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Editorial

Epistemology and Education

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It has been a privilege to have been asked to edit this series of papers on education and epistemology.

While philosophy of education is often considered an applied discipline, it has made contributions across the philosophical spectrum. For example, there has been a significant body of work on aesthetics and education. There have been occasional incursions into debates about ontology and even, albeit rarely, metaphysics. However, the majority of work has always been concerned with epistemology (questions of knowing) and ethics (questions of right action). Traditionally, much of this work, particularly in epistemology, has had a highly individualistic tendency. The assumption of the knowing mind as key characteristic of the rational autonomous agent is at the heart of the liberal educational tradition and takes root in Descartes' *cogito*: even if I doubt who I am, there is an 'I' that doubts, and this 'I' is the fundamental characteristic of the autonomous rational agent, the fully human being.

Of course, heirs to this Cartesian legacy need not be solipsists: it is easy to argue that the individual has duties towards, and needs relating to others, and it is in consideration of such issues that ethics takes its place in the modern philosophical canon. In terms of social policy, the liberal tradition tends to think in terms of various construals of the social contract, whereby, at least in its early forms, the individual trades in certain aspects of his or her freedom in return for the benefits and security afforded by an ordered society. For many educationalists, at least, the key thinkers at the start of this tradition are those who conceived of the human as potentially dwelling in one of two states, that of nature or that of society. To Hobbes, the state of nature was competitive and dangerous, so only rule by a benevolent sovereign could stop people effectively tearing each other apart; to Locke, the state of nature was more benevolent, but social training, in tune with natural inclinations, would produce the best outcomes in terms of human flourishing; to Rousseau, nature was essentially good and society (in all its existing forms) was not to be trusted, even though ultimately human growth depends on social action. The Lockean view provides the perfect justification for educational intervention, insofar as the child benefits from training that builds on her natural inclinations; the Rousseauian view provides the perfect justification for delaying formal schooling and allowing children to learn through play so that they can develop healthy self-confidence before entering the bitter and competitive social world. Both these views are more empirical than idealist, in the sense that mind and knowledge are construed as developing through direct sensory experience rather than the exercise of pure reason. Nevertheless, there remains a strong sense of dualism in many of these accounts: between nature and society, between self and others, and between mind and body.

Philosophers of education—indeed, philosophers generally—have found many grounds for wishing to depart from the individualistic and dualistic tendencies of modern epistemology. At the same time, questions of professional identity and genuine scepticism have combined to make many philosophers of education wary of embracing theoretical perspectives that seem radically anti-rationalist, relativist, sociological or collectivist. Thus much of the work done on the social nature of mind has been conducted outside mainstream Western philosophy, as practised in university

departments of that name: one might think of the work of the Russian school of Vygotsky, Bakhtin and others, for example, which is often categorised more as psychology than philosophy, though it does not sit easily within modern psychology either. Much work on constructivism is rarely regarded as philosophy, though it has produced dominant explanations of how we come to know: individual, Piagetian constructivism has been often categorised as psychology; social constructivism as sociology. Philosophers have been mindful of the need to protect a space for philosophy in these debates, often at the cost of not engaging with dominant theories in the field of educational theory more broadly.

In recent years, there has been increased interest in mainstream philosophy in questions that cross these traditional boundaries: in social epistemology, and in virtue epistemology, for example. The contributions to this special edition reflect well this broadened range of interest in epistemology within educational theory, and within the philosophy of education network. Marianna Papastephanou [1] tackles the central issue identified above head-on. She argues that in order to bring epistemology and ethics together in the service of education, we are required to reject out long-held belief in curiosity as an apolitical rational virtue. Instead, we must accept that disinterested (that is, impartial) curiosity has never been truly disinterested but is itself a socio-historical construction. Kai Horsthemke [2] makes a similarly controversial, but very different claim, that 'indigenous knowledge' 'involves at best an incomplete, partial or, at worst, a questionable understanding or conception of knowledge.' While Papastephanou might be seen as challenging the philosophical establishment in some respects, Horsthemke is defending the power of philosophical analysis against what he sees as over-politicised rhetoric. He does not deny that indigenous beliefs can be of great practical value, but he rejects the claim that it is philosophically valid to replace truth-based propositional knowledge with 'way-based' cultural tradition. Between them, these two papers pose very important questions about the power and limitations of philosophy, and about the appropriate relationship between philosophy and social theory: these are big questions that yield no easy answers.

Claudia Schumann [3] contributes to the debate a defence against the argument that feminism undermines epistemology through politicising it. Feminist critique does not merely reduce philosophy to sociology by dealing with issues of power or lapsing into thoroughgoing relativism. Rather, feminist epistemologies have contributed to opening up the question of objectivity which (echoing Papastephanou's critique of curiosity) has too often been construed as unproblematic. Issues of power and position are inextricably tied to the process of converting facts to knowledge, and Schumann argues that we inhibit our quest for true objectivity if we deny this to be the case.

Nigel Tubbs [4] argues that epistemological questions have often been pursued not only as separate from ethical questions, but as separate from educational issues too. Tubbs' concern is therefore to see epistemology as education in line with 'the Delphic maxim: know thyself'. Tubbs reminds us that modern epistemology was born not in a certain methodology producing unquestionable outcomes but rather in Socrates' questioning of every claim to knowledge. The rejection of certain knowledge is reflected in modern relativism, but such relativism does not necessarily tell individuals anything about how to live their lives. It is only when people question their own experiences as epistemological that they will have any real power to do something positive in the world.

Ronald Barnett and Søren Bengtsen [5] consider the impact of social changes on the role of the university and its claims to knowledge creation. This work draws on philosophy and the sociology of knowledge to claim that digitisation and the postmodern condition more broadly have destabilised and fragmented knowledge, such that the university now reflects a world of 'ethno-epistemic assemblages'. From this we can glean important insights about how the nature of knowledge changes and about the shifting status of disciplinary practices (for example, the current dominance of mathematics and technological applied science). In response to this existential crisis, we have recourse to the enduring value of thinking, and in particular, ecological thinking, that enables us to reflect on the many changes that have upset many liberal humanist assumptions about the role of the university.

Indeed, taken together, these papers provide a powerful set of invitations to us all to re-think what we take for granted in our understandings both of what knowing is and of how it might be arrived at.

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