Acting Out Philosophy

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In this paper, the nature of teaching philosophy is analysed. The teaching of character-forming subjects should be neutral. The teacher should present opposing theories with equal passion. The views that claim that the goal of teaching philosophy was carving out a human form are false. The teacher should not decide which theory is true. He must not guide the students. This normative claim is justified with two observations. First, there are many incompatible philosophical theories. Second, there are many ideas about when a person becomes actualised. It has to be left to the student to come to terms with all the theories. Some concepts associated with the concept of Bildung imply a disputable role of the teacher because they limit the freedom of students and may lead to an authoritarian and/or totalitarian society. Such is the concept of discursive thinking as a natural development of thought. Mill's criterion of truth in human sciences is presented.

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IGRATI FILOZOFIJO

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Analizirana je narava poučevanja filozofije v gimnaziji. Značaj oblikujoči predmeti se morajo poučevati nepristransko. Učitelj mora nasprotujoče teorije predstaviti enako strastno. Pedagoške teorije, ki trdijo, da je cilj poučevanja filozofije v gimnaziji oblikovanje človeške forme, so zmotne. Učitelj nima pravice odločati o resničnosti različnih filozofij. Enako ne sme vsiljivo usmerjati dijakov. Ta normativna zahteva izhaja iz dveh empiričnih spoznanj. Prvič, obstajajo številne nezdružljive teorije o človeški naravi. Drugič, obstajajo raznolika prepričanja o tem, kdaj nekdo razvije človeško naravo. Potemtakem obstajajo nezdružljiva pojmovanja dobrega življenja. Dijaki se morajo sami boriti s pluralizmom idej. Nadalje je prikazano, da nekateri pojmi skupaj s pojmom Bildung implicirajo sporno vlogo učitelja, ker njihova uporaba neutemeljeno oži svobodo dijakov. Vodi lahko v avtoritarno in/ali totalitarno družbo. Takšen je pojem diskurzivnega mišljenja kot naravno nujnega mišljenja. Prikazano je Millovo pojmovanje kriterija resničnosti v družboslovnih disciplinah in filozofiji.

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Plato considered his philosophical work of immense importance as he deemed himself being acquainted with Truth in contradistinction to the sophists, who were satisfied with a semblance of Truth only. Thus the dispute was between a truth-loving philosopher and truth-disregarding, truth-distorting and – even worse power-grabbing lovers of political manipulation. The misleading teachings of the sophists were definitely to be nipped in the bud lest the human chaos will go on forever.

Plato's sentiments are to be found throughout philosophical debates. Those who willingly turn a blind eye to the obvious, defending evident falsehoods, should be ridiculed, if not – in the worst case, of which there are many – silenced. The evil must not be allowed to speak up. Illustrations can be found in abundance, so I ask the reader to look for them. In fact, this point might possibly be demonstrated by looking into one's own experience.

So, the question arises as to how a philosophy teacher in the secondary school shall deliver the content of his or her subject. The answer is neither trivial nor inconsequential. For one thing, in the course of secondary school, the nature of a person seems to be significantly determined by the character building subjects, and for another, philosophical ideas are a major contributor to the outcome of this process. It is as if a person's essence was defined by the philosophy she endorses. On the one hand, it seems that a person chooses the philosophy which befits her innermost subtle leanings, implying that "the history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments" (James, 1987, p. 488).

On the other hand, the impact also takes place in the opposite direction. Namely, the philosophies read and listened to mould the future combatant standing up for truth and justice. Therefore, it matters whether a student listens to a philosophy teacher who puts his effort into demonstrating that Marx is right and Hayek is mistaken about the causes of (in)efficiency of modern economies, or whether he has to master course requirements of an antithetical philosopher who is convinced in the opposite truth. Chances are that the two students will stand for clashing ideals, the first fighting for some form of governmentally enforced collective solidarity and positive freedom, and the second relegating distributive justice from the realm of enforceable moral duty to individual emotions and charity, thus limiting the power of government in communal matters and advocating negative freedom.

The indicated early influence of philosophical ideas on cognition and affections carries far-reaching consequences both for the life of the individual and for how fundamental institutions of society are structured and operative. Namely, while it is true that the human has the potential for critical- and evidence-based thinking, cognitive and emotional activity of the average person is also heavily loaded with pre-existing opinions. This means that the content of a person's education may have a huge impact upon her self-understanding and the kind of society she deems desirable. Thus, the trouble is that she will shut down her critical faculties and act in a blinkered way for good or ill. As a matter of fact, this hypothesis is well-confirmed for moral-political judgments. Ample research shows that adopted convictions are staunchly defended even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. For example, M. Lodge and C. S. Taber argue that "citizens overly value supportive evidence while finding reasons to dismiss out of hand evidence that challenges their prior attitudes," thus being guilty of (dis)confirmation bias and motivated reasoning. This is not to say that people would not care about truth and accuracy. On the contrary, they try hard to accomplish "*accuracy goals*, which motivate them to seek out and carefully consider relevant evidence so as to reach a correct or otherwise good-enough conclusion, /…/, but they are typically unable to control their preconceptions, even when encouraged to be objective" (Lodge, Taber, 2013).

Bear in mind that these empirical findings are about the average person, meaning that she – on the assumption that she finished secondary school (i.e., the European continental gymnasium) – came across philosophical conceptions of various topics, which were presented by her philosophy teacher. Therefore, whatever the teacher's outlook on assorted aspects of the human condition, the philosophy classes are preparing ground for later fundamental philosophical theories, which will serve as an interpretative tool for a plethora of facts and values. In other words, philosophical ideas give the very fundamental, conceptual framework for self-understanding and understanding of reality, meaning that they get – let me jokingly add – reversely sublimated into everyday life, politics, science, or arts. This holds true even for abstract philosophical conundrums like the mind-body problem or the properties of scientific explanation. To illustrate with an example from the former, it does matter if the teacher passionately defends Patricia Churchland's materialism (Churchland, 2013) or powerfully presents the knowledge argument against physicalism as put forward in Frank Jackson's anecdote about Mary's Room (Jackson, 1982).

As both theories appear convincing if advanced with the right tools of rhetorical trade, the adoption of the one or the other will induce antithetic perceptions, cognitions, emotional attitudes, and activities. A psychologist, for example, who was in his school years convinced in favour of either theory, will also later tend to explain behaviour as caused either by physical causes or some intrinsically conscious agent. If he happens to become a behaviourist, he will systematically condition pigeons to behave as, say, table tennis players. He will not attempt to conduct experiments that might bring to light consciousness as a non-localised entity. The thrust of philosophical ideas upon cognition and emotions is even stronger in the case of all-encompassing theories of human condition. To illustrate, what can be more powerful than Hegel's objective idealism, which strangulates individual spontaneity and whim, or Freud's portrayal of human as an irrational beast, entrusting reason with the role of a servant to the libidinal energies only, or Rawls's interpretation of Kant's notion of moral duty, according to which a person exercises reasonableness when he or she willingly gives up part of her income and wealth out of selfish reasons, dismissing ethical individualism as unreasonable? Therefore, a student who listens to a devoted Freudian philosophy teacher, has good chances to become a trained psychoanalyst, stumbling upon human irrationalities on every step she takes. If somebody is told that a theory is "the best of all theories," then it is safe to bet that his understanding of all sorts of phenomena will be dominated by this theory.

The psychological fact that philosophical ideas impart a sense of importance and mission is in itself not a problem – t is good to have a mission. The problem is that there are many incompatible truths on offer. Many felt missions, as it were. Therefore, we can conclude that a lot of bogus philosophical beliefs are being hankered after. We may assume that it is not only benign falsehoods about the nature of mathematical reality, laws of nature, or the fundamental building blocks of consciousness, but also far-reaching delusions which many hold about moral principles, justice, freedom or the laws of historical development, often with dire consequences. How could this then be prevented?

For one thing, it is not far-fetched to suppose that a lot of humbug and chaos originates from badly designed lessons. So, it seems plausible that the problem of philosophical falsehoods would be mitigated if only the teacher was willing to overcome her disorder and laziness with diligence and good will. Hard work on finding the truth appears to be the solution. Another harmful philosophical activity seems to be consciously making "the weaker argument the stronger." For many,

such a relativistic denial of truth sadly enough does not follow the path of character building. On the contrary, they see it leading into a dissolution and collapse of human reality. Such is the case of the Greek philosopher Gorgias, whose rhetorical strivings are considered by some as an objectification of "a vicious attitude of the mind" (Maritain, cited in Higgins, n. d.). If such a philosophical attitude is practised in the classroom, the prospects of finding the truth are not great, in particular because maliciousness is harder to be dealt with than indolence. It is not manifest right off the bat how to change the corrupted mind of a teacher so that the youth would be given passable directions for life. Therefore, the challenge of according the youth adequate philosophy acumen appears to be only halfway soluble. If secondary school students are lucky, a genuine philosopher – if only a lazy one – will equip them with the right sort of fundamental insight. If they meet a disingenuous crook, the chances are they themselves will become crooked. The school may help to build the character, but it may also not. Or so we thought.

Let us take a step back. So, what is it all about? It is a vision of the noble goal to help an aspiring human to develop his or her potentialities to the fullest. This can allegedly be accomplished only by separating the wheat from the chaff. It is claimed that only if the students are taught the Truth and the falsehoods are red-flagged, then there are good prospects to advance into a full-fledged human being. That is to say, the teacher of philosophy has to expound the right sort of theories. No sophists are allowed in the philosophy classroom.

At first sight it sounds plausible. However, this view is a bone of contention as several claims are controversial. Are false philosophical theories really such a danger for the youth as Plato was convinced? Should the philosophy teacher instil correct knowledge into his students? Can he avert the catastrophe allegedly brought about by deceptive philosophical thinking? Is he entitled to chase off the so-called philosopher who preaches false doctrines?

In modern times the tradition of Neohumanism gives affirmative answers. Schiller, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel and their disciples deem education as a process of right and proper cultivation, a procurement of culture and literacy, which is referred to as *Bildung*. It is "the creation, formation and development of those dimensions and shapes which are common (*universal*) to all people. This *universal* refers to /…/ a specific *human* shape /…/ which is expressed in the dimensions of the good and beautiful" (Medveš, 2010). Essential in the process of *Bildung* is "the unity of human

reason as opposed to the heterogeneity of the world and cosmos" (Medveš, 2010). The result of adequate Bildung is, in some sense, perhaps a simplifying characterisation, a flourishing individual and a balanced society. To illustrate, Plato's depiction of the tripartite nature of the soul and the state suits well. A just soul and a blameless polis conceived as a harmony of opposites under the guidance of reason can be established only if the youth is administered proper education. To be sure, philosophy assumes a central role in the formative mechanism that helps the individual to actualise his essential human potentials.

Such a benevolent guidance seems to be a commendable ambition and, in fact, in one way or another many philosophy teachers take the stand that their professional end is to equip students with conceptual tools for critical thinking. This does not mean just skills of analytic decomposing of claims into their tacit assumptions, but also making the right choices regarding the correct view of cosmos, society, and man. Moreover, the adequately philosophically educated will be armed with conceptual weapons to fight the worldly wrongs. After having completed the philosophy course, participants should have the capacity to see through the deceptions of the ideologically compromised common sense and vicious interests of the powerful few.

However, as laudable as this undertaking could be, there are some caveats that have to be taken seriously. To begin with, the exact content of a critical analysis of popular misconceptions remains to be seen. The outlined concept of "universal human nature," as proposed by Medveš, is unhelpfully abstract. Which philosophical theory is to be advised so that the aim of the *Bildung* is realised? Is it platonism or formalism about mathematical objects? Shall the secondary school students be enthralled with physicalism or dualism when they are to determine the nature of intentionality? Is it Rawls's focus on equity, commanded by reasonable care for those least well-off, or is it Nozick's argument in favour of procedural justice, which is constituted when the government is limited to enforcing rights as side-constraints of freedom? Hence, it is not clear which philosophy should be internalised so that the youth is carved out as a fully actualised and flourishing instance of humankind. In short, it is not clear which of the many opposing and mutually exclusive theories is true.

Now, the truth not granting to be fixed in the classroom is less a theoretical problem in pedagogy of philosophy as it is a real-life difficulty for the practising teacher of philosophy. It is not a theoretical pedagogical trouble for the simple reason that the

philosophy teacher does not have the authority of making decisions about the correctness of a theory. Whatever the disputed issue is, whether the classroom debate is about Rawls's or Nozick's understanding of justice, Descartes' or Skinner's theory of consciousness, Kant's or Rand's view of the fundamentals of morality, the teacher has to remain silent about who is right. At the same time, it is an everyday and down-to-earth personal psychological issue for the teacher, because of the described biased attitude towards either cherished or hated philosophical theory he is giving voice to. Namely, the (dis)confirmation bias is even more pronounced and intense among professional philosophers than it is in ordinary people. This can be inferred from observations in political psychology, which show that educated and informed citizens more stubbornly clench the accepted opinions than a less well-read person. Empirical research shows "that motivated biases are greatest for sophisticates" (Lodge, Taber, 2013).

In consequence, it can easily happen that the teacher passionately and in a partisan manner talks about conflicting theories. This is even more the case because of a rather loose connection between philosophical theories and observational data. Furthermore, philosophers and some social scientists are keen on justifying the adopted theory purely "theoretically," meaning that they consciously take a purely theoretical stand against empirical evidence. If this happens, then all observational underpinning of theoretical modelling of the human condition is explained away. This is vividly presented in a documentary on the so-called Norwegian equality paradox, in which a gender scientist rejects empirical evidence which is adduced by the proponents of the hypothesis that gender differences partly stem from biological causes on completely theoretical grounds. This theoretician advocates a universal social determinism regarding gender characteristics and rejects the possibility that her theory could be falsified or questioned by observational data. On the contrary, she is worried that some scientists stockpile the empirical type of data. She is biting her nails because findings of empirical research suggest a biological explanation of some gender idiosyncrasies (Eia, 2010, 34:30).

This is not, in any case, a cognitive matter anymore. It is an emotionally biased partisanship. Therefore, the question of truth (or Truth) becomes a detached and rather poetic affair, giving leeway to subjective emotional preferences without much, if any, cognitive check with facts. As such unsound episodes take place in empirical sciences, we may validly draw the conclusion that they are also present in a non-empirical discipline like philosophy. As a result, what happens in the classroom tends

to be a verbatim emotionally laden moulding of students in just one, "theoretically correct" direction. The bottom line is that, contrary to the good intentions of the teacher, only God knows whether the theory that he is defending really describes the unifying, universal and beautiful human form which is the assumed, ultimate goal of *Bildung*.

Long story short, the role of a philosophy teacher is to give a strictly impartial account of all philosophical ideas. Bigotry and illiberality do not have a legitimate place in a philosophy classroom. This fact is logically related to the nature of truth in philosophy. Contrary to what one might expect, the criterion of truth in philosophy as a foundational discipline does not unmistakably distinguish truth from falsehoods. The human is fallible not only when engaged in the construction of knowledge in empirical sciences, but also when moving along the outer borders of all knowledge. As said above, one aspect of this is the multiplicity of philosophical theories about every aspect of human existence. By way of illustration, a famous textbook in its seventh iteration has the title *Thirteen Theories of Human Nature* (Stevenson et al., 2018).

Rest assured that each of the thirteen philosophers together with their supporters think that they were in possession of an evidently true philosophical account of the human condition. Can we make a logically clear-cut decision on who is right? The answer is negative, because we are not aware of an indisputable meta-criterion of truth that would decide between non-simultaneously realisable philosophical models of human condition. So what can we do? The only solution is discussion. Let the giants fight for our souls.

By now it should have become obvious that I am arguing in favour of John Stuart Mill's concept of truth as it pertains to the fields of study that are concerned with human matters. He claims, firstly, that in moral questions, it is only warranted belief that can be achieved, not absolute certainty (Mill, 1991).

It may be added that the same holds true for human sciences and all philosophical theories. Hence, Mill embraces a falsificationist view of theories about human nature. However, social sciences spell out the conditions of falsification with some difficulties. Philosophical reasoning is even more afflicted with this predicament. This is why in philosophy, the theoretical modelling and observational data are not tightly conjoined through the practice of drawing observational predictions from

theoretical assumptions. By implication, observations in philosophy provide a rather lax arbiter between competing theoretical proposals. Moreover, if we are cognisant of the fact that even in natural sciences a crucial experiment does not decide between models in a logically unequivocal and straightforward manner, because it leaves room for *ad hoc* efforts to bring home the salvation of the beloved theory, we may feel confident that advocates of adverse philosophies will not go eagerly for a logically clear confirmation or disconfirmation of any philosophical conviction. This empirical indeterminacy of philosophical theories, which is caused by the limitations of human thought, is amplified by the psychological fact of theoretical partisanship described above. As philosophers only reluctantly give up accepted theories, inevitably the question of how to implement falsification as a criterion of the truth of philosophical theories arises. Again, Mill's solution comes to mind. Only on the battlefield of ideas, in an ongoing process of fight, will the truth be extracted from contending proposals. To state the point from a different perspective, the liberty of discussion is the very test of truth as it is accessible to the knowledge faculties of humans. In this vein, Mill claims that "the beliefs which we have most warrant for, have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded. /…/ This is the amount of certainty attainable by a fallible being, and this is the sole way of attaining it" (Mill, 1991).

Furthermore, Mill contends that some other aspects of knowledge acquisition by way of human nature require total freedom of thought, nearly total freedom of expression, and a continuing presence of discussion. To explain, first, without passionate argument our beliefs turn into a dead dogma. If we do not face the objections our postulates remain prejudice-infested blindness and "but one superstition the more," even if ultimately true (Mill, 1991). What is more, the absence of a fight of opinions leaves the superstitious individuals ignorant not just about the grounds of their opinions, but at the same time deprives them of understanding the meaning of their judgements. While the second estimate appears harsh at first glance, the first is confirmed by empirical evidence presented above.

How is the fight of opinions to be carried out is an important and difficult question that cannot be handled in any detail in this paper. Let me just briefly point out two essential aspects of how an individual may find a semblance of his or her essence in the marketplace of ideas. For one thing, we have to approach the incompatible theories without preconceptions. We have to pretend as if philosophy would not have any impact upon our self-understanding and how we relate either with other

people or reality in general. Psychological facts promise hard work to accomplish this; however, it is inevitable for forming a picture of the human condition as clearly as is possible. Secondly, disinterested readings of conflicting theories do not mean that we should not step into the theory's shoes, as it were. On the contrary, every philosophy should be imagined as passionately as possible. It is the same attitude that Nietzsche deems necessary for his writings to become "'readable' – something for which one has almost to be a cow and in any case *not* a 'modern man': *rumination*" (Nietzsche, 1989).

By the same token, unshakable confidence in oneself cannot serve as a vehicle for dissemination of truth in the classroom. The philosophy teacher cannot assume the obligation to impart to his students the true human form by tutoring them on what is philosophically correct or misleading. If a teacher understands his job as moulding a previously undifferentiated possibility blob, then he commits several fallacies, even morally problematic acts. First, as a genuine fight of opinions is not allowed, he is making "an assumption of infallibility" (Mill, 1991), which is clearly false. What is more, such an "undertaking to decide /…/ question/s/ for others" (Mill, 1991) presents an undue coercion, which in Mill's opinion causes harm to those who are thus silenced. The analysis above shows that Mill is right. By implication, pedagogical theories like the one proposed by Medveš are inaccurate. It is impossible to benevolently immerse high school and university students into the so-called discursive thinking, understood as some sort of development of concepts, like Hegel's idealist or Marx's materialist dialectical unfolding of thought and history, which as a result would unify the dispersed manifold of human thought wanderings. Even if a philosopher, say Hegel or Marx, accurately explains the political woes of modern society, it has to be left to the student to find the truth free of emotionally intrusive and value-laden classes delivered by the teacher. As ideas willy-nilly exert physical force upon the individual and society, there is no other way but to give the youth freedom to make philosophical choices for themselves, unless we allow for the real possibility of totalitarian and authoritarian defenders of truth and justice coming to power. Indeed, liberty does not guarantee an acceptable result. Yet, "deciding for others" by necessity of human nature sooner or later brings about disastrous consequences. We must not forget that all catastrophes in human history came about in the name of the good and virtuous, only to be realised after a lot of pain that the obvious was not that obvious after all.

Let's finally have a brief look at the implications of the above findings for some pedagogical concepts. To begin with, in Europe for some time now the so-called Bologna process is setting the standards of higher education. It is a new paradigm, which is focusing on the results which students should achieve, that is, on their ability to carry out a task. This means that the content has to be adapted to this targeted outcome. In contrast, the traditional paradigm is focusing attention to the intentions of the teacher regarding the content of her teaching. The student then has to show mastery of the contents delivered by the teacher. The new paradigm is typically called "competence-based approach" (Kotnik, 2013, p. 12–13), as the effort of education is directed at development of the students' abilities.

In the view of many, the concept of competences is loaded with problems because it is "unreflected behaviourist understanding /…/ which is unbefitting and even dangerous" (Kotnik, 2013, p. 14). The critics of the competence-based approach to education oppose the idea of "trained behaviour." Instead, they propose that the individual would have "a role in the construction of meaning," thus learning would be "a creative process." They fear that "the standards of competence were driven by strong political forces which see this as a way of training workers for a globally competitive economy" (Kerka, quoted in Kotnik, 2013, p. 15). A further negative aspect of the competence-based approach is that it is "supported by the ideology of the new right" (Armstrong, quoted in Kotnik, 2013, p. 15).

A suggested alternative to the behaviourist concept of competence relevant for teaching philosophy is a "holistic idea" of education, which incorporates "three dimensions: informative-cognitive, formative-functional, and social-ethical-personal" (Medveš, 2010), thus supplanting "imitation and mechanical training" (Medveš, 2010) with the totality of human nature. According to this view, an essential element of education should be furthering the creation of the universal and unifying human form as mentioned above. Such a holistic and total approach should be adopted already in vocational education and certainly in character-building subjects.

In contrast, I think that the state of affairs in philosophy and the opposition between 'a trained behaviour' and 'the totality of human nature' is somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, it is true that philosophical ideas are fundamental to all human understanding. Therefore, they are character-building, unifying, and essential for being human. Yet, for reasons, which I have delineated, the role of the teacher in

the process of becoming human is rather limited. He has to be strictly neutral in relation to all philosophical theories, not only in terms of reasons that speak for or against a position, but also in the manner in which he delivers philosophical problems to the students. As I described, adopting a philosophical standpoint is a thoroughly emotional affair with far reaching consequences for the fact-based, that is, observationally underpinned and realistic thinking. As the teacher himself is fallible and the only efficient measure against false beliefs is a wide-ranging fight of opinions, he has to emulate the debate. This can happen only if the teacher presents opposing theories and views equally passionately, repeatedly giving an effective performance in favour of the discussed theory. Thus, he or she has to play the role of a talented actor in the theatre of ideas.

As a consequence, the educational goal of the teacher of philosophy is the formation of cognitive competences only. The students have to acquire knowledge of philosophical theories and the ability to carry out a comparative analysis. They should also evaluate the theories epistemologically and axiologically, but without an ostensive patronage of their teacher. It is not up to the latter to devise a concept of the human condition that would mould the individual into his proper form. The teacher must only make sure that the students get to know a variety of philosophical theories.

Finally, some thoughts on the assessment process are due. For sure, not following a specific conception of the human form does not exclude any element of Bloom's taxonomy. Thus, speaking about the cognitive domain, the teacher surely can and should assess the aptness of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation as constituents of an essay. What she cannot do, however, is assess whether an evaluation fits the background of some objective truth. Similar points hold true for the affective domain and to some extent even for the action-based domain. In a word, regarding the specific effects of a student's acquired cognitive competences the teacher has to stay silent.

To conclude, whatever professor Kotnik's writings seem to suggest regarding the question of competence-based approach in education as opposed to the goal of finding the one and only objective Truth, in his practice as a teacher of future philosophy teachers, his advice is in line with my understanding of the function of philosophy in the classroom: here is the problem, let the students find the answer.

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