

PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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Nemo Veritatem Regit

Nobody Governs Truth

Book Review

David Birch, *Provocations. Philosophy for Secondary School*, Crown House Publishing, Carmarthen, UK, 2014, hardcover. ISBN 978-184590888-1. 297 pages.

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“Learning is a matter of desire, not a question of cognition; of magnetism rather than machinery” (p. 1). As David Birch underlines, teaching should not be about handing down knowledge from on high, but instead should be a response to the student’s curiosity, interest and desire to learn—and should reach these outputs by being inspirational and listening.

From Birch’s perspective, having involved students comes mainly by listening—that “endows speech with reality.” To listen is to be involved, many times without knowing what we are involved in. Listening to the students, encouraging them to question the world—by conversation, exploration and experimentation with different ideas and perspectives, even if contradictory and unfinished—can contribute enormously to have them looking at the world like “something to be customized rather than complied with,” or at least something uncertain and ever changing (p. 1).

As Birch argues, the focus on listening dissolves the dichotomy of child-centered or teacher-led learning: it provides a substantial help to dissolve the idea of a source, an originator. Speaking and listening mixes and merges. From such a pedagogical perspective, learning is mainly a situated and socially constructed process: it develops in dialogic and interpersonal terms, through forms of collaboration and sharing. Even if schools sometimes promote the “pleasures of togetherness” (p. 1), as Birch observes, mainly today we can say that learning is a dynamic process involving complex cognitive and emotional elements for both its acquisition and use: this includes perception, communication, association and reasoning. Ultimately, learning derives mainly from minds at work thanks to a process of social action and engagement involving different ways of thinking, doing and communicating (Montessori 1903, 1909, 1912, 1914, 1947, 1949; Dewey 1916, 1929, 1938; Popper 1945, 1972; Polanyi 1974; Gardner 1983, 1991, 1993, 1999; Alston 1986; Guarini 1989; Harré & Gillett 1994; Morin 1992, 2008, 2014; Sawyer 2006; Sosa 2009; Bertagni, La Rosa & Salvetti 2010; Lynch 2012; Shell 2013; Salvetti 2014; Gardner & Davis 2014; Stiglitz & Greenwald 2014).

Philosophy requires teachers to lead by questioning and listening. The focus on listening “dissolves the idea of a source, an originator.” Speaking and listening mixes and merges. Encouraging students to look at the worlds through some windows opened by a philosophical approach is very interesting: first of all because “philosophy says it is okay to be incomplete,” so dealing with philosophical issues—something that has the form “I don’t know my way about”—brings students dealing with ambiguity and incompleteness, that are dimensions that can boost the enterprise of being open and exploratory (Wittgenstein 1921; Rorty 1962, 1979, 1989; Nozick 1981; Baggini & Fosl 2010; Worley 2010; Evans 2012). Accepting that certainties are hard to come by and that complexities often remain after much debate facilitates teachers’ jobs that implies not only teaching what to learn but

also how to learn—putting the teachers in an inconclusive position because to teach philosophy means, for a teacher, adapting to the idea you might not be able to identify what, if anything, was achieved. As Birch writes, the teachers may have “a sense of how to get a conversation going, an idea of where the catalytic questions lie, but they don’t know where the conversation might lead or how they can end it.” Questions take on a life of their own, the teachers are in no position to be conclusive, “confusion is its currency of exchange” (p. 2).

If philosophy is mainly conceived as conversation, exploration and mutual listening, no one is an expert and no one is smarter than anyone else. *Provocations* is a set of philosophy sessions designed for secondary school and predicated on the pedagogical methods of The Philosophy Foundation. The lessons in the book are based on talking, “that is a simple yet peculiarly radical approach” (p. 5). These sessions are mature, challenging and provocative, using history, literature, myth and the world today as their basis. Each session contains particular pedagogical tips and advice and suggestions as to how they can be effectively delivered. For instance, there are very valuable guidelines regarding the classroom’s set-up: circle, horseshoe or remain at the desk? And there are interesting guidelines regarding how to manage the verbal turns during a discussion—such as a ball passed round the group to allow someone to speak. Another relevant tip provided about the classroom deals with the use of the board, which in philosophy is “no longer an instrument of information but a medium of experimentation” because it is not performing its usual function: what is written on the board is “not what the class is being taught, but what they are being asked to consider” (p. 4).

This difference in role also applies to the teacher’s voice, which is expected not to be used to direct or dictate but mainly to suggest alternatives and multiple directions—suspending the teacher’s own certainties. So, as Birch points out, “speech is not a medium of consensus or conformity, of falling into line,” nor a declaration of individuality. Instead, it is mainly a medium used to question the most commonly provided answers, to keep people in a space open to doubts and incompleteness (thanks mainly to the tripartite questions provided in each section: ‘starter,’ ‘hermeneutic’ and ‘task’ questions).

Humans are physical, biological, psychological, cultural, social, historical beings. This complex unity of human nature has been so thoroughly disintegrated by education and divided into disciplines, that we can no longer learn what human being means because of the compartmentalization of disciplines. This awareness about the complexity of human nature—as Morin (2014) argues—should be restored. But restoring the awareness of the unity of the human nature means moving away from the great Western paradigm—the mind-body dualism—formulated by Descartes and imposed by developments in European history since the 17th century. The Cartesian paradigm disconnects subject and object, each in its own sphere: philosophy and reflective research here, science and objective research there. It is indeed a paradigm that unconsciously irrigates and controls our conscious thought, making it also super-conscious. This paradigm determines a double vision of the world, in fact a doubling of the world. One is a world of objects that can be observed, experimented, manipulated; the other is a world of subjects that raise problems of existence, communication, conscience, destiny.

A paradigm institutes primordial relations that form axioms, determine concepts, command discourse and/or theories. It organizes their organization and generates their generation or regeneration (Bachelard 1927; Kuhn 1962; Foucault 1966, 1969; Morin 2008). A paradigm may elucidate and blind, reveal and obscure. There, deeply ensconced inside the paradigm, lies a crucial factor in

the game of truth and error. In short, a paradigm determines the sovereign concepts and prescribes the logical relation of disconnection. Disobedience to this disconnection is necessarily clandestine, marginal, deviant: that is the risk incurred by Birch's proposal of fighting against what we can call the cult of the separate disciplines. Even if the Cartesian body-mind dualism historically lost its attraction very early on, the notion that mental life is "internal" and separate from behavior, which is "external," survived much longer and can still be found today in many psychological, pedagogical and andragogical approaches. This situation results in a uniting and managing of impoverished, simplified models and conceptual human action that cannot be used in the dense and polysemic dynamics of our daily lives. Perhaps it is no coincidence that we still often bring into account learning environments that, doing a little archaeology of knowledge, we could trace back to the model of the Panopticon described by Jeremy Bentham (1843), or rather prison (and then hospital, factory or learning institutes), "that shows everything" thanks to the spoke shape of the building: an environment where ideally a single observer may watch everything all the time, adding to the perceptions of the inmates (or patients, workers, students), a sort of omniscience and generalized control by the guardian. This occurs in an environment—the Panopticon—where learning is conceived as a passing of information from the lecturer to the student, following a communicative process that tends to be one-way (top-down) and within which the "retroactions," the feed-back (bottom-up), take on the role of interrogations (Foucault 1975).

Instead of being inspired by the Panopticon, we should consider both educational environments as well as the human mind to be complex systems. In particular, the human mind works as a meeting point for a wide range of structuring influences whose nature may only be represented on a much larger canvas than that provided by the study of individual organisms. And therefore, we should remember that each one of us lives many different discussions, each of which has its own set of meanings. Some of these discussions may be put into conflict among themselves, necessitating a negotiation and an adjustment to try and make them compatible. The discussions regard symbolic interactions, as well as conventions and relationships in which these same interactions are bound by informal rules and are interconnected to each other in ways that reflect that which Michel Foucault (1971) called "the order of things." People operate continually in the middle of evaluative and interpersonal influences that shape and manage their activities. People are "agents" who must produce their own constructive interpretations and the expressive acts starting from the contexts in which they are rooted and within which we all live, move and realize our being.

What Birch reminds us of (and provides us guidelines to do so) are new ways of thinking that are able to process peculiarities, individualities, oddities, discontinuities, contrasts and singularities. We need ways of thinking that are able to understand the variety, plurality of belonging and ways of being part of the many local worlds in which we live, study and work. We need to learn how to learn a potentially relativist (but not destructive or nihilistic), relational and self-aware thought that knows its requirements and that is left unsaid—A thought that is able to consider the cognitive restraints that make it up, that sometimes command and control it blindly and fideistically, a thought that is aware that knowledge is a *mélange* of rationality and rationalization, of true and false intuition, inductions, syllogisms and paralogisms, ways of saying and doing things, personal opinions and shared beliefs. People have many different and discrete facets of cognition, so they have different cognitive strengths and contrasting cognitive styles. A radically different view of the mind and intelligence that yields a very different vision of education is needed today, because a revolution is under way due to a number of big changes that are emerging at the same time: high-speed mobile

networks, cheap tablet devices, the ability to process huge amounts of data cheaply, sophisticated online gaming, adaptive-learning software, “stellar” contents available, often for free. The job of the classroom’s teachers and trainers, at every educational and training stage, will move from orator to coach and learning facilitator (Gardner & Davis 2014, Salvetti F. 2014, Bertagni & Salvetti S. 2014).

Divided into chapters on ‘The World’, ‘Self’, ‘Society’ and ‘Others’, Birch’s book is a valuable resource for secondary school (such as GCSE and A-Level in the UK). It is written to give teachers the means to listen rather than teach, to allow the ideas and thoughts of students to form the center of the lesson. The clear introductory outline contains tips and advice on how to use this book both in and outside the classroom and across the curriculum. It offers teachers from all subjects the opportunity to introduce a student-centered approach to their lessons. There is also an extensive bibliography for those who wish to explore the topics in greater depth. Last, but not least, there are useful hints, reminders and guides to setting up the discussion, for example reminding the teacher to avoid making students feel like they are being given the answer. And there is a clear line of thought with his questioning and more than enough for even a non-specialist to fill a lesson. Overall, this is an excellent resource for anyone that wants to bring in critical, creative, independent thinking into their classroom – helping students put down their pens and engage the power of their mind, developing their thinking, listening and speaking skills.

In such a perspective, philosophy is conversation à la Rorty (1989), exploration and experiment with ideas as suggested for instance by Nozick (1981): an effort to achieve greater understanding of whatever topic is under discussion—by listening to other points of view and following where the best arguments lead. That is mainly why this book is made up of questions aimed at being invitations, because “in philosophy the class does not take, but rather becomes, the subject” (p. 1)—in a situated and socially constructed process. From the fall of Icarus to the rise of Caesar, this practical book draws upon history, philosophy, literature and the world today to provoke students to think, question and wonder. It raises questions on the nature of evil, the power of science, belief in God, consumerism, utopia, the limits of freedom and a whole lot more. Are human beings flawed? Is murder an act of insanity or just plain thoughtlessness? Do we need a soul?

User friendly, practical and workable, Birch’s book is very useful also for practical philosophers engaged with people new to philosophical enquiry—committing to a particular attitude of open inquiry being aware that commitment is distinct from belief (Lynch 2012; Popper 1945, 1972). The exercises are designed to invite reflection and generate debate, making people understand how partial, incomplete and open-ended almost all enquiry is; and that in many areas of enquiry there are no right and wrong answers, only better and worse reasons for taking this view or that—subject always to scrutiny and challenge. If philosophy is “the enterprise of being open and exploratory, of accepting that certainties are had to come by and that complexities often remain after much debate” (Grayling 2014), this book also teaches the important lesson that openness, uncertainty and incompleteness can be highly productive.

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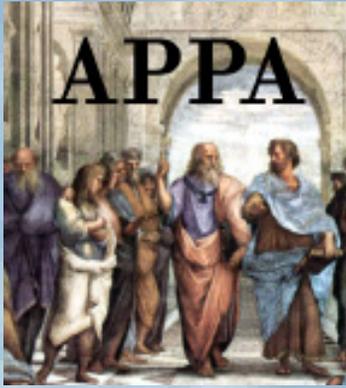
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Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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