
Introduction

PLACE-BASED CRITICAL THINKING

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When Henry David Thoreau went to live in solitude in Walden Woods he performed a philosophical act. “There are nowadays professors of philosophy,” he observed, “but not philosophers.”¹ Rather than talking about philosophy, he lived it. On the eve of Pierce, James, and Dewey’s pragmatism, Thoreau’s way of doing philosophy was quintessentially American: the rugged individual, striking out a new way of thoughtful living. And yet while Thoreau’s going it alone exudes the American frontier mythos, which he proudly announced, his move was part of a much longer tradition in which philosophy is understood more as a way of living than as a way thinking. Thoreau, a student of Emerson, was also a careful reader of the Stoics, for whom philosophical talk was cheap and action essential.

Like the early monastic desert mothers and fathers, fleeing Roman ways of seeing, thinking, and consuming, Thoreau broke free from the entanglements of his culture, the quiet desperation and ossified habits of his fellow citizens, and headed for the wilds. For Thoreau, the philosophy of the salon, the coffee shop, and the classroom proved to be ineffectual, empty chatter—the philosophers’ soiree of Dante’s *Inferno*. In his own words, Thoreau sought to live out a “manly” or “kingly” philosophy, rather than the idyll philosophy of the “courtesan” at the service of another’s beck and call. Yet Thoreau’s manly philosophy was not the disembodied masculinity of the analytic tradition. Arguably a proto-feminist, Thoreau understood how embodied our seeing and knowing truly is. Consider this sensuous observation:

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirtsleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, . . . all the elements are unusually congenial to me. . . . Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled.²

¹ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854; repr., Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Library, 1995), 334. For this reading of Thoreau I am indebted to Pierre Hadot’s, “There Are Nowadays Professors of Philosophy, but not Philosophers,” *Journal Of Speculative Philosophy* 19, no. 3 (2005), 229–237.

² Thoreau, *Walden*, 425.

Thoreau sought a way of doing philosophy that not only changed his way of thinking, but transformed his way of living. For this to happen, he needed a change of venue: he needed to do philosophy under the stars and in the woods.

In her Presidential Address, Sheron Fraser-Burgess's emphasis on critical positionality resonates with Thoreau's bold experiment. Taking on the persistent and urgent task of sustaining and nurturing a viable public space that allows for substantive engagement across differences while affirming rather than marginalizing such differences, Fraser-Burgess notes how our "e pluribus unum" often degenerates into a hegemonic "unum" or macro culture that trumps meaningful plurality and the space (and imagination) to cultivate the kind of resistance Thoreau embodied. Yet to counter cultural fragmentation there needs to be an "unum," a meaningful public space where contested differences can be mediated and our shared humanity recognized. This public space must be strong enough to counter cultural atomization, yet thin enough to allow group expression and identity.

Fraser-Burgess's essay is a bold venture, most notably because it squarely takes on two of philosophy of education's most prominent deities, Maxine Greene and John Dewey, contending that they favor an unum that infringes on pluribus (Dewey) or advocate an uber-pluribus (Greene) that is too disruptive to one's particular, group identity. While John Petrovic's thoughtful response insightfully questions the extent to which Greene and Dewey commit these sins, Fraser-Burgess's thesis holds up. Her central question, as I understand it, is this: How comfortable are we *really* with difference? Her answer is not so much, and this discomfort leads to token lip service given to diversity while cultural fragmentation and marginalization of minority voices persists. The public space, rather than being hospitable to difference, wittingly and unwittingly employs hegemonic discourses. While the trivial differences that comprise our amused and distracted culture abound, Fraser-Burgess fears that ethically significant differences—power differentials tied to race, class, and ethnicity; contested ways of believing, desiring, and living—are all too often whitewashed (emphasis on White) by the project of forging a public space.

To address this paradox, Fraser-Burgess proposes the construct of critical positionality, wherein one's identity, social context, and particular community are balanced with a capacity to critically question and evaluate one's positionality, in light of others who live and see the world differently. In the work of John Rawls, Fraser-Burgess finds an ethical framework strong enough to sustain and secure a viable public space, yet thin enough (i.e. not overreaching) to allow for the expression and cultivation of strong subjectivities. At primary issue in Fraser-Burgess's essay is the significance of positionality, as the locus of our "thick subjectivities." Nurtured within communities, our identity emerges through the development of a particular set of communal virtues that provide "epistemological and ontological meaning." The key question is this: Can criticality and embrace of one's positionality

coexist? How do we educate for a critical positionality that steers clear of assimilation while overcoming balkanization?

In embracing criticality one recognizes that there are multiple positions or ways of seeing, living, and making sense of the world—one comes to see, paraphrasing Richard Rorty, that one’s particular way of seeing is just one vocabulary among many.³ Rorty’s solution is to become an ironist, to recognize the contingency of all vocabularies or narratives for making meaning. With this critical awareness comes a detachment from our own particular positionality. As a consequence, we do not take our own positionality or that of others too seriously. The posture of the ironist risks condescension (though perhaps politely masked) towards earnest folk who take themselves (and metaphysical beliefs) too seriously.

This is not, in my view, Fraser-Burgess’s brand of critical positionality. Rather, she aims to be sympathetic with where people come from and where they stand. She seeks to move past the embarrassment of particularity, underscoring that “group identities provide rich epistemological and ontological locations for making meaning” that a grand commons/public-space project does not. Yet positionality, Fraser-Burgess notes, must not go unquestioned. Still though, encounters across differences must happen in such a way that one is not forced to trade one’s particular identity for a generic one.

Fraser-Burgess’s project aims to respect our multiple vocabularies or ways of living, noting how our identity is irrevocably tethered to our particular contexts. She is, as I read her, wary of the move to create a meta-discourse, fearful that such a move forfeits too much of one’s particular discourse and identity. In this regard, I wonder about the extent to which Rawls’s project is sympathetic with hers, as Rawls’s public space requires that particular discourses, especially religious ones, be formulated or translated within the parameters of public reason. The nagging question is: What counts as public reason and how much is lost in translation?

Nevertheless, Fraser-Burgess’s emphasis on positionality strikes me as essential. While the Enlightenment, in spite of its pretensions, was unable to surpass positionality (every view is from somewhere), postmodernity, in relativizing each and every position, loses sight of how deeply attached and rooted we are to our particular contexts. Moreover, our particular traditions and cultures are loci that not only provide meaning but spaces wherein resistance to a dominant consumer macro culture can emerge. Citing John Covaleskie, Fraser-Burgess references particular communities as valuable for virtue formation and identity development, something that an ethically thin public space cannot, by definition, provide.

While affirming Fraser-Burgess’s emphasis on community and virtue, I do not share (or perhaps do not fully understand) the extent of her concern about the self-rupture that critical examination or Greene’s aesthetic encounters

³ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

may occasion. Critical thinking that calls into question one's perspective and positionality, with the very possibility of self-rupture, strikes me as the heart of the educational enterprise. I am not sure the criticality that Fraser-Burgess seeks can be secured without some degree of ontological destabilization. The key movement, however, is from deconstruction to construction. The educational quest is often adept at deconstruction, calling into question our guiding assumptions and ways of being, but often fails at construction, offering new ways of being, desiring, and living.

This is where philosophers or living witnesses like Thoreau are of surpassing value. More than critique his old way of life, Thoreau embraces and lives out an alternative way of life. In so doing, he illuminates the criticality-positionality dynamic. Alternate positionality, rather than something to be transcended, is a force to be embraced. Thoreau's questions, criticisms, and animating concerns are transformed by his new positionality. He sees his old life, with its manufactured worries and concerns, with new eyes. Thoreau models how alternative positionality grounds meaningful and constructive criticality. It creates a new habitus⁴ wherein new ways of seeing and questioning are revealed.

It is amusing to imagine Thoreau trying to explain himself today to our distracted selves. Words, words, and more words will not convince, will not elucidate. Virtue, Aristotle contends, must be owned before it can be viscerally and intellectually understood—a paradoxical circle. Yet Thoreau models a way forward—a Kierkegaardian leap into another way of living, which leads to another way of seeing. Maxine Greene prompts educators to see things as if they could be otherwise. Thoreau recognized that in order to see otherwise, one must live otherwise. One's habitus must change, lest one default to taken-for-granted assumptions, habits, and ways of seeing. Thoreau understood that in order to acquire critical positionality one has to inhabit an alternate positionality.

This kind of movement, though, requires a far more intense kind of pedagogy, as it entails not simply a new way of knowing, but a new way of seeing, desiring, and living. While the Academy proposes reasons, the consumer marketplace shapes desires—operating beneath the cognitive-reasoning register, soliciting all five senses to shape how way see, desire, and live. Countering such forces demands more than a change of thinking. The cerebral emphasis of modern schooling (even when it critiques our neoliberal consumptive habits) is poorly equipped to guide us into an alternative positionality. Instead a more audacious and formative pedagogy is required—something akin to Thoreau's experiment on Walden Pond.

In what follows I provide a brief overview of the fine essays that comprise this volume. While each is a whole unto itself, they can be organized

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

within the following themes: philosophy and education, fairness and education, the private versus public self, and the burden of freedom.

PHILOSOPHY AND EDUCATION

Related to positionality, René Arcilla's provocative Phil Smith lecture questions the place or position where the philosophical endeavor can occur. Where previously Arcilla advocated for an antagonistic relationship between philosophy and education, he now he calls for a divorce, citing irreconcilable differences.⁵ The educational enterprise, Arcilla contends, is largely comprised of reified practices concerned with knowledge transmission. Philosophy, by contrast, constitutes the love of wisdom, characterized by attention to a miraculous present that eludes quantification. The philosophical endeavor is a transcendent call that exists on a completely different plane than the commodity exchange practices that constitute modern education. While Arcilla's proposed divorce is unsettling, his engaging essay provokes us to consider anew what is, should, or might be a constructive relationship between philosophy and education.

Of course, Arcilla's argument depends upon how one defines education and philosophy. Natasha Levinson's sharp response hinges on these definitions. Turning to ancient sources, Levinson recalls an understanding of education, and schools in particular, as places apart that were concerned as much with being, characterized by the wisdom of living attentively in the present, as they were with becoming or preparing for a productive future. More than a distant ideal, Levinson illuminates how this kind of being, this attentiveness, can be and often is cultivated within school spaces. Levinson argues that schools can (and should be) the garden where philosophical wonder grows. Where Arcilla sees an inevitable (and perhaps helpful) rift, Levinson discerns a vital and necessary connection, wherein philosophy and education are symbiotic.

Adrienne Johnson echoes Arcilla's concern about the reification and commodification of educational practices. Examining educational documents from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Johnson notes a significant and problematic shift in the educational discourse. Earlier documents used to speak about the importance of "lifelong education," which connoted the broad, expansive kind of critical thinking often associated with the liberal arts ideal of education. By contrast, in more recent documents, "lifelong education," has morphed into "lifelong learning," which implies a narrower professionalization or transmission of the skills necessary for the global economy that is constantly changing. With resources from Charles Taylor and Hans Gadamer, Johnson explores the significance and importance of lifelong education, while underlining concerns about a reductive emphasis on lifelong learning. Johnson's concern about the

⁵ René Vicente Arcilla, "Why Aren't Philosophers and Educators Speaking to Each Other?" *Educational Theory* 52, no. 1 (2002): 1.

instrumentalization of education complements Fraser-Burgess's concern about sustaining spaces for a unique and critical positionality.

John Covaleskie shares Johnson's concern about the evolving discourse of education, as he notes the fading distinction between education and training. Historically, Covaleskie notes, education used to be understood as the broader aim of becoming a human being in the fullest sense, while training referred to narrow preparation for a specific task to serve the world of work. This distinction has faded. Education is now largely, if not exclusively, understood as training. Accordingly, students increasingly regard education as a commodity towards attaining a utilitarian end. Within this economic frame, the value of getting an education, Covaleskie notes, will inevitably decrease as the supply (graduates) inevitably outpaces the demand (jobs). This analysis, Covaleskie contends, undermines the assumption that greater educational access leads to greater economic advancement.

FAIRNESS AND EDUCATION

John Rawls makes three cameos in this volume, most notably in the Presidential Address, and also in Bryan Warnick's and Kerry Rodgers's essays.

Warnick's thoughtful essay revisits the ongoing evolution versus creationism debate. With polarizing antagonists on both sides, this intractable debate often generates more heat than light, with proponents tending overstate their case, making unwarranted metaphysical assertions. Animated by a Rawlsian notion of fairness and the tools of a sharp analytic philosopher, Warnick offers a convincing and clear case for epistemological humility. Just as scrupulous scientists must be careful not to exaggerate their knowledge claims, so too proponents of intelligent design, if they aspire to play in the science ballpark, must play by those rules, proposing theories that are falsifiable.

Kerry Rodgers uses Rawls to critique the small school movement in New York. Drawing from her own teaching experience and employing Rawls's original position, Rodgers argues that the putative aims of small schools to address inequities for disadvantaged students actually increase them.

Though not directly invoking Rawls, Xiangdong Liu's essay is concerned with ethics, in particular with moral education. Appraising the merits and demerits of both character education and Lawrence Kohlberg's stage model, Liu makes a case for how Dewey's approach to ethical education can salvage the merits of each approach, while avoiding their shortcomings.

THE PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE SELF

Sarah Stitzlein shares Fraser-Burgess's concern about cultural fragmentation and the loss of a public space. As evidence of this trend, Stitzlein cites the growing and legally sanctioned trend of parents opting out of public school curricula on matters of conscience. Tracing the etymology of the word "conscience," Stitzlein notes that conscience originally meant "to think with"

or “to know along with others.” Rather than an interior, solitary voice formed in isolation or separation, conscience refers to a normed and reflexive judgment, developed in community with others. Given this understanding, to the extent that parents choose to opt out of public education, they risk stunting the mature conscience formation of their children. For Stitzlein public schools should be the space where the conscience is rightly formed.

David Roof’s essay echoes Fraser-Burgess animating concern, as he too ponders how public education can balance “the needs of the individual with the needs of the community.” Towards this end, he enlists the pedagogical writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Frederic Nietzsche, countering the conventional wisdom that they are antithetical to the project of public education. Their pedagogical writings, Roof argues, strike the right balance between “fostering individualism and promotion of the common good.”

Seemingly eliding the public-private tension, Joseph Watras explores the life and writings of philosopher/theologian Martin Buber. Rather than directly engage the political sphere, Buber turned to the social (or private) sphere, creating the kind of community he wrote about. This private move, however, had public implications, as it created a counter-culture. Buber, like Thoreau, was an exemplar of lived philosophy. Deeply sympathetic to outside voices, he embodies the kind of rich critical positionality that Fraser-Burgess calls for.

The public/private dialectic is also pursued in Jane Blanken-Webb’s essay. Blanken-Webb takes on the concern that the private self in Dewey’s account is dissolved into the public self. Examining Dewey texts that have been cited as evidence of this public-private fusion, Blanken-Webb finds evidence, albeit nuanced, for a viable private self that is not consumed by the public. To amplify Dewey’s subtlety, Blanken-Webb incorporates the work of psychologist Heinz Kohut.

Zhao Guoping’s essay also addresses the public space project, arguing that the public space needs to be reimagined, as it has been largely shaped by modernist assumptions about the nature of the self, characterized as autonomous “self-realizing and self-directing modern subjects.” The public space, consequently, is a battleground where autonomous egos meet, bent on securing their own self-interest. Complementing the insights of Jurgen Habermas and Immanuel Levinas, Guoping makes a case for conceiving of and fashioning a human subject that is more heteronomous than autonomous. Accordingly, Guoping argues that education should relinquish the autonomy ideal in favor of Levinasian notion of subjectivity as responsible for the irreplaceable Other. An education with this aim, notes Guoping, would radically reconfigure the public space.

Amanda West’s thoughtful essay extends John Dewey’s notion of an educative experience to the emotional sphere. The emotional lives of students, often relegated to the private sphere, offer educative possibilities that should not be missed. West argues that teachers have a responsibility to attend not only to the cognitive, but also the emotional lives of their students. She

deconstructs the problematic gender constructs that surround shows of emotion, forwarding a constructive proposal for how teachers can respond educatively to the emotional lives of students.

THE GIFT/BURDEN OF FREEDOM

Jessica Heybach and Katrina Dillon both examine the gift/burden of freedom, exploring how education systems, in spite of their pro-freedom rhetoric, prompt students to abdicate freedom. As evidence of this, Heybach cites the ideal of pedagogical neutrality. Rather than a constructive detachment, the posture of neutrality can foster in students a passivity that shirks the burden of freedom and the hard work of developing one's subjectivity. Drawing from Simone de Beauvoir, Heybach describes two manifestations of this passivity: sub-man and serious man (sic). Beauvoir's sub-man, resonant of today's uncritical consumer, avoids taking serious ethical stands altogether. A soft nihilist, sub-man remains a bystander to life. Serious man, by contrast, makes a choice—the choice to give up his or her ability to choose—subsuming herself and her subjectivity to a particular group or cause. Recalling Fraser-Burgess' critical positionality, serious man possesses hyper-positionality, absent criticality; sub-man has neither criticality nor positionality.

Katrina Dillon shares Heybach's concern about educating for freedom. Towards this end, Dillon argues that education should diagnose and unveil the ways we undermine and avoid freedom. For insight, Dillon turns to psychologist Erich Fromm. Fromm discloses interior ways we relinquish our freedom, noting three major manifestations: authoritarianism, destructiveness, and automaton mechanism. Each manifestation is characterized by the attempt to eliminate the self. Yet more than unveil negative freedom, education, Dillon notes, must work towards what Fromm describes as positive freedom, characterized by the spontaneous ability to love.

CONCLUSION

What a privilege it has been to serve as conference chair for the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Conference and as Contributing Editor for the *Philosophical Studies in Education Journal*. One special privilege as Chair and Editor is to see the fine work that goes on behind the scenes. In particular, I was overwhelmingly impressed by the thoughtful and constructive feedback offered to conference proposals and journal submissions.

The OVPES conference and journal embodies the dynamic critical positionality Fraser-Burgess illuminates. For more than a decade it has been beholden to a particular place, the Bergamo Retreat Center, where scholars share papers, food, and wine. The social fragmentation that is common in conference culture is kept in check by the communal atmosphere of OVPES. As philosophy of education and the humanities continue to become marginalized by the Academy, the critical positionality of OVPES has become all the more important!
