
Presidential Response

“CAN YOU TELL ME, SOCRATES, IS VIRTUE TEACHABLE?”:
A RESPONSE TO JOE WATRAS’ OVPES PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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First, may I say that I consider it an honor to be asked to respond to the presidential address. I thank Joe Watras for this opportunity and hope my remarks might enable us to debate the thought-provoking address we just heard. My quandary originally was how to make sense of the various points within the address and still deal with what I took to be the major “aim” of the speech. That is, I had a number of questions about the form of the histories of the various groups included in the address and yet I found myself coming back to the summative point: that philosophy of education courses should prepare teachers to raise questions about and communicate clearly what the purpose(s) of schooling are or should be. I’m going to work backwards, in a sense, by starting where Watras concludes and then, with only a tangent or two thrown in for good measure, raise some issues about the narrative within the body. My “aim” is to provoke even more questions so that we can have a lively and spirited exchange shortly.

The beginning of the title to this response is lifted directly from Plato’s *Meno*. It’s the very first line of the dialogue (70a) and does not seem to me to have yet lost its appeal. In keeping with the theme of this conference, it’s been around a while, but is still useful—which, by the way, is good news to those of us aging faster than we ever imagined we would. The opening line also portends various ideas: sophistry, universals, paradoxes, dialogue. Indeed, as with other of Plato’s writings, *Meno* is a dialogue about teaching that is also a dialogue about dialogue, albeit of a particular kind. It challenges readers to think about teaching in a focused way and I think Watras’ concluding challenge also focuses attention on our teaching. What do we do in our classes to entice or engage students to think about aims of schooling? What projects, readings, and activities do we use? What are the expectations and requirements? I don’t mean these as rhetorical questions, by the way. I’m actually interested in knowing what others do. So, as one way of thinking about these sorts of issues, I’d like to share with you—admittedly with a sense of trepidation—some of what I do in my philosophy of education class. The point here is to see whether what I (we) do in class gets at or achieves what Watras expects.

The course happens to be a graduate-level seminar with enrollments ranging anywhere from 10 to 30 and in it I use Plato’s *Meno*, Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, and a third text that changes. I also use a writing assignment called Philosophy Positions, as many of you may use as well. These positions

are described in the syllabus as one way to philosophically investigate issues of education and schooling. Personal in nature, the essays are supposed to be iterative. They are supposed to be “working drafts” of ideas which may change over time, but at any rate are extended during the semester. They are, in effect, conversations on paper.

Students begin by stating, in a few paragraphs, their first thoughts concerning philosophy of education. These thoughts are initially prodded by sample questions used to indicate the kind of breadth and character of the questions students begin to consider. You know the kinds of questions. Recite them with me or add your own here: Are training, schooling, and education synonymous? What does it mean to “teach”? Is teaching contingent on learning? How is philosophy represented in different majors (like counseling, special education, psychology, and kinesiology and health, etc.)? What purpose does philosophizing serve regarding schooling, society, knowledge, and culture? These are only illustrative questions. Students are urged to raise their own. When they do, however, the students are expected to justify and illustrate their ideas and, in so doing, they both develop their positions and demonstrate philosophical analysis. I tell the students that there is no one, all-encompassing “plug-in” response to satisfy the questions. Students have to investigate and clarify for themselves what philosophical foundations comprise or undergird their positions. I also maintain, though, that I don’t want unsupported opinion and what I call mere assertion.

The positions are collected, reviewed, marked, and returned. There is no red ink, but lots of ink nonetheless. This is intentional, as students apparently grow up thinking that if they don’t have marks on their paper, the work is good. The more marks, the worse the paper. I attempt to turn that around when I read and write comments and questions on students’ Philosophy Positions. “Sounds nice but what does it *mean*?” “If this is true, how do you account for x?” “Interesting, but is there more to the issue than z?” “Is this better suited for a refrigerator magnet?” “Why?/Why not?” Words are circled, phrases are underlined, arrows are drawn—a recent psychology student thought his first returned paper was a special Rorschach test designed specifically for him.¹ In a way, maybe it was because he, and the others in the class, were looking intently at the comments on their papers. Even though prior to passing the papers back I tell my students “The more writing from me, the better.” “If you don’t have lots of ink from my pen, something’s wrong.” It usually doesn’t matter. They’re still a little shocked, I think. In my tenth year of university teaching, I’m not shocked that they’re shocked anymore. The pattern has, I fear, already been established. The aim of schooling has often already revealed itself. The aim is to find *the* correct answer to Meno’s question. The point becomes getting your money’s worth, getting an “A,” and getting out.

In this way, Watras' desire for teachers to "communicate their understandings to their students and to . . . parents" isn't an aim. It's a perverse reality. It may not have the kind of critical reflection Watras desires. It may not have the kind of justification and logical support he wants, either. It may not even be cogently articulated in writing or in speech. It still gets communicated all too well. Call it cultural capital. Students in my Philosophy of Education seminar who are already teachers are very adept (though unconsciously I suspect) at complaining about their own students not thinking "critically" about the importance of their schooling. At the same time they worry inordinately, like Meno might, about what will be included on exams, what they need to do (minimally) to garner class participation points, and how long the Philosophy Positions ultimately need to be. "How many pages, again?" And yet. . . I need to be careful here. What responsibility do I have? In the words of my psychology students, how much am I "an enabler"? I have a syllabus. It's understood to be like a contract (note the litigious language and recall the rights versus needs theme in Watras' address). I assign grades. Exams *are* given. *Et tu* Gorgias?

What I'm also really trying to get at here is a concern about the underlying *non-sequitur* that I think exists in Watras' ultimate aim and is seen throughout the address—and may well exist as a flawed basis for the Philosophy Positions. Watras wants teachers, in part, to "understand the complex relationships within society." The Philosophy Positions intend a similar goal, but even if the Philosophy Positions yield interesting, inventive, creative, thoughtful, intellectually vibrant ideas about the aims of schooling, it does not seem to follow that communicating those ideas clearly will be sufficient to counteract anything. Said differently, even if the course is successful at having students more deeply consider complex themes and communicate their ideas about those themes (in writing or otherwise), what of necessity follows? In the history of educational movements *qua* educational policy initiatives, have teachers ever been major players? Should they have been major players? Should they be now? A hopeful part of me says yes, but a circumspect side of me wonders whether the rules of policy making aren't stacked against teachers, especially given Watras' characterization of society; namely, one rife with complex relationships and one I'll extend to include asymmetries of power and privilege.

Complexity is just what Meno wanted to avoid. It's also what, in part, frustrates some of the students reading *Meno*. It's not a Disney script. Sleeping Beauty doesn't wake up. The ending isn't neat and packaged. It's unresolved and complex. But to link to policy again, I claim that policy has less to do with embracing complexity and more to do with negotiated settlements between well-funded lobbies and their legislators. Selfish like the sophists, grant-chasing education policy wonks are not only inordinately interested in asking Meno's first question in the way Meno intended it,² they are inordinately interested in taking credit for giving the answer—and being the first to do so. Needs of children?

Rights of students? How about needs of the economy? Rights of corporations?

So we come to the different, but no less interesting issue of another major theme of the address: needs versus rights. Watras sets the two concepts against one another, perhaps intending the dualism as a “red flag” to catch our attention. If so, it worked. If not, I might be getting into some trouble here. Nonetheless, I’m reminded of Patricia Williams’ *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* in which she claims that rights emerge from particular experiences and specific needs of those to whom such rights have historically been denied. She, unlike Watras, collapses rights and needs. Like Watras, however, she may also commit a kind of essentializing. Writes Ben Baez,

[Williams’] materialistic understanding of rights makes sense—it constitutes rights in bodies, in experience, and not in abstract principles. Yet, this understanding is itself abstract [and problematic] in that it fails to account for (a) the historically situated character of any materialistic claim, (b) how any “experience” is itself a historical construct, one whose existence and meaning shift over time, and (c) how the very body and experience asserting any right actually may be constituted not as user and recipient of power but as its effect.³

When Watras writes that “meeting the needs of children *or* satisfying their rights can prevent teachers from trying to understand the complex relationships within society,” he seems to be granting the dualism that Williams rejects. Still, both may be underestimating the temporality, the situatedness of those concepts. Are needs and rights dualistic? Antithetical? More synonymous than not?

After reading and re-reading Watras’ speech, I could not help but think of Herbert Kliebard’s *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958*. In that text, Kliebard lays out what he takes to be the major competitors in the crusade to direct purposes of schooling in the United States. While he called the groups humanists, developmentalists, social efficiency educators, and social meliorists, the titles or groups were somewhat less important than both the ideas *and* the people arguing for those ideas. We had the lively, if mis-guided and unendingly impactful, Joseph Mayer Rice who (as any good pediatrician is wont to do) went around searching for the “good schools” so they could be models for “bad schools.” We had Charles Eliot and the Committee of Ten, as Watras notes in the beginning of his paper. We also had the various progressives or social meliorists like Addams, Bode, Counts, Dewey, Kilpatrick, Rugg, etc. Going beyond Kliebard, Watras lays out for us a narrative of struggles regarding race, special education, and gay/lesbian issues connected to schools. These are as much struggles for power and influence as they are struggles over needs and rights. And yet there’s something else.

Maybe it's just the nagging feeling I have that the history outlined here is, well. . . selective. That might not be the right word, as all history is to some degree selective. What about truncated? Unproblematized? Perhaps a necessary feature of such an address, I still wonder whether the treatment of the groups goes far enough in teasing out the very complexities Watras identifies as social realities. By not doing so, I wonder aloud if the form of the history written led to what I'm claiming is the problem of a recurring *non sequitur*. Bilingual advocates "might have garnered political support to protect their programs if they had been clearer about their aims." Regarding special education reform, "[the] effort did not move toward a wider understanding of the aim of education. . . ." Those arguing in favor of "education for homosexual and bisexual youth could not agree on the aim they sought in part because they avoided profound consideration of the aims of education in general." Again, I sympathize with the idea that developing clear aims is noble and worthwhile. I just wonder here not only about what necessarily follows from clear aims, but whether the form of the historical narrative helped bring about the *non sequitur*. I leave it to others with a more complete and intricate understanding of history and the histories of the various groups highlighted to take up that matter, if in fact that's an issue at all.

Such concerns should not detract, though, from what I think is Watras' major (and laudable) topic: teaching philosophy of education. To personalize this again, the Philosophy Positions from my seminar embody much of what I take to be Watras' desire for philosophy of education classes. In a sense, the larger project is about questions, isn't it? It's about challenging long held, deeply ingrained assumptions that, for a variety of reasons, simply haven't been questioned before. Care must be taken here, however, as the project just described may carry with it the same kinds of Enlightenment assumptions that could get us (notice how I'm broadening the group so as to not take sole blame here) into other difficulties. I, for example, (ok, I'll shoulder the blame) find myself raising issues in the Philosophy Positions—as noted before—regarding logic, reasoning, justification, consistency, and the like. While I think they are often helpful to the larger project of helping students clarify their ideas, they are not the only issues students have to work out in order to participate significantly in school, society, democracy, community, etc. Watras' paper has nonetheless helped me think about these sorts of issues, so I'm grateful to him and I thank him for his thought-provoking address. He supplied much food for thought, so let me invite everyone here to sidle up to the proverbial table and "dig in" with questions and comments. Thank you.

NOTES

1. The syllabus goes on to expect that students read the comments. From the notes made and directions suggested, students' personal ideas generally expand, perhaps alter, and positions usually grow in size and scope. Students are expected to continue refining
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(not “perfecting”) their philosophies a minimum of two times after the initial statements are submitted. After each revision, papers are collected, reviewed, and returned with further comments. The bulk of each position tends to change (i.e., not perfecting means lines of inquiry may be similar, but keeping the bulk of paragraphs with editorial/minor changes is not the point).

2. See Joe L. Green, “Meno’s Motivation: The Foundations of Learning,” *The Educational Forum* 51, no. 2 (Winter, 1987):151–165.

3. Benjamin Baez, *Affirmative Action, Hate Speech, and Tenure: Narratives About Race, Law, and the Academy* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001), 149.
