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## Teaching the Philosophy of Education

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## TEACHING THE PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

(Comment on earlier article)

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In 'Problems in Teaching Philosophy of Education', *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol II, No 1, 1986, M A B Degenhardt pinpoints the 'difficulty' in teaching this subject when he outlines an imaginary lecture on 'Discipline and Punishment'. At the end of this lecture, he says, the students 'will have learned that there is a general agreement on what punishment is, that there are three main theories of punishment ..., that all have strong points ... and that much more will need to be done towards the development of a satisfactory theory of punishment in education' (p.31). He concludes that the students leave wondering what all this tells them about what to do if children flick paper pellets during next week's poetry lesson.

I think it is fairly easy to re-arrange this lecture so that it will be both philosophical (given in accordance with 'open-ness of inquiry') and useful to the beginning teachers.

The first step is to reverse Degenhardt's material, put the wondering students first, and address their problem. From here on there are, of course, many ways of proceeding. I shall suggest one of them. Ask the students what they would do if confronted with the pellet-flicking. You can have them answer orally, or by jotting down their answers or simply by thinking what they would do. Now ask them to consider what their reaction really is. Are they attempting revenge on the naughty children? Are they trying to reform them? Are they using a deterrent? Or are they simply bewildered and reverting to what they think their teachers did to them? Or angry and blustering? There are other possibilities. By this time some of the students may be offering suggestions about teachers' motives. The lecturer, however, needs to pull the lecture back to its theme, so he or she now asks the class to consider whether all of the suggested ways of dealing with the disorder were punishment. This is the place for explaining that there are theories of punishment, and what they are. I think that we could postpone the question of whether the punishment of adults is of a different character from that of children. The lecture will be either too long or too compressed if we were to try to deal with this question too, though it could make a good essay topic or a problem to think about in preparation for the next lecture.

The lecturer can now discuss which, if any, of the punishments were or were meant to be educative. (I assume that the nature of education has already been

discussed in previous lectures.) Were the punishments intended to teach the children? Or to produce enough order to permit for education to continue? If the latter is the intention, has the punishment of some pupils militated against their learning whatever the teacher intended to teach about poetry? Is the whole poetry lesson wrecked, anyway? Would it be advisable to abandon the poetry till a more convenient time, a time when the audience was receptive, and give an arithmetic lesson instead, not as punishment, but as more educative in the circumstances? (With my senior classes in high school, in which I felt I needed a receptive atmosphere for poetry, I brought reserve comprehension lessons with me to the poetry sessions, to be substituted if the class on arrival showed signs of restlessness.)

That would be about enough for one lecture. Perhaps in the following one there could be reference to Socrates' belief that to harm people is to make them worse citizens than before, and hence to harm oneself. The relevance to the teacher's position here is clear. Does 'punishment' make 'worse' (less cooperative, less inquiring). And if so, does this make the teacher's task harder?

By now the class may be ready for discussion of what 'discipline' is, of the difference between discipline and punishment, and of the connexion between education (assuming perhaps that we regard it as the promotion of inquiry) and discipline. The belief that the subject is its own discipline would be here introduced.

By this time the students will almost certainly have raised the problem of the pupil who will not learn, will not cooperate, and prevents learning in others. This is the place to discuss whether, in those circumstances the teacher can, *as educator*, do anything, and whether the problem is perhaps one which the schools should not have to solve. Educators obviously cannot educate the ineducable. (There is a further problem here in deciding which people, if any, are ineducable.)

My contention is that if we begin with the practical problems and use them as material for investigation we can stimulate inquiry and a philosophical approach much better than if we simply repeat the solutions that other philosophers have reached. The 'real' social philosophers began from the occurrences of ordinary life, not from the writings of other philosophers. This is what Socrates did when he questioned Euthyphro who was on his way to accuse his father to the legal authorities (*Euthyphro*), when he discussed how the sons of good fathers can turn out bad (*Protagoras*), and why the slave boy was able to understand the procedures for drawing a square twice the area of a given one (*Meno*).

We could well follow Socrates' example.

Perhaps part of the problem of teaching the philosophy of education lies in the belief that to be 'academic' we must be scholarly. This produces lectures on past philosophers (these are of course valuable) to the exclusion of

philosophising (which is essential if the students are to apply what they learn.) We might remember that Descartes is remembered not for a treatise on the literature of certainty, nor for a review of other people's beliefs on the subject, but for three words epitomising his personal experience.

One of the questions in the philosophy paper at my final examination paper at Oxford was on punishment. It was: 'Is it ever justifiable to punish the innocent?' I do not remember what I wrote, but it satisfied the examiner. I now think that what he had in mind was the kind of punishment involved when the teacher keeps the whole class in because the one who threw his ruler at the teacher has neither owned up nor been betrayed.

I was interested in Degenhardt's suggestion in the sample lecture that there is agreement about what punishment is. I am not so sure on this point myself, and think that 'what is punishment?' would be a good question. Then one could devise questions about how if at all to distinguish punishment from the exaction of involuntary compensation. And whether it is possible to punish oneself. And, as indicated above, whether there is a difference between the punishment of children and that of adults.

None of this has touched on the question of the efficacy of punishment. There is a philosophical question here in deciding what effect the punishment is supposed to have, the determination of this being a requirement if we are to test efficacy. From here we could proceed to deciding how to test efficacy - what would count as evidence of effective punishment.

Another approach, both for lecturing and examining, is to devise short case histories, and examine them, or have the students do so, to see whether they deal with behaviour for which punishment would be appropriate, and, if so, of what kind (retribution, deterrent, compensatory ...)

I suggest that an approach such as this could give the students more help with the incidents in their lessons than would prescriptive advice, which is rarely accepted unless the advised person already wants to do what is prescribed, and, moreover, which can rarely take into consideration special circumstances crucial in the classroom incident.