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In this article we argue that a positively formulated theory of education ought to take into consideration empirically based knowledge. Theories of education are normative theories, because they are mainly focused on how the world ought to be: they present ideals, they prescribe preferred repertoires of actions, and they describe valued attitudes. However, using a recent example of an ideal of cosmopolitan education, we here reveal some ways in which prevalent theories of education quickly become remote and powerless if they rebuff empirically based knowledge about peoples' actual experiences and ways of being in the world.

**Keywords:** philosophy of education · empirical knowledge · educational ideals and realities

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# Reality is catching up with me

## *Empirical knowledge and philosophy of education*

EINAR SUNSDAL & TORILL STRAND

"Reality is catching up with me"  
Kanye West<sup>1</sup>

According to the moral philosopher Bernard Williams, contemporary moral theory is rather meaningless because it "bears little relation to the psychology of people's ethical lives" (Williams, 2003, p. 36). Instead of considering morals as something detached from other types of experiences and thus trusting that moral theory has positive authority, Williams argues for a familiarity with people's actual lives. Consequently, Williams' moral philosophical studies are based on information from history, culture, politics and psychology, which provides a productive interconnection between traditional philosophical methods and evidence and empirical data from natural and social sciences (Railton, 2004).

But do Williams' objections that moral theories fail to consider adequately people's actual experiences and behaviours also apply to present theories of education and citizenship? And if so, does it mean that present theories of education and citizenship are not socially robust? To answer these, we shall discuss questions about theories of education against empirical findings. In this discussion we use Sharon Todd's appeal for a

cosmopolitan thinking as an example as we ask: Do we, Nordic philosophers of education have anything to learn from empirical studies?

## Education in a New World Order

One ongoing theme within *Nordic Philosophy of Education* is *cosmopolitanism* (Bergström, 2010; Boman, 2007; Huggler, 2010; Hyldgaard, 2009; Kemp, 2004, 2005; Strand, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Todd, 2007, 2009, 2010). The background is how trans-national movements of people, ideas, knowledge and cultures during the last decade have challenged traditional Nordic ways of seeing and experiencing citizenship education. Briefly, the backdrop for various types of “cosmopolitanism” is a desire to make the world a better place. In other words, this strand of philosophy of education is born through a vision that all humanity is part of the same community. Accordingly, the intention with a cosmopolitan ethic is to establish communal norms for a new world order.

However, one difficult dilemma is the contrast between universalism and particularism, i.e., on the one hand the conflict between the expectations of a global support of universal values – say common human rights – and on the other hand the acknowledgement of the enormous variety of norms, values, traditions, world-views and ways of life that in fact characterizes a world affected by new patterns of migration and communication. This is only one of the many dilemmas cosmopolitan education must take into consideration. Sharon Todd (2007) takes this dilemma seriously when she discusses the ideals of justice related to cosmopolitan ethics.

The problem is “the difficulty of *judging what is just* in the context of an increasingly diverse public” (Todd, 2007, p. 27; italics in original). Her argument is that:

there is a world of difference between educating for cosmopolitanism, which entails a faith in principles, and “thinking cosmopolitan”, which entails an aspiration for justice for my neighbours. (Todd, 2007, p. 27).

Todd discusses how educators must or should think about justice within the present day classrooms, which are marked more by “radical diversities than unitary similarities”. Following Arendt and Levinas, Todd (2007, p. 34) maintains that:

Justice, although an ideal, has no content. It cannot tell us *what* to decide, it can merely inform us that, through a reminder of the initial obligation we have for the other, we merely must decide.

Based on the assumption that justice is an empty ideal, she argues that “thinking” is “central to judgment”, not only based on what thinking does (criticize, challenge, reflect), but also because thinking “has a fundamentally cosmopolitan quality” meaning that thinking is generated by and focused on and acknowledges the differences of others:

Thinking is therefore not simply a flight into solitude, but a relation across radical difference where my thinking is enabled by the provocation of others. This means that although thinking is a distinct form of conversation, it nonetheless is occasioned by the conscious recognition of exteriority and the freedom of others. Thus, both Arendt and Levinas are right in asserting that rules or standards (morality, quite simply) are not the stuff of judgment; rather it is the unique thinker who is responsible for the judgments she makes. (Todd, 2007, p. 35)

Thus, the educator – “the unique thinker who is responsible for the judgments she makes” – is urged to take responsibility for her judgments. But these judgments can neither be based on ethical principles, nor on

given moral judgments nor the professional role as teacher. Rather, they must arise from the thinking that emerges from the confrontation with the others' difference and which takes into consideration the uniqueness of the unique other. Only in this manner can an educator judge what may seem just when facing children and youngsters whose life experiences are radically different from their own. As such, Todd's article may be read as an educational philosophical appeal for justice in a classroom marked by *radical diversities*.

### The problem of judging what is just

Todd's notion of judgment is twofold. Our judgments are "statements of our prioritised responsibilities and of the results of our weighing the elements of a situation in order to reach a verdict" (Todd, 2007, p. 28). At the same time, the judgment cannot be passed through a reference to a rule or a principle. On the contrary, it is connected to particular situations that arise there and then and which require a decision: "we merely must decide" (Todd, 2007, p. 34). In other words, such a decision is not "determinable in terms of knowledge," as Jacques Derrida (2002, p. 229) says. The decision cannot simply be the effect, conclusion or the explanation of one type of knowledge to which it can refer. If the decision is taken beforehand, for example by referring to a rule or a standard for the profession, it is in principle not a decision anymore. It is a reference to something or other. Consequently, one does not take responsibility for one's own judgment.

Todd's suggestion is to think of "judgments as *moments that fix thinking in time*, that implicate teachers in there and now of their work" (Todd, 2007, p. 35). Within such a moment, a deliberate judgment coincides

with its ignorant act of making a decision. Thus, the teachers themselves have to take responsibility for their own judgment. To make a decision is to be personally committed to something. In other words, to teachers it is not sufficient to refer to the rules for the performance of their profession as the basis of their judgment.

Todd further points out that it is difficult, not to say impossible, when a judgment exceeds the rules and the common procedures "it is clear that teachers must perform as teachers in ways that cannot do justice to others" (Todd, 2007, p. 35). Moreover, in a teaching situation, there is not always room for thinking: "Given the kind of work teachers do, there is often not a lot of time for thinking and so *we need to reflect on how we can propose a thoughtful orientation to our judgments.*" (Todd, 2007, p. 35, our italics) She underlines that it is particularly important not to forget the question of justice when we attempt to understand how we pass our judgments.

In order to reflect upon how people (in this case, teachers) can give direction to or guide their judgments, it can be both useful and interesting to explore the ways in which they actually pass their judgments when it comes to questions of justice. We would like to elucidate this through empirical studies of norms. Although Todd rejects that rules and procedures are "the stuff of judgment", this does not eliminate the fact that part of her problem may be elucidated through studies of norms. Primary considerations are how we make deliberations to arrive at a judgment, and the belief that we actually reflectively can orientate this judgment in a more or less contemplative manner.

### Justice

With support from empirically founded knowledge, the philosopher Christina Bic-

chieri (2006, 2010) asks the questions: Is justice a social or personal norm? How does justice arise? And what importance does it have for the way in which a norm is applied? Such an approach to ethical problems “insists that the relation between moral inquiry and some new empirical discovery remain an open question” (Appiah, 2008, p. 185). In order to be able to empirically validate the degree to which norms are followed, Bicchieri (2006, 2010; Bicchieri & Chavez, 2010; Bicchieri & Xiao, 2009) uses a definition of norms that is based on preferences and expectations.

In other words, a norm about justice would be present only in lieu of my and others’ expectations of justice. If justice is a personal norm, I shall abide by this norm independently from others’ expectations. If justice is a social norm, I abide by the norm in accordance with that which I conceive as others’ expectations. Social norms become particularly applicable in situations where there are innate conflicts between individual and collective interests, for example everyday situations in the multicultural classroom. As such, it becomes impossible to conceive of justice as an empty ideal, since the very prerequisite for a norm of justice to exist is that it is given content as soon as the people involved “believe it exists and know the class of situations to which the norm pertains” (Bicchieri & Chavez, 2010, p. 161).

Bicchieri and her colleagues have studied norm-regulated behaviour through several empirical studies. A framework of game theory has given the possibility to initiate various types of “social games” and to manipulate the premises of the games. Bicchieri and Chavez (2010) demonstrate that people’s thinking about justice and their actions based on such a norm is generated by their view of what they ought to do in a given situation. A social norm of justice may, however, be perceived differently, meaning that a social ex-

pectation of justice can be interpreted differently and therefore be given different content. When the informants were offered several choices, Bicchieri and Chavez (2010) saw a clear tendency for people to choose the interpretation closest to their own interests.

A norm of justice is therefore not based on that which we perceive as others’ expectations. Others’ expectations are often interpreted in view of their own preferences. This rebukes Todd’s (2007, p. 35) claim that moral thinking “is occasioned by the conscious recognition of the exteriority and the freedom of others”. In addition, Bicchieri and Chavez (2010) found a slight tendency to dilute the norms. Particularly in situations with clear expectations of just thinking and action, but in which breach of the norm was not sanctioned. Social norms will therefore weaken if it makes no difference whether the norms are followed or not.

If justice is a personal norm, we assume that the norm will give the person “an independent reason to follow it, that is, a reason that is independent of one’s expectations of others’ compliance” (Bicchieri, 2010, p. 299). This means that a personal norm is less affected by the social situation. Nevertheless, a person with a personal orientation towards justice will not be unaffected by others’, for there are situations in which a personal motive to act in a particular way is overshadowed by other, stronger, motives. This can happen when the individual is confronted by a conflict of norms, for example, if I have a personal norm of justice such as equal sharing, while the social interactions in my culture are steered by a social norm of reciprocity. In other words, it is a tendency that a personal norm of justice may overshadow a more selfless motive, either when most people are acting unjustly, or when the majority do not share the view that one should act justly (Bicchieri & Chavez, 2010; Bicchieri

& Xiao, 2009). This means that it may be difficult to establish a sharp line between personal and social norms, but also because moral philosophy until recently has overestimated the importance of personal norms and correspondingly underestimated the importance of the social. For it is not necessarily true that morality starts and ends within the person: “the unique thinker who is responsible for the judgments she makes” (Todd, 2007, p. 35). But how does just thinking emerge?

### How does just thinking emerge?

Bicchieri and colleagues base their empirical studies on an assumption that social norms are not something “out there.” On the contrary, social norms are integrated in the person, not as cognitive structures, but rather as a type of “scripts” for thinking and acting. Such scripts:

describe a stylized, stereotyped sequence of actions and defines actors and roles. Our scripts allow us to make inferences about unobservable variables, predict behaviour, make causal attributions, and modulate emotional reactions. Scripts are a source of projectable regularities as well as the legitimacy of our expectations. (Bicchieri, 2010, p. 305).

The fact that social norms are integrated in the script mean, among other things, that such scripts decide which expectations are most appropriate or which responses are most applicable in different types of situations. But this also means that the social context can be crucial, since what we see as justice cannot be detached from how we interpret that specific situation. Bicchieri’s studies can therefore support Todd’s (2007) rejection of a rule-based ethic: There is not just one type of justice that applies “across a wide variety of strategic contexts” (Bicchieri,

2010, p. 308). On the contrary, social expectation of “justice” carries a potential to activate completely different scripts, depending on the signs embedded within the situation itself. This is why our ethical thinking and actions are so specifically tuned in and finely adjusted to the social expectations embedded in that particular situation that triggers our response.

But since a norm of justice is ensued, maintained and given content as soon as the people involved “*believe* it exists and know the class of situations to which the norm pertains” (Bicchieri & Chavez, 2010, p. 161; italics in original), it is pertinent to ask how we manage to read social situations, and thus form a belief that a norm exists. To what degree does a person perceive that there exists a social expectation of just thinking and acting? The question is important, because Bicchieri (2010) maintains to have observed a general tendency that as soon as people perceive that there exist social norms, they tend to follow them. Nevertheless, she calls for “psychological realism”, since different individuals have varying degrees of sensitivity when it comes to perceiving social norms.

People also have different levels of compliance when faced with a decision to follow a norm as soon as they realize that it exists. It is, nevertheless, a paradox that this type of sensitivity for social expectations is strengthened when the person is confronted with a social dilemma, because it is precisely in such situations the collective aspirations and expectations guide the person’s attempts to interpret the social script. In other words, Bicchieri starts and ends in the social: norms occur, are maintained, justified and followed by virtue of social preferences and expectations.

Norms are the language a society speaks, the embodiment of its values and collective desires, the secure guide in the uncertain land we all traverse,

the common practices that hold human groups together. (Bicchieri, 2006, p. ix).

### Can we trust WEIRD studies?

The above example shows how a traditional and normative philosophy of education ought to be balanced against empirically generated knowledge. However, this by no means implies that we immediately have to regard all empirically generated knowledge as valid. How much can we rely on Bicchieri's (**which?**) studies? Are the studies trustworthy? Are the results valid? If so, for whom and in which situations?

In other words, to what degree can empirical studies that are based on Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) informants be considered as reliable? Motivated by such a question Heinrich, Heine and Norenzayan (2010) went through all the publications from six different psychological disciplines published in the most distinguished scientific journals within the period 2003–2007. They found that as many as 96% of the informants in all these studies represented only 12% of the world's population. But is WEIRD peoples' psychological repertoire universal? The question is important, in particular when evaluating the reliability of Todd's outlook and the validity of Bicchieri's (**which?**) studies.

Several acknowledged studies, based on game theory and carried out by Fehr and Gächter (2002) and Gächter, Renner and Sefton (2008) confirm Bicchieri's findings: As soon as the participants realized that there was a likelihood that anti-social behaviour would be sanctioned, their motivation to cooperate, and as a result also the prospect of achieving a mutual goal, changed drastically. These studies were carried out among students at the University of Zürich, which may be said to be a rather homogeneous population.

But when re-testing the studies, it appeared to be difficult to find the same tendency in other western, but more heterogeneous populations (Herrmann, Thöni & Gächter, 2008). The likelihood of sanctions against anti-social behaviour did not generate increased cooperation in these heterogeneous populations at all. On the contrary, the researchers found clear tendencies towards anti-social behaviour: Here, the participants sanctioned individuals who were "overly" socially oriented, meaning those who were more cooperative than those who sanctioned them.

It is difficult to know whether these findings can have immediate validity for the multicultural classroom. But a large number of empirical studies show how westerners have a stronger tendency towards more autonomous self-perception than other populations. A review carried out by Heine (2008) refers to several comparative studies that points out how people from western populations have a stronger tendency to describe themselves from internal psychological characteristics, such as personality traits and attitudes, than people from non-western populations, who have a stronger tendency to describe themselves through social roles and characteristics. Moreover, a major study carried out through 17 different countries shows that non-western informants have a stronger tendency towards conformity (Bond & Smith, 1996).

In addition, Heinrich, Heine and Norenzayan (2010) point out – through a comprehensive review of big, comparative, psychological studies – the contrasts between, for example, a characteristic western and non-western world view. A western way of thinking focuses more on the object than the area, it tends to abstract more, to place behaviour in a decontextualized framework, and relies more often on rules abstracted from similar situations when things are to be

recognized and categorized. This means that various types of population will most likely apply completely different, if not contrasting, social scripts to interpret the very same social situation.

It is therefore tempting to ask how valid an approach to norm-regulated behaviour based on social game theory can be in a changing world. Because one prerequisite for the order of the game is that the participants are able to interpret and thus have the possibility to conform to the rules of the game. The participants do not necessarily need to know the game or its rules. But a vital precondition is that all participants can use elements from their large repertoire of social scripts in a tentative interpretation of the game and its rules.

### **Does philosophy of education have anything to learn from empirical studies?**

In this article, we have used knowledge from empirical studies to elucidate discussions about cosmopolitan educational ideals within philosophy of education. Our intention was to offer an example on how to adopt knowledge generated through various empirical studies on norm-regulated behaviour and self-perception. Furthermore, we aim to show how this knowledge may invite a reconsideration of different aspects of the proposed educational project. Empirically generated knowledge thus allows us to make some assessments of philosophical assumptions and allegations that we would have been unable to make if we had not explored the empirical findings.

The empirical data allow us to question how plausible the educational prescriptions appear, given the knowledge we have. Expectations and assumptions within educational theory meet some restrictions that they need to answer, and possibly “give way”,

when confronted with the facts the sciences tell us about the world and ourselves. Without that which John Dewey (1884) described as an Aladdin’s lamp to make visible the educational values we can imagine intellectually, not all educational projects make sense. Or as Appiah (2008, p. 189) writes: “Since we’re human beings, there are only certain values that we can intelligibly pursue.”

To put it simply, the task of empirical knowledge in relation to the philosophical studies of education may be divided into two corresponding groups, one negative and one positive. When used negatively, empirical knowledge may have a “restrictive function”. This function is demonstrated in the type of epistemic humility suggested above. When used positively, empirical knowledge may have “the function of enlightenment”, which means that the scope of knowledge is expanded. This function is, for example, demonstrated when we acquire new ideas, ask new questions, add depths of explanation, or generate new theory. In addition, empirical awareness will increase the social significance and relevance of philosophy of education. Also, the discipline will be more relevant to and come closer to other educational disciplines, such as psychology and didactics.<sup>2</sup>

In a discussion on the nature and task of philosophy of education, Peter Kemp (2005) has pointed out the significance of precisely this viewpoint: Philosophy of education must reflect on and consider the empirical sub-disciplines in relation to the objectives of the field of education. Kemp points to the fact that the philosophical studies of education are not limited to specific objects of study or specific methods for studying them. Philosophy of education is not, in the same way as other sub-disciplines of education, limited by a well-defined subject matter or method. On the contrary, philosophical studies of education may take knowledge gener-

ated within external fields of knowledge as its starting point, while exploring this knowledge in relation to knowledge from other areas and concurrently having an eye to "the existing human being" (Kemp, 2005, p. 180).

This is always a potential problem, since knowledge and theories from the different fields are not necessarily in agreement about what is relevant and in what ways and in which settings various aspects are relevant. In other words, different fields of knowledge and philosophical traditions do not speak the same language. This may lead to an uncompromising confrontation between seemingly incommensurable discourses. Examples are Bridges and Smith (2006) and Ruitenbergs' (2009) perception of empirical studies as a threat to philosophy of education: this to them is particularly true of the possibility of philosophy of education to elucidate and question educational projects with other means, such as "case studies, deconstructive approaches and discourse analysis" (Bridges & Smith, 2006, p. 132).

In line with Kemps' methodological perspective, however, we understand the mission of philosophy of education – among other things – to be a form of meta-interpretation. Philosophy of education must try to understand seemingly incommensurable discourses by making them commensurable. W.V.O. Quine (1960) has argued that any attempt to understand another discourse is an attempt to crack a code. Recognizing the failure in communication between opposing discourses, the challenge is to crack the code so as to be able to translate between discourses in such a way that their misunderstanding does not continue.

Following Quine (1960), we can thus maintain that in this article two meta-philosophical positions have been confronted with each other, and that we have acted as the interpreters. This means that we see these positions as complementary and not as

adversaries aiming at annihilating one another. Despite the fact that our empirical material does not speak the same language as Sharon Todd (e.g. ??????), or the philosophers she depends on in her attempts to solve a particular problem concerning the likelihood of a cosmopolitan ethic, it appears to be productive to work.

Empirical studies can contribute to the philosophical discourse of education without threatening it. On the contrary, empirical data are often "directly relevant to philosophical issues" (Metzinger, 2009, p. 2). This way of seeing the role of empirical studies is evident within a number of branches of contemporary philosophy: We can for example observe how philosophy of consciousness acquires information from psychology and cognitive science (Gallagher, 2005), social philosophy from biology and linguistics (Searle, 2010), and how moral philosophy borrows established insights from ethnology and neuroscience (Nussbaum, 2001). Such an approach is an invitation to transcend the traditional ontological and epistemological orientation of human sciences by also taking into consideration a posteriori knowledge. In this way, we can return to the educational phenomenon we wish to explore – let us say education in a new world order – with that which Martha Nussbaum calls "a sense of new illumination" (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 11).

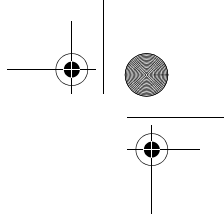
## Notes

- 1 In Kanye West's album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (Roc-A-Fella/Universal, 2010).
- 2 Regarding the relation between philosophy of education and other disciplines of education, the restriction and enlightenment functions are reciprocal. Restriction and enlightenment go both ways and are mutual, at least to the point where the allegations of the philosophy gets into a deep conflict with what science tells us about ourselves.



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