to ends “outside” of the phenomenon of education itself.

In further elaboration of this point, Blacker discusses Gadamer’s reliance on the Socratic model to draw distinctions between authentic and inauthentic dialogue. As Gadamer writes in *Truth and Method*, the participants in authentic dialogue “can ultimately achieve a common language and a common judgment in an imperceptible and non-arbitrary transfer of viewpoints.”¹ Further, Gadamer writes that “...practical and political reason can only be realized and transmitted dialogically. I think, then, that the chief task of philosophy is to justify this way of reason and to defend practical and political reason against the domination of technology based upon science.... [I]t vindicates the noblest task of the citizen...decision-making, according to one’s own responsibility.”² Again, while I agree, it seems clear that this explanation of the conditions of edifying dialogue and justification for philosophy are hard pressed against a strict separation between intrinsic, inherent value and considerations of utility.

Indeed, Blacker recognizes this tension when discussing the normative dimension of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. While offering an interpretation of Gadamer’s view as teleological, Blacker worries aloud that it is a strange sort of teleology which admits of no guaranteed end points. Still, for all Gadamer’s reluctance to identify end-states in the dialectic of interpretation, it remains the case that, quoting Ingram, “Gadamer compares *Bildung* to a progressive *fusion of horizons* in which interpreter and tradition are elevated to participation in a higher universality.”³ While talk about a “higher universality” may avoid the idealist absolutism of Hegel, I do not know why the something new, independent of the prejudices and traditions of the participants, which emerges from an authentic, edifying dialogue must be characterized by a “higher universality.” Would not a “higher particularity” also be possible and worthwhile? How does “universality” acquire its virtue here from the phenomenon of education itself, apart from “external” considerations of use?

Perhaps these questions arise from a too ready acceptance of the taken-for-granted view that education is always something we “use” for private or collective purposes. Blacker suggests instead, following Gadamer, that “it would be more correct to say that *education uses us*.” This is an important distinction and certainly not foreign to Deweyans who talk of suffering and undergoing experience instead of simply “having” it, but I do not think it gets us out of the dualist dilemma. Simply put, to talk of the ways we use education or the ways education uses us is still to describe *relations of use*. Of course, we do not have to understand “use” in narrow, purely instrumental terms. Even the hard-boiled English utilitarian, Jeremy Bentham, who Marx once described as a “genius of bourgeois stupidity,” admitted of qualitative, non-hedonistic senses of utility. But if one problem with the mainstream view that we “use” education is that it makes education into an instrument or tool and discourages our interpretation and understanding of its richest meaning, would it not be true that the view that education uses us makes *us* into instruments or tools and discourages our possibilities for self-understanding and re-creation?

In short, while I agree with the spirit and much of the substance of Blacker and Gadamer’s account, I believe the dualistic terms in which it is presented are unsustainable and undesirable. The dichotomies of internal vs. external, intrinsic vs. extrinsic, and inherent vs. utilitarian have proven too disabling for any tradition to bear and defend cogently and honestly.

The only corrective I know of is to take a dialectical view more seriously. For example, I think Dewey’s descriptive metaphysics, which give equal ontological status to the stable and predictable and the precarious and contingent exemplifies this thorough-going dialectical view. In trying to describe the way in which Deweyan metaphysics overcomes the dualisms of both foundationalism and anti-foundationalism, I have called his view an ontology of chance, a comprehensive philosophy

of incompleteness, a foundationalism of uncertainty, and an objectivism of the random. Perhaps what Blacker and Gadamer need here is some way to talk of education as intrinsically useful or consequential in itself. Perhaps not, but I believe that this is a problematic for and by which the normative dimension of philosophical hermeneutics can be enjoined.

¹ H-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. and rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroads Press, 1989), 385. (Cited in Blacker.)

² H-G. Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Social Science," *Cultural Hermeneutics* 2 (1975): 314. (Cited in Blacker.)

³ David Ingram, "Hermeneutics and Truth," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 15 (January 1984): 70. (Cited in Blacker.)

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