

What Kind of Ethical Education will Serve our Future Needs?

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People tend to ask us: What kind of knowledge and skills will our young generation need in the future? The obvious answer is: Skills of learning and thinking! Schools must be learning centres where we all study the skills of learning and are seekers of knowledge. But what does this mean if we think of ethics and, in particular, of ethical instruction in formal education? What sorts of skills in ethics does a good life call for in our modern, or perhaps, in our post modern condition?

The birth of modernity in Europe has been endlessly discussed and debated in terms of individualism versus collectivism, nation states versus feudal polities, rationalistic models of analysis versus traditionalist legitimations, secularization versus religiousness, democracy versus elitism, etc. One important thread in this complicated web is surely the distinction between the private and the public. The private versus the public is not, of course, simply a modern distinction, but it does assume a characteristic colouring of its own in the history of modernity.

For our present purposes, the private sphere of modernity includes the domestic and intimate spheres of relations and a multitude of individual roles in civil society. In the anthropological literature, the term is often used to refer to the domestic household opposing the public and politicized sphere of interhousehold relations. The public sphere includes such relations as marriage, competitive feasting, feuding and warfare. The public also comprises those rituals or “religious” activities that address the society or polity as a whole as well as ethical instruction in formal education (Friedman 1995). In many societies, of course, the distinction overlaps with the prevailing division of labor between the sexes. In the most extreme case this has meant the exclusion of women from the public domain and their subjection to their fathers, husbands and brothers in the private domain. No wonder that in an era of feminist aspirations all attempts to distinguish the public from the private in ethically principled and rational ways are controversial. Yet such a heated debate is often the price we must pay for progress and freedom.

In our presentation we shall first describe how the formal education in Finland is improving the skills of our pupils and students. We shall also point out that the ongoing reforms of the Finnish system of education will make the students more able to meet the challenges of the future. In the second part we shall propose a demarcation between philosophy and philosophy of life to clarify their respective goals in school curricula. We **shall see** that the proposed demarcation intriguingly brings at the focus of attention the public/private distinction.

THE OUTLOOK OF FINNISH EDUCATION

The educational system of Finland is presently in transition. Choice, flexibility and quality are the keywords of this change. Such aims are realistic and feasible as we believe firmly that investments in human capital are vital for any country hoping to be or become prosperous.

Indeed, modern economists are convinced that epistemics and economics are not too far from being the two sides of the same coin: Economic growth and development are based on creating and learning new things. This emphasis on the growth of knowledge is a crucial feature that distinguishes the *via moderna* of economics from the stasis of neoclassical mainstream. (Romer 1994). Conversely, an enriched economics that has become

aware of its metaphysical and epistemological commitments, can deepen significantly our understanding of epistemological issues. (Hooker 1994)

Anyway, we have kept reforming the structures and substances of general and vocational education, despite the heavy strain our weakened economy and finances have imposed on them. This is necessary not just for the benefit of the Finnish economy and general prosperity, but also for reasons of equity and cultural development.

We shall carry the reform strategy for the development of Finnish education in two stages. The goal of deregulation is to usher creativity and diversity. Informative instruction will largely replace the rigid national control of the curriculum. The reform enforced in 1993 and at the beginning of 1994 will increase the decision-making powers of individual schools and will give them a welcome boost to become more active and inspiring. One aspect of this reform was a new and more flexible roster of school subjects. (Lindstrom 1995)

The second stage is being carried out by encouraging improvements in the quality of schooling and by supporting the creation of effective information and evaluation systems. These pursuits have taken a concrete shape in the so-called Aquarium Project. More than four hundred schools take part to this project: primary schools, secondary schools, upper secondary schools and vocational schools. Thanks to the Aquarium Project, the schools make use of previously untapped sources of energy and vitality. They devise and test their own curricula and swap ideas and innovations in fifteen different networks. Finland will be rich in networking experience; we are sure that our schools are more than willing to share this know-how as it becomes available.

Such initiatives should be seen as deliberate responses to altered circumstances, namely the rapid changes in society, the complexities of contemporary knowledge and the increasing demand for international cooperation. As these irresistible forces also manifest themselves in shifting contexts of interpretation and horizons of expectation, it is inevitable that we face here the phenomena that many commentators prefer to call post modern. The unpredictability, multivocality, ambiguousness and swift tempo of these phenomena calls for flexibility and diversity in all areas of the education.

What kind of role are philosophy and philosophy of life playing in this drama? We feel that they fulfill two essential roles in education. The first role is part and parcel of the global humanistic and scientific tradition. Philosophy has profoundly influenced our ways of thinking and understanding. Therefore we are not obliged to seek justifications for philosophy in the schools; rather, we should ask how general education can meet its proper tasks at all without the help of philosophy. Another, perhaps an even more pressing contemporary role for philosophy in general education is to raise the quality of teaching. The future school aims at developing how-to-learn-to-learn skills and not just the memorization of a certain collection of particular facts. As a result, the all-important skills are those of learning and thinking. Traditionally the faculties of self-reflective critical thinking are the very faculties philosophy has taken pride in cultivating. Thus we see that procedurally philosophy is inseparable from the learning that should guide us to the next millennium.

PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE GOES TO SCHOOL: A BRIEF HISTORY

Freedom of religion was established relatively late in Finland: until the end of 1922 all the Finns had to belong to some Christian congregation or organization. When freedom from all religious communities became possible, the demand was voiced that school should also offer an alternative to religious education. The history and development of the new subject are reflected in the names it was given over the decades.

First it was called history of religion, then history of religions, and finally philosophy of life. So the frame of reference was first based on just one religion, then on several religions and lastly on a whole spectrum of views and beliefs. By now the initial religious framework has been left behind, and the curricula are no longer tied to any one type of belief. The development, however, was not a straightforward march of reason. In fact, the journey towards an emancipation from religious excess baggage has been tortuous enough. At one stage this quest for justice prompted the Finnish freethinkers to lodge an official complaint with the UN Commission on Human Rights. The complaint pointed out that by burdening the philosophy of life studies with religious materials, Finland had not respected the right of the parents to choose the religious education of their children. However, in the end Finland managed to amend its own legislation just in time; thus our liberal democracy narrowly

escaped the censure of the Human Rights Commission. Do we need a more compelling proof of the efficiency and efficacy of the UN organisations?

The present philosophy of life curriculum includes the following objectives:

At the early stages, the themes to be discussed in the philosophy of life classes are chosen from the daily life of young pupils. Here the main point is to strengthen the self-image of the pupil. Glimpses of other cultures and ways of life are introduced gradually. (The pupils are then eleven or twelve years old.)

At the upper comprehensive stage (thirteen to fifteen year old pupils), the basic problems of existence are discussed, different doctrines are compared and the ethical values of youth cultures are reviewed. The overall aim is to understand the ethical principles that are the foundation of human rights. The pupils discuss different beliefs, religious as well as non-religious, at the top grades of the upper comprehensive school.

Upper secondary school courses in philosophy of life (ages from sixteen and eighteen years) are intended to support the development of an ethically conscious and active person. Pupils are also encouraged to seek knowledge and analyse information critically, and they are guided towards scientific thinking.

The first course in philosophy of life introduces the basics of the subject; it identifies connections between general ethical principles and the young person's own life hopes. The second course links up worldviews, ideologies and views of life. The topics discussed vary from the limits of existence to the potential of art to widen one's individual horizon. The third course deals with social issues from an ethical point of view.

Philosophy of life has now been taught in Finnish schools for ten years. The universities and the open university provide the teacher training as a multiform programme. Textbooks have now their second generation of development, and the discipline is firmly established in schools. The attendance figures have been growing by 20 percent each year. The majority of pupils come from the Capital area; in Helsinki, the capital of Finland, over 10 percent of comprehensive school beginners choose to attend philosophy of life classes rather than religious instruction.

The sort of ethical education philosophy of life is expected to provide is unsurprising: It should aim above good manners, be based on personal responsibility, cultivate sensitivity to more subtle aspects or moral problems, develop understanding of principles guiding practical decisions, etc. These classical objectives have been reviewed in well-known studies by Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) and John Rawls (1971), to mention just two prominent theorists.

In view of these objectives, it is obvious that ethical learning both presupposes cognitive capacities and also contributes to their development. Moral development is a story of deepening judgment: It requires the exercise of discerning and critical observation, awareness of moral conflicts and the ability to find new solutions to the problems of everyday life. Given this, the questions on philosophy of life in the national matriculation examinations are fairly often about moral dilemmas. To present moral dilemmas, school teachers often find helpful the Philosophy for Children material developed by Matthew Lipman (Lipman et al. 1980) in the United States.

Developing a pupil's imagination also stirs his or her thinking ability. This is why art plays such an important role in ethical education. Intense emotional experiences arising from art may deepen one's view of life and increase the sensitivity that is necessary for acute observation in moral matters.

Discussions about vexing problems of life, seeking richer and more mature perspectives for their resolution, can certainly be beneficial to individual moral development. However, the process of maturing is mainly a practical affair. Successful life experiments are premised on sound knowledge about the world. So we may conclude that up-to-date general education is also necessary for the survival of one's life hopes. All in all, the ethical orientation of the discipline and the reflective method of approach explains why in teacher education the most closely related subject to it is felt to be philosophy.

We noted that the basis of curriculum subject philosophy of life was relieved from irrelevant religious burdens by no lesser means than the intervention of a UN Commission. But the verification of the genuinely moral substance of the discipline is a much harder problem to solve. Or, is Socrates' problem solvable simply by teaching survival skills?

DEMARCATING PHILOSOPHY AND PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

Socrates died after drinking a cup of hemlock. The Athenian judges had accused him of heresy and corrupting the youth of the city, and sentenced him to death. The judges had found his actions inappropriate for an Athenian; in other words, he had been a bad citizen. Would Socrates have avoided his untimely death if he had been taught good manners and survival skills in time?

One of the aims of education is to reconstruct a model of a good person in terms of contemporary culture. The ideal is a socially constructive citizen who has found her place in the community and conducts herself appropriately. The sophists gave the ancient Athenians general education, and they had their own ideas about morality and about its relative nature in theory. If Socrates had been given an “ordinary” education, he would hardly have chosen to devote himself to telling painful truths to his fellow citizens.

Education presents us with the very same opposite elements as Socrates’ problem does. On the one hand, we must give the people a general education that permits them to fill the roles the community finds desirable and acceptable. It is not too much to ask that a person should be able to survive in her own community without needing to cross its borders. General education contributing to this modest goal should also include civil ethics.

On the other hand, education also comprises ideal objectives that go far beyond basic survival. The story of Socrates comes to our aid again: Socrates did not escape prison nor did he survive his trial, but he did live according to his own ideals. School education at large faces the same problem of balancing these somewhat conflicting objectives, survival skills and personal moral ideals. This problem arises in philosophy of life education in a very acute form. As we have noted, the discipline has been freed from all doctrinal commitments and particular values. What becomes then of learning the map to the good life? If philosophy of life simply provides rational ways of assessing those routes, how does it differ from philosophy proper? We feel that these difficulties can be resolved and philosophy of life can be given a place of its own in the curriculum.

THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy has traditionally studied highly general and abstract problems that are not amenable to ready resolutions by means of experiment or calculation. The development of the sciences, in turn, is closely connected with the emergence of relatively independent research agenda and methods that permit detailed answers to specific questions on the agenda.

It would be an error, however, to think that philosophy and sciences are either opposites or completely separate domains of inquiry. It is more justifiable to see them as complementary traditions that both aim at increasing our understanding of the world and our place in it. Both philosophy and sciences are motivated by intellectual curiosity; they are procedurally committed to the systematic use of reason.

Philosophy is also related to arts, to the cultivation of life skills and to edification of all sorts. Indeed, as it patrols at the frontiers of our understanding, as it tries to articulate the multifarious world of our experience, philosophy becomes a noble play, it acquires characteristics of an art. The most beautiful products of this play have undiminished poetic value.

Edification and visions of life sublime notwithstanding, philosophy in the West has been a theoretical pursuit, a search for objective knowledge.

PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

The point of view of philosophy of life, as it has been taught in Finnish schools, is that of a subjective individual, that of a participant. An individual’s view of life can be regarded as a personal attempt to articulate the various aspects that make up the rich fabric of human experience. Such a personal view inevitably contains irreducibly subjective choices. There are hardly any objective answers to questions that pertain to, say, the choices individuals have to make between various life pursuits. It’s up to the person herself whether to devote her life to arts or personal relations; it is upon the individual to say what life design gives meaning and significance to his existence.

Many subjects that are taught in schools are independent academic disciplines. Philosophy of life, as a school subject in Finnish schools, cannot claim any separate academic discipline of its own. It does not mean that views of life would be an unsuitable subject for a proper academic study. Rather, any single discipline would not fulfill all those demands that have been set for teaching philosophy of life for Finnish schools.

In fact, the background knowledge necessary for teaching philosophy of life can be traced to several university departments. Of course, ethics comes to mind immediately, but there are also many others: anthropology, biology, sociology, psychology, etc. As its background knowledge philosophy of life makes use of the knowledge produced by many disciplines. We can compare philosophy of life-as conceived above-to many applied or technical sciences. Such sciences use the knowledge that is provided by the more “basic” sciences to give answers to questions of more practical nature (educational studies, cartography, artificial intelligence, medicine etc.).

However, philosophy of life, as a normative subject, differs in a crucial way from “more ordinary” normative sciences. The “practical need” relevant for philosophy of life is nothing but “the good life” itself. As a goal “the good life” is problematic precisely in the same way as philosophical problems are problematic.

Studies of philosophy of life may provide rational techniques but no given or self-evident uses. This raises the question whether ethics could meet all the needs of philosophy of life in the school curriculum. After all, ethics is committed to rational procedures and acknowledges the problematic nature of the basic decisions. However, there are reasons suggesting another view: Ethics attempts to transcend particular interests in favour of universality and intersubjectivity, if not objectivity. Philosophy of life, in contrast, deliberately embraces the subjective perspective. Its aim is to provide an opportunity to think and to discuss about matters that might give meaning to my life.

THE USE OF KNOWLEDGE IN PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

We have argued that philosophy of life does not mean that philosophy of life would reject the demand of reliability. Whatever demands we can set for objective knowledge in general, we can set for the background knowledge philosophy of life is using. However, the goal of philosophy of life is to challenge students to make their own valuations and choices as to what significance they give to these facts in their own life. Similarly, philosophy of life challenges them to think about the place of values and choices in their world. For these reasons philosophy of life is the search of a synoptic view, where the requirements of objectivity are reconciled to the necessity of living ones life from the perspective of subjectivity.

HUMANIST WORRIES, POSTMODERNIST CHALLENGES

On aspect of philosophy of life as we have presented it should catch the attention of critical readers. Evidently, philosophy of life deals with questions that are very personal. Inevitably, there arises a suspicion of gross intrusion into the lives of students. Sociological studies and philosophically informed accounts have revealed that such doubts concerning the effects of “modern schooling” are justified. While the atmosphere of intimacy is very beneficial to communal well-being, it cannot on its own protect the interests of individual persons and subcommunities. Teachers’ noble intentions and beautiful-sounding pedagogical principles are similarly insufficient-unless they become institutionalized in a structure of rights. Such rights would extend general citizens’ rights into the schools, into classes. As it happens, philosophy of life has the advantage of being committed to pedagogical principles that do make a difference. These pedagogical principles are based on the idea of a student as an autonomous agent capable of rational judgment and ethical responsibility.

Of course, the studying takes place under teachers’ guidance, but autonomous agents capable of exercising their rational and ethical faculties certainly deserve the rights free citizens everywhere enjoy. The crucial insight here is to understand that (a) Schools belong to the public sphere, although they are simultaneously networks of intimacy and thus belong to the private sphere; (b) Socratic conflict between the functional necessities of reproducing community life and personal moral ideals can be partially overcome only in a properly organised pedagogical practice. The first point reveals the source of humanistic worries and postmodernist suspicions: We are faced with an ambiguous situation, where the best intentions all too easily turn into nightmares of

exploitation. The second point is a (partial) remedy: Starting from the idea of recognising the student as an autonomous agent capable of rational and ethical judgment, we can reproduce the Socratic conflict in the schools in a way that protects the rights of the students and allows them to experiment and play with the roles and situations they have to face in a postmodern world.

The postmodernists will surely remain unconvinced. They are likely to see our nice-sounding Enlightenment rhetorics as a cover for sinister power serving (or power seeking) moves. We feel that such an assessment would not be just unnecessarily cynical, but it would reveal an error about the nature of rationality. In fact, lurking behind all debates on modernity and postmodernity is a very serious disagreement on reason and rationality. (Toulmin 1990). The postmodernists can be thanked for their rediscovery of the historical and contingent aspect of rationality. As human beings are parts of nature, also human rationality has a natural/cultural history. And as human beings are finite and fallible, human rationality cannot wholly escape ambiguity, diversity, contingency and sensitivity to changing contexts of interpretation. However, that does not spell the end of “the Enlightenment Project.” The postmodernists have simply taken Platonistic ideas about rationality at their face value and now find their only solace in narcissistic play. The story of human reason lies precisely in our attempt to transcend the limitations our finitude and fallibility have imposed on us. Fashionable computational accounts of rational faculties tend to play down our capacity for judgment. Yet the capacity for critical and reflective judgment is our best model for rationality. Indeed, it thrives on the very possibility of reinterpreting the situation at hand in the light of our best considerations. Free inquiry does not require some otherworldly Platonist heaven of abstract rationality but “merely” human rationality. That is enough to make sure that we are not going in circles, but bootstrapping ourselves to greater objectivity.

One context of self-reflecting interpretation is our ethical judgment. Readdressing our original question, we ask what sort of ethical education the next millennium calls for. The answer is as obvious as in the beginning: we need ethical education that is guided by reason!

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