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Self-Understanding and Self-Determination

An unfamiliar look at the philosophy of education

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Introduction

I should like to start with a personal note. For the last twelve years or so I worked in the philosophy of mind and action, the last years with a lot of emphasis on the ways in which the questions I discuss originate from within the practical problems of daily life and are related to problems discussed in what is now generally known as moral psychology. It is from this background that I'm recently thrown into the deep waters of the philosophy of education by being appointed to the chair of philosophy of education at Nijmegen University.

With this in mind I seek to explore a possible view of philosophy of education that would allow me to address issues apparently central to the field in a way that requires and appeals to my competence as originally a philosopher of mind and action. Nothing in what I shall say should be understood as developing arguments to revise the philosophy of education. Not at all — as a novice I just have an interest in finding my own niche. The paper is in four parts. In section 1 I shall say something about a widespread view of the philosophy of education as a variety of applied philosophy, and about the order of

relevance this view assumes between the philosophy of education and the more established branches of philosophy. In section 2 I shall elaborate a bit on the idea that education is a feature of human life that informs us about the fact that human nature is constitutively temporal and self-related. Then I shall make some very sketchy remarks about two current developments in contemporary philosophy of mind (concerning self-knowledge and personal identity) that seem to be heading in the wrong direction, and I shall suggest that work in the philosophy of education could contribute to inspiring and new moves in discussing these philosophical issues (section 3). In the concluding section 4 I shall raise the question of whether the suggested alternative order of relevance between the philosophy of education and "pure" philosophy can be defended against criticisms from people primarily and mainly interested in education.

1. Relevance among disciplines

According to a widespread view the philosophy of education is a species of applied philosophy, an enterprise characterised by the attempt to apply existing philosophical work to the study and understanding of educational practices. Of course philosophers working in the area, together with philosophers working in other branches of applied philosophy, are rightly quite unhappy with some of the unfortunate impressions it creates: as if philosophers of education are merely instrumentally and mechanically applying insights and results developed by more gifted "pure" philosophers, as if they sponge on the blood, sweat and tears of these original philosophers, as if their role is merely to serve educational scientists and practitioners, as if their status cannot be more than second-rate, as if their competence need not be more than that of a serving-hatch, as if they have taken the easy way out and show off by becoming one-eyed kings in the country of the blind. Even if we would succeed in arguing successfully against each and every of these nasty prejudices, and even if we would succeed in arguing successfully that the philosophy of education is rather a species of practical philosophy, and as such a branch of philosophy

proper, it might still be that one connotation strongly associated with the idea of *applying* philosophy to a particular region of human action would survive. This would be the idea that there is an *order of relevance* among disciplines: if we would think of disciplines as related to one another in terms of relevance, the point of this order is that we would probably have to conclude that the more established branches of philosophy are relevant to the philosophy of education, rather than *vice versa*, and that, in turn, the philosophy of education is relevant to educational science and practice, rather than *vice versa*. Perhaps we could make a convincing case to partially revise this picture by arguing that the philosophy and the science of a specific region of reality are mutually dependent, beneficial *and* relevant to one another. But this revision would leave intact the assumption that I shall dispute in this paper: namely that there is a one-directional order of relevance that goes *from* the more central, established, “pure” branches of philosophy *to* the philosophy of education. This assumption is even implicit in a remark of Richard Peters, *the* exponent of an independent and autonomous philosophy of education, who observes that although “the philosophy of education should be a branch of philosophy proper... [this] is not to suggest that it is a distinct branch in the same sense that it could exist apart from established branches of philosophy such as epistemology, ethics, and philosophy of mind. Rather it *draws on* such established branches of philosophy” (Peters, 1973, p. 2; my emphasis).

Given this background the plan for the paper is simple: I shall argue that careful philosophical attention paid to the significance of educational practices to the organisation of human life, allows us to draw conclusions about two crucial features of human nature: its temporality and its self-relatedness. These features, or so I argue, are likely to remain unnoticed by philosophers of mind who fail to pay sufficient attention to the educational dimension of human life. Because of that, or so I argue, these philosophers are inclined to misunderstand certain philosophical problems central to the enterprise of human self-understanding, notably the metaphysical problem of personal identity and the epistemological problem of self-knowledge. Because of their misunderstanding of these problems, they fail to come up with the right kind of account of personal identity and self-knowledge, which is an account that emphasizes the role of

educationally organised self-determination¹ in the enterprise of human self-understanding.

If I am right in all this — and I know this requires much more substantial, elaborate, and detailed arguments than I can provide in this paper — it means that there is at least one area in which the order of relevance between the philosophy of education and the philosophy of mind goes in the opposite direction than what seems to be taken for granted in the widespread view of the philosophy of education as a variety of applied philosophy.

2. Education, temporality and self-relatedness

I have suggested in the previous section that we can learn something about human nature by concentrating on the importance of educational practices in daily life. The kind of thing I want to draw attention to is not so much a matter of empirical findings: I am not making a claim about certain facts that are true of most (or all) human beings as exemplars of human nature, but I will be making a claim about the concept of human nature, about how and what to think of exemplars of a kind that is in its manifestations so deeply characterised by educational practices. The claim is also not meant to point out a crucial, essential, and exclusive feature of *mankind*: I am not saying that the presence of education in human daily life makes mankind special and importantly different from all other natural kinds. Rather, I shall be making a conceptual claim about what should be true of whatever species whose daily life is seriously characterised by educational practices. The claim is meant to be true of any kind of species that happens to be

¹ As I have argued in Bransen (1996) it is important to take into account that ‘determination’ is an intrinsically ambiguous notion, with both a contemplative and a constructive connotation, meaning both “to lay bare” (or “to discover”) and “to lay down” (or “to decide on”).

educatable in the way we happen to be, and it will be a contingent fact, if it is a fact, that on this earth only human beings are educatable in that way.

I want to restrict my discussion to two features of human nature that should draw our attention when we think about the dominant presence of education in our lives. The first is the temporal character of human nature, the other its self-relatedness. Let me say a bit about each.

Human nature is temporal in two, related ways: ontogenetically and historically. As an exemplar of mankind I instantiate human nature at any moment at which I am alive, but almost everything that was true of me when I was a baby is no longer true of me now, and almost everything that is true of me today was not true of me when I was a small boy, and won't probably be true of me when I'm an old man. This is the case not merely because of natural developments that will take place in whatever environment I happen to be in, but primarily, and this is what we can learn from the dominant presence of educational practices, because of the changes I go through by being educated, by being able and moved to learn from experience, from examples, from myself, and from my teachers. And this is not merely true of me, but of each of us. We all show what human nature is like by instantiating it in many different ways, and these ways are temporally related, and temporally to be distinguished.

The changes in how we instantiate human nature display a development, but not merely a natural development that is a matter of course, such as takes place between acorns and oaks, caterpillars and butterflies, cubs and lions. No. Children and adults are related through a series of developments that are not merely natural because they are watched over in a process called education. Education is something we *do*, intentionally, with an eye on the developments likely to happen, with an eye on the direction they should take, and with an awareness of the ways in which we could make a difference to the direction these developments will take. This is a complicated statement, but that the educational nature of our ontogenetic developments is significant and makes a difference, can be shown by stressing the striking character of our historical temporality. Here's an example to illustrate what I mean: acorns and oaks in ancient Greece were very similar to acorns and oaks today, and the ways in which acorns turn into oaks today is very similar to the

ways in which acorns turned into oaks in Aristotle's time. But adults and children living today are very different from adults and children that lived in ancient Greece, and the ways in which children in ancient Greece developed into grown-up Greeks is very different from the ways in which contemporary children develop into the kind of adults that populate our world today.

We could come up with a variety of explanations for this obvious and intriguing historical character of human life, but it seems that an explanation in terms of education is most plausible — despite all the complicated difficulties involved in this concept, difficulties that require the dedicated attention of philosophers of education. If this is true, it has an interesting and important consequence for our understanding of human nature. That is, if we want to understand ourselves we should realize that what we are differs over time, and is at least in part a function of what we think we are, and of what we think we should be, and, strikingly, these latter two differ over time as well. Thus, if education is a dominant feature of the ways in which our lives unfold, this shows not merely that our human nature has a history, but also that history is itself a major feature of our nature! And this means that what we are is something that unfolds as a history in virtue of the empathic concern² of those who can read and write narratives with an eye to grasping their import.

I will elaborate on this theme in the next section where I shall use it to suggest that this insight from the philosophy of education could be used to develop a specific, promising contribution to a couple of contemporary discussions that seem to be heading down a blind ally. But let me first say something about the other feature of human nature that attracts the attention of those aware of the role of education in human life.

² I don't mean *control*, but I do mean *empathic concern*, and if someone suspects that this observation displays anti-postmodernist overtones, I would feel invited to defend my case. We could elaborate on this issue, although it is not central to my argument. My scant thoughts in this area are that if moderns think of empathic concern as if it were control, and if postmoderns want to do away with empathic concern because they rightly doubt the possibility of control, then both are wrong. We cannot, and should not do away with empathic concern for the import of our human autobiographies, for it is this concern that makes the crucial difference between natural kinds that exist in an educational realm and those that do not.

This feature, that I call ‘self-relatedness’, is already implicitly prominent in what I just said about our temporality. In education, as I said, we attempt to make a difference to our ontogenetic developments in virtue of having an eye on the directions these developments should take, or, stated differently, in education we watch over the historical unfolding of our nature with an eye to grasping the import of this unfoldment. This means that in education we display a sensitivity to the fact that our humanity is not merely a fact but also always a commitment. The idea is that we cannot just *be* ourselves, but are always related to what we will become in virtue of our understanding of the import of the development that constitutes us.

This may sound quite obscure, but here is the kind of example that might help to make my point. An acorn will develop into an oak given the right circumstances. Of course the phrase ‘right circumstances’ is a normative one, but in the absence of any agential responsibility, it is not a normative phrase *for* acorns and oaks. With respect to acorns and oaks we could determine the meaning of the phrase ‘right circumstances’ simply by generalising over the characteristics of all actual circumstances in which particular acorns do develop into oaks. This is not simply true of, say, rabbit hutches. Of course a heap of board could develop into a rabbit hutch in the right circumstances. And obviously the phrase ‘right circumstances’ is again a normative one. However, in the absence of any agential responsibility, heaps of board will *never* develop into rabbit hutches. With respect to heaps of board and rabbit hutches we could again attempt to determine the meaning of the phrase ‘right circumstances’ simply by generalising over characteristics of all actual circumstances in which particular heaps of board do develop into rabbit hutches, but what we will discover then is that agents with an understanding of what it means to be a rabbit hutch are imperative to what could possibly be right circumstances for a heap of board to develop into a rabbit hutch. The normativity implicit in the phrase ‘right circumstances’ is in such cases a function of the explicit normativity of the *idea* of a rabbit hutch. Without such an idea there would not be any rabbit hutches at all, and neither — and this is more important than might seem — would there be heaps of board that could *in whatever circumstances* turn into rabbit hutches.

Well, what about human beings? What about human nature, its temporality and its educational infrastructure? My inclination is to use the obvious absence of an educational dimension in the growth of natural kinds like oaks and the construction of things like rabbit hutches to emphasize and clarify the essential self-relatedness of human beings. We share with the oaks that we will develop anyway, that the phrase ‘right circumstances’ might be given an empirical and natural meaning that is normatively idle on the assumption of the complete absence of agential responsibility. But we share with the rabbit hutches that in any circumstances in which children do develop into adults responsible agents with an understanding of the idea of a human being are involved. This means that on any possible account of right circumstances responsible agents will be part of these circumstances, and this reveals that the assumption of the complete absence of agential responsibility is in the case of human beings mistaken, which in turn means that the phrase ‘right circumstances’ is for human beings a normatively significant phrase. That is why we make, and have to make, a distinction, in the case of human life, between development and education. And the distinction is twice a matter of self-relatedness.

Firstly, in education we are, as learners, responsible for the quality of the content of our mental states in the light of, among other things, the evidence we are confronted with concerning the truth of our beliefs and the desirability of our desires. In the literature this is mainly conceptualised as a matter of our minds’ capacity to develop second order states, which is a matter of reflexive self-consciousness (Pettit, 1993; Frankfurt, 1971). Many philosophers nowadays work on a project called ‘naturalising the mind’ which aims to show that our capacity to learn can be understood as a complication of our capacity to develop, and can be understood as naturally possible without education, i.e. without such explicitly normative notions as truth, rationality, and desirability (Dretske, 1995).

Whether or not this naturalisation of learning will be possible does not effect, however, the much stronger case for the prominence of normative self-relations in the other side of the educational coin: teaching. For, secondly, in education we are, as teachers, responsible for the quality of the circumstances in which we could be confronted with evidence about, among other things, the truth of our beliefs and the desirability of our desires. This

responsibility does require explicitly normative notions, such as truth, rationality, desirability, intelligibility, and also, and this is important for my argument, an explicitly normative notion of human nature. This normative notion of human nature is required, not merely because the whole enterprise of being responsible for the circumstances in which we could improve our *beliefs*, presupposes a normative notion of what it means to cope with reality as a minded creature. It is also required, more importantly, because the very idea of being responsible for the circumstances in which we could improve the quality of our *desires*, requires that we have to think about what makes our lives worthwhile as something that is, at least in part, not a matter of satisfying the desires we happen to have. The very idea of presupposing that there might be better desires than the ones we happen to have, and that we are responsible for the circumstances in which we could develop these more worthwhile desires, requires that we should try to think of ourselves from without, as developments with an import that deserves our commitment.

There is more that should be said here, particularly about the way in which the normativity entailed in teaching presupposes that learning is normative in a way that might be much more difficult to naturalize than optimists assume, as well as about how to think clearly about what it means for a desire to be actual, to be more worthwhile, to be one's own, etc. I cannot do that here, but should like to conclude this section by emphasizing that its point was merely to show that the obvious educational infrastructure of our human lives highlights two intriguing features of human nature: that it develops in time, and that it is characterised by a normatively significant self-relatedness.

3. Personal identity, self-knowledge, and self-determination

I have been quite brief and sketchy in the previous section, and I shall be blatantly so in this one. As said before, this paper is a first attempt to explore some of the ground where results from the philosophy of education might prove relevant and important for discussions going on in domains traditionally thought to be more central to “pure” philosophy.

The argument of the previous section suggests that the philosophy of education might be relevant to questions concerning human self-understanding, such as the metaphysical problem of personal identity and the epistemological problem of self-knowledge. What I should like to suggest here, is that discussions of these problems tend to set off on the wrong foot because of negligence of the fact that human nature develops in time, and is characterised by a normatively significant self-relatedness. Failing to take these important features of human nature into account is unlikely to happen once one is informed by the philosophy of education. That is why I should like to suggest that philosophers of mind would do well to pay attention to the educational infrastructure of human life. Such attention would strengthen an interpretation of self-understanding as primarily a matter of self-determination.

My suggestion is something of an empirical conjecture. That is, I notice the tremendous impact of Derek Parfit's picture of personal identity as a metaphysical question to do with re-identification (Parfit, 1984; Dancy, 1997) and the equally influential picture of self-knowledge as an epistemological question concerning privileged access and incorrigibility (Cassam, 1994; Wright, Smith, & Macdonald, 2000), and I suspect that these questions became framed the way they presently are due to a general failure to take the educational infrastructure of human life into account.

Let me illustrate what I mean very, very briefly with some comments on the question of personal identity. In the Parfitian tradition the problem of personal identity is the result of acknowledging that, strictly speaking, the concept of identity cannot apply to persons because (1) persons typically change over time, whereas (2) strict, or Leibnizian, identity over time requires that the object as individuated at t_1 shares *all* its properties with the object as individuated at t_2 . Acknowledging this requires us to develop an alternative concept of identity for persons that is on the one hand strong enough to account for the commonsensical intuition that a person is and remains one and the same throughout all of her life, and on the other hand flexible enough to allow for developments over time that are characteristic of those parts of reality, such as persons, that have an intrinsically temporal nature.

Seen from an educational perspective it is obvious that the normative character of the temporal self-relatedness significant of personal existence should play a cardinal role in this alternative concept of personal identity. That is, as I argued in the previous section, the fact that we change over time is not just something that happens to us. It is a fact that of necessity requires and depends upon our dedicated attention, and that we will have to watch over with responsibility, with an eye to what we will become in virtue of our understanding of the import of the development that constitutes us. This means that from an educational perspective our identity is, *even metaphysically speaking*, a normative fact.³

In the Parfitian tradition, however, this normative self-relatedness is strikingly absent. Of course, there is much, and even very detailed and technical, attention paid to the fact that we change over time, but these changes are investigated from without, so to speak, and conceptualised in terms of psychological continuity which Parfit proposes to analyse in terms of overlapping chains of strong connectedness. Introducing an educational perspective would, I suggest, support the development of some of the alternative accounts that are put forward in the literature, but, so far, do not receive the attention they deserve, such as Korsgaard (1989) and Schechtman (1996).

A very similar line of argument could be developed with respect to the problem of self-knowledge. The upshot of such an argument would be an awareness of the fact that a person's authoritativeness about the content of her own mental states is not an epistemological state of possessing privileged evidence, but an educational state of being responsible for the normative orientation of the development that constitutes the person. Introducing an educational perspective on the question of self-knowledge would withdraw the question from epistemological quarters and would present it as a question at

³ Thinking of metaphysics as, at least with respect to certain regions of reality, inherently normative is, of course, not without problems. My argument for an educational perspective on personal identity is, however, not meant to solve all problems at once, but rather meant to draw attention to those problems that should be addressed in the first place.

home in moral psychology. Such a shift would support a similar, intriguing attempt undertaken in Moran (2001).

These scant remarks are, of course, absolutely insufficient to convince anyone of the fact that the philosophy of education could contribute to the philosophy of mind. But I hope they are suggestive enough to raise an interest among philosophers of education to investigate issues in recent philosophy of mind *not* with an interest in learning from them *but* with an interest in contributing to them.

4. Is it relevant to the study of education that the philosophy of education is relevant to philosophy?

Two contingent facts about the way universities are organised raise a further problem I should like to address. The first fact is that philosophy departments are unlikely to create room for philosophy of education as a proper branch of what they consider to be their core business. The second fact is that the philosophy of education is traditionally located within departments of education. Because of these two facts one might wonder whether my attempt to develop a way to reverse the order of relevance between “pure” philosophy and philosophy of education could have any welcome consequences for academic policies. I might actually be making things worse, because if the philosophy of education is relevant to pure philosophy (rather than *vice versa*), policy makers in the department of education might wonder why they would continue to support their philosophers, whereas policy makers in the department of philosophy would continue to dislike revising their favoured picture of their core business. Because of the threat of such an unfortunate future scenario for philosophers of education elicited by my attempt, I should ask whether the fact that the philosophy of education is relevant to philosophy might itself be relevant to the study of education.

The question is not about the familiar reasons educational scientists and practitioners have to engage in the philosophy of education, nor about new reasons to counter possible negative effects produced by my attempt. The question is an optimistic one, about whether my proposal to look for ways to reverse the order of relevance between philosophy of education and “pure” philosophy would create any additional reasons for people interested in education to foster the philosophy of education.

I can think of two such reasons. One of them is more general, one more specific. The general reason starts from a picture of science as not primarily a practically oriented enterprise aimed at problem-solving, but as an undertaking fundamentally inspired by the wish to understand for the sake of understanding itself. This is a respectable and age-old picture of science that clearly is appreciated for its romantic charme, its overtones of independence, disengagement and contemplativeness, and its associations with such great, imaginative scientists as Pythagoras, Galileo, Newton, and Einstein. It is also, however, a picture that is not very popular in the present era, dominated as it is by technological appreciation of science and by a pragmatic instrumentalism. It is therefore also a picture unlikely to appeal to educational scientists who tend to be very practical and seriously in the grip of concrete usefulness. Nevertheless, this general reason emphasizes that the argument I’ve been developing shows that education is a crucial feature of human life, and therefore a central field of science conceived of as our most prestigious and systematic attempt to understand ourselves. This reason might gain some force in evolutionary contexts in which it could be argued that the most impressive step forward on the evolutionary scale was made possible by the appearance of a biological species not merely capable of learning but capable of *reflective* learning, i.e. capable of teaching, or (self-)education.

The more specific reason is, I guess, also a more pragmatic reason addressing the educational scientists’ desire to improve the quality of education through its systematic and scientific study. This reason concentrates on the fact that self-knowledge and personal identity are among the central aims of education. My attempt could be understood as an attempt to show we can gain a better understanding of these aims of education by emphasizing the import of their educational nature. This would imply that

the proper study and practice of education could profit from my argument, albeit in an almost indirect way. That is, the philosophy of education supports, according to this argument, educational science and practice because it is relevant to the philosophy of personal identity and the philosophy of self-knowledge, and by thus being relevant, it improves our understanding of some important aims of education, namely personal identity and self-knowledge, particularly in their educational — i.e. normatively oriented developmental — form.

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