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On the Possibility to Teach Doing Philosophy

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to clarify and evaluate the possibility of teaching doing philosophy. Using analysis as a main method, I argue that philosophizing, as an activity, has different levels, some of which are connected with specifically philosophical abilities. By analyzing John Rudisill's minimal conception of "doing philosophy," I demonstrate that many philosophical practices, such as the interpretation, analysis, and critical assessment of arguments and presuppositions, as well as the application of simple philosophical concepts, do not need a background of specifically philosophical abilities. However, other philosophical practices, including the application of sophisticated philosophical concepts and the development of novel approaches, need such a background. I show that specifically philosophical abilities are: (1) high ability of abstract thinking, (2) high motivation to achieve intellectual autonomy, and (3) capability to feel "philosophical astonishment." I also argue that there is a real possibility to teach doing philosophy, although students without specifically philosophical abilities will successfully learn only basic levels of philosophizing. Consequently, careful selection of prospective students for philosophy courses is important. Moreover, I claim that the possibility of teaching doing philosophy highly correlates with a teacher's expertise in the pedagogical approaches and techniques of philosophy teaching. The results of my research provide to philosophy teachers information to help them choose proper methodology and raise teaching effectiveness.

Keywords

Philosophy, education, pedagogy, doing philosophy, philosophy as activity, philosophy teaching, philosophy of education.

Introduction

Subjects going under the name of ‘philosophy’ are taught almost in all countries (Goucha, 2007, p. 106). Every year, many thousands of students learn philosophy. My research question in this article is if it is possible to teach these students doing philosophy, rather than only knowing philosophy. The answer to this question can provide to philosophy teachers information to help them choose proper methodologies and raise teaching effectiveness .

In this paper, I discuss several central findings. Firstly, philosophizing as an activity has different levels, some of which are connected with specifically philosophical abilities. Many philosophical practices, such as the interpretation, analysis, and critical assessment of arguments and presuppositions, as well as the application of simple philosophical concepts, do not need a background of specifically philosophical abilities. However, other philosophical practices, including the application of sophisticated philosophical concepts and the development of novel approaches, need such a background. Secondly, these specifically philosophical abilities include: (1) high ability of abstract thinking, (2) high motivation to achieve intellectual autonomy, and (3) capability to feel “philosophical astonishment.” Thirdly, there is a real possibility to teach doing philosophy; however, students without specifically philosophical abilities can successfully learn only basic levels of philosophizing. Consequently, it is important to carefully select prospective students for philosophy courses.

The results of my research are implicated in the pedagogical practice of teaching philosophy. They could help organize and optimize the teaching of philosophy.

Literature review

There are different positions on the issue of the possibility of teaching doing philosophy. Contemporary U.S. philosopher John Hick believes that philosophers are born, not made (Hick, 2010). His position has many predecessors, such as Friedrich Nietzsche, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. However, another modern researcher, John Rudisill, believes that it is possible to teach “doing philosophy” (Rudisill, 2011). As far as I know, there is no research on these two positions to clarify their correctness. I want to fill this gap with this article.

The Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this paper is to clarify and evaluate the possibility of teaching doing philosophy.

Discussion

In 2011, John Rudisill, Professor of Philosophy at the College of Wooster, published "The Transition From Studying Philosophy to Doing Philosophy." This paper triggered extensive discussion on the possibilities and tasks of teaching philosophy. Rudisill's research received recognition from colleagues. Professor Rudisill won the 2012 Lenssen Prize for the best paper regarding the teaching of philosophy from the American Association of Philosophy Teachers.

John Rudisill believes that knowledge of the history of philosophy and the mastery of a philosophical lexicon are not the only benefits of an education in philosophy. He emphasizes that students who study philosophy should gain

philosophical skills, not only philosophical knowledge. Students can be engaged in a sort of intellectual activity called “philosophy.”

These thoughts are not unusual for philosophy. For example, the course “Philosophy for Everyone” at the University of Edinburgh emphasizes that philosophy is an activity (Chrisman and Pritchard, 2014, p. 1). Moreover, Rudisill’s ideas are in accordance with beliefs of many famous philosophers. For instance, Martin Heidegger thought that the task of understanding the nature of philosophy is impossible without immersion into philosophy or without philosophizing. For instance, he writes: “When we ask, ‘What is Philosophy?’ then we are speaking *about* philosophy. By asking in this way we are obviously taking a stand above and, therefore, outside of philosophy. But the aim of our question is to enter *into* philosophy, to tarry in it, to ‘philosophize.’ The path of our discussion must, therefore, not only have a clear direction, but this direction must at the same time give us the guarantee that we are moving within philosophy and not outside of it and around it” (Heidegger, 1956, p. 21).

However, the idea of teaching students not only philosophy knowledge, but also philosophy activity, is not obvious for many philosophy teachers. Some say that it is impossible to produce new Kants, Aristotles, and Platoes from students. Some say that it is impossible to learn to be a philosopher.

This position has its famous theoreticians. For instance, the early 19th-century English poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge identifies the “philosophic organ.” He writes that this organ is completely lacking in “many a one among us” (Winterowd, 1998, p. 117). Friedrich Nietzsche thought that philosophers are born, not made (Nietzsche, 2002). Contemporary philosopher John Harwood Hick writes that “made philosophers” are not true philosophers (Hick, 2014, p. 124).

To decide which of these two positions is correct, I think it is necessary to analyze the term ‘philosophizing.’ I will do this through analyzing Rudisill’s ideas. There are four building blocks in Rudisill’s minimal conception of “doing philosophy” (Rudisill, 2011, p. 243). By using notion ‘philosophizing,’ he means the following types of a philosopher’s activity.

First are interpretation and analysis. Is it possible to succeed in teaching students to interpret and to analyze? I think that this is possible. These are philosophical techniques that any philosophy teacher can teach to students. Moreover, a philosophy teacher must do this. In philosophy, there are many good techniques of interpretation and analysis. For instance, Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics gives good techniques for philosophical interpretation; such analytic philosophers as Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein have also elaborated excellent techniques of philosophical analysis.

Even only reading philosophical texts can help students to learn the basics of philosophizing. David W. Concepcion, chair of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Ball State University, writes: "If a student is truly engaged in reading she will be evaluating and making arguments. If we show students how to read philosophy well we will increase learning and when learning is increased, student enjoyment and retention tend to rise as well" (Concepción, 2004).

The second building block of a philosopher's activity, according to John Rudisill, is the critical assessment of arguments, ideas, and presuppositions. Critical assessment is a philosophical technique; I do not see any problems with teaching this technique. It is not necessary to be born a philosophical genius to learn using critical assessment. A philosophy instructor can teach students to use Aristotle, Sextus Empiricus, Descartes, Voltaire, and other philosophers' efficient techniques of critical assessment for different types of arguments, ideas, and presuppositions.

Of course, a philosophy teacher has to provide students not only knowledge of different philosophical techniques, but also help them to gain experience in applying these techniques. One good way to do this is to write argumentative and critical papers: "writing assignments, by design, require students to go beyond merely describing others' claims and arguments towards articulating critical assessments of these claims and arguments and developing arguments of their own" (Rudisill, 2011). Another way to teach these philosophical techniques is to encourage students to comment on philosophical texts at seminars and conferences, speaking about the weaknesses or strengths of an author's position and elaborating an alternative

interpretation of the author's source material (Rudisill, 2011, p. 254). A good way to enhance the effectiveness of these pedagogical methods is to introduce controversial issues in discussion. Nel Noddings, an American philosopher known for her work in philosophy of education, together with Laurie Brooks, propose that philosophy teachers foster critical thinking through the exploration of such controversial issues as equality, religion, gender, justice, freedom, poverty, and so on: "The object is not necessarily to win a debate. Rather, it is to understand what is being said on all sides and, perhaps, to find a nucleus of agreement that will provide a starting point from which we can work together" (Noddings and Brooks, 2016, p. 1).

The third part of Rudisill's understanding of 'philosophizing' is the fluent application of philosophical concepts, distinctions, and methods to address a philosophical problem. Having more than 12 years of experience in teaching philosophy, I can say that this is a more difficult task than the previous ones. It is possible to teach the effective application of, for example, Kant's concepts from his "Critique of Pure Reason" only to those students who are well equipped with philosophical abilities. By this, I mean a necessary high level of abstract thinking. Of course, all students have some ability to think about principles and ideas that are not physically present. But not every student can demonstrate high results in this activity. Philosophy as an activity demands the strong performance of abstract thinking. My pedagogical experience informs me that there are not any problems for students applying the philosophical concepts of Diogenes the Cynic or Aristippus of Cyrene about the good life; however, sophisticated concepts, like Descartes' kinds of ideas or Kant's transcendental idealism, are very difficult to apply for most students.

The fourth building block of Rudisill's notion of 'philosophizing' consists of "creatively developing and pursuing, through the means of effective written and oral communication, a novel approach to any of a certain broad class of puzzling issues" (Rudisill, 2011, p. 243). Of course, philosophy is not only a history of famous dead philosophers' ideas. Philosophy is a living thing for people today. Students can take part in its creation. But, it is apparent to me that not all students can do this. Not all students can develop novel approaches. I think that the main problem in this area is

not a lack of creative thinking ability. Rather, many students do not have the motivation to create novel approaches and not all students have the need to be intellectually free. In his "Escape from Freedom," Erich Fromm explains that conformity is highly pervasive among people. He writes that using others' ideas is more convenient for many people than developing their own points of view (Fromm, 2013). In these conditions, I can address the development of novel approaches only as a goal of teaching philosophy; it cannot be a standard feature for all students who complete a philosophy course. Philosophy teachers can teach students techniques for developing novel approaches, but they cannot teach them to want such development.

Regarding the fourth building block of Rudisill's notion 'philosophizing,' it is productive to remember Aristotle's famous idea about the role of wondering in philosophizing: "For from wonder men, both now and at the first, began to philosophize, having felt astonishment originally at the things which were more obvious, indeed, amongst those that were doubtful; then, by degrees, in this way having advanced onwards, and, in process of time, having started difficulties about more important subjects" (Aristotle, 2013, p. 5). We can teach students to use the techniques of philosophers, but we cannot teach them to wonder. If students do not wonder, they cannot execute the level of philosophizing needed to develop novel approaches.

To sum up, I want to say that I do not see problems with agreeing entirely with Rudisill's ideas on the possibility of teaching students philosophizing by means of the interpretation, analysis, and critical assessment of arguments and presuppositions. Such skills do not require a special background, Coleridge's "philosophic organ," or Nietzsche's instinct. I have argued that successes in providing these activities are based on techniques. Everyone who can study in higher educational institutions can learn the techniques of effective interpretation, analysis, critical assessment of arguments, ideas, and presuppositions. These skills do not require any specific background.

I am ready to accept with reserve Rudisill's ideas that it is possible to teach students to apply philosophical concepts and to develop novel approaches to puzzling issues. However, I think that not all students can learn these philosophical activities.

To master these skills, a person does need a specific background. From my exploration, I found three components of this background, namely: (1) a high ability of abstract thinking, (2) a high motivation to achieve intellectual autonomy, and (3) a capability to feel "philosophical astonishment." But, I do not think that a person who already has these abilities does not need philosophical education. Such a person can strengthen these abilities during the process of learning philosophy by practicing them and learning the best techniques. Of course, Thales of Miletus was a born philosopher, but in the 21st century, after hundreds of prominent philosophers have lived and died, it is strange to provide Thales' style of philosophizing by avoiding using well-regarded philosophical techniques.

John Harwood Hick wrote the following: "Born philosophers usually deal with the big and important issues, whilst the ones who are made often deal in highly sophisticated trivialities. They can be incredibly clever, and yet contribute nothing to our understanding of the universe and our place in it" (Hick, 2014, p. 124). So, Hick thinks that "made philosophers" are not truly philosophers and that it is impossible to make true philosophers. But, I think this does not really contradict my ideas that it is possible to teach doing philosophy. I agree with John Hick that different people have different possibilities for doing philosophy. However, firstly, persons with weak philosophical abilities can be taught to do philosophy at some level; and, secondly, persons with high philosophical abilities can be taught professional techniques to do philosophy more effectively.

I think that a careful selection of prospective students for philosophy courses is important. It is necessary to check not only the basic knowledge of prospective students, but also some of their abilities and motivations, namely a high ability of abstract thinking, a high motivation to achieve intellectual autonomy, and a capability to feel astonishment at philosophical ideas. It can be useful to organize different groups of philosophy students based on a criterion of their background.

By having highly motivated students who also have a high ability of abstract thinking, a teacher can help them to effectively apply sophisticated philosophical concepts and to develop interesting novel approaches. There are a lot of pedagogical tools for doing this. For instance, John Rudisill provides such practices as scaffolding and guided discovery during Junior Seminar. Firstly, a teacher directs students' focus on a manageable task or narrowed range of tasks, puts into relief the critical features of the assigned tasks, and models ideal solutions to these tasks. Secondly, when students are doing their own research projects, they get pieces of advice from peers how to do it in the proper way. For this purpose, I also use such practices as thought experiments, brain storms, and group discussion of philosophical texts.

I want to discuss one difficulty that can arise in the process of teaching doing philosophy. Usually, we can follow the model of an apprenticeship in teaching skills. But this model has some specific challenges for philosophy. As I have shown early, only those students with motivation for intellectual autonomy can achieve successes in doing philosophy. Glenn Ross, a professor of Philosophy at Franklin and Marshall College, believes that neutrality is an important feature of teaching philosophy. He holds that "A philosophy teacher should not take it as a goal of the teaching of philosophy that students be converted to any particular philosophical doctrine, or that they be sustained in any of their preexisting opinions" (Ross, 1996, p. 245). A teacher of philosophy should not regard producing adherents of a particular philosophical school as his task. On the contrary, he should help his students to think critically about all positions. Descartes' ideas on doubting as the fundamental process of reasoning demonstrate the importance for a philosopher to think critically on every position. Philosophy students are gravitating to make their own philosophical decisions, so the model of an apprenticeship is specific to philosophy. A philosophy teacher should not impose his philosophical views on students. He must help them to create their own philosophical positions.

There are different ways to provide this neutrality. For instance, Eugene Marshall from Wellesley College proposes diversifying syllabi beyond the canonical set of philosophers and theories (Marshall, 2014). Elizabeth Schiltz from the College

of Wooster proposes actively using comparative philosophy material (Schiltz, 2014, p. 215). Christopher S. Gifford from the University of Bristol, Royal Institute of Philosophy, believes that the method of introducing issues via puzzles, paradoxes, problems, and conundrums develops individual students' independent, original, and creative philosophical thinking (Gifford, 2015, p. 193).

Moreover, I think that the dialogical nature of philosophy helps teachers to provide neutrality when teaching philosophy. Heidegger writes about this: "We philosophize when we get into conversation with philosophers. This is dialog. We speak with them about topics of their interest" (Heidegger, 1956, p. 67). In philosophy, every philosophical position, including a teacher's position, is only one side of a dialogue. A student learning philosophy is the other participant, with full rights to philosophize. I think that Socrates' maieutics can be a good sample for any philosophy teacher.

It is apparent that a strong pedagogical background is necessary for a philosophy teacher, if we want him or her to be able to teach doing philosophy. Unfortunately, this background is uncommon. David W. Concepción, Melinda Messineo, Sarah Wieten, and Catherine Homan explored the state of teacher training in philosophy graduate programs in the English-speaking world (2016) and argue the following: "A majority of philosophers (i) know little about best practices in teaching and learning, (ii) receive fewer than twenty hours of formal teacher training during graduate school, and (iii) believe they are well prepared for the teaching aspects of the professoriate" (Concepción, Messineo, Wieten, and Homan, 2016, p. 2).

I think that we can find much the same picture in non-English-speaking countries. This is a big problem and when I explore possibilities to teach doing philosophy, I must say that these possibilities also depend on the pedagogical expertise of a given philosophy teacher. There are many pedagogical approaches that could help a philosophy teacher effectively teach doing philosophy. For instance, intentional learning is a well-thought-out method (Cholbi, 2007). Still, a philosophy teacher must be aware of these approaches and be able to use them.

Conclusion

As I have shown, it is possible to teach doing philosophy, although it is impossible to teach all students to achieve the best results in doing philosophy. Only students with a good background, namely (1) a high ability of abstract thinking, (2) a high motivation to achieve intellectual autonomy, and (3) a capability to feel “philosophical astonishment,” are able to be taught doing philosophy at high levels.

I have analyzed Rudisill’s minimal conception of “doing philosophy” and pointed out two levels of philosophical activities in it. The first level includes such philosophical practices as the interpretation, analysis, and critical assessment of arguments and presuppositions and the application of simple philosophical concepts. To learn doing philosophy at this level, students do not need a background of specifically philosophical abilities. The second level includes such philosophical practices as the application of sophisticated philosophical concepts and the development of novel approaches to philosophical issues; these require a special philosophical background. Having this background enables students to learn doing philosophy at this second level.

As I have argued, the possibility of teaching doing philosophy is also highly correlated to a teacher’s expertise in pedagogical approaches and techniques of philosophy teaching.

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