

# The Concept of Philosophical Education

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## 1. Introduction

There is something called “metaphilosophy,” and there certainly is philosophy of education, but there is not much *philosophy* about the educational significance of philosophy. One symptom thereof is the fate of the term “philosophical education.” Whereas corresponding concepts like aesthetic education and religious education are ordinary, established, and surrounded by discourses at various levels of abstraction, the philosophical version seems quite uncommon, mostly used to refer to an academic schooling in philosophy. As a simple search in Google or philosophy encyclopaedias will show, aesthetic education appears to be a more prominent theme *in philosophy* than philosophical education. Why that is so is itself a question worthy of investigation, but it is not the one to be pursued here. Rather, if we were to attempt a rediscovery of the concept of philosophical education as a topic for philosophy, how should we approach it? That is the question to be considered now.

“Philosophical education” is here to be taken in a wide sense. By “philosophy,” I do not mean only the academic discipline but a kind of reflection that every human being may sometimes, though perhaps not often, be engaged in. And by “education,” I do not mean only the one given in schools but a kind of growth or formation, usually with regard to knowledge or understanding. Consequently, the concept of philosophical education applies to the kind of growth or formation that philosophical reflection might, should, or will bring about. Of course, this does not say much on its own. What more it might mean is up to the rest of this essay to explore.

In a minimal sense, to investigate into the concept of philosophical education is to investigate into the educational significance of philosophy. Yet that formulation could be understood in different ways, depending on whether we understand “significance” as referring to the *effects* of doing philosophy or to the meaning *of* or *in* the process itself. Particular accounts of philosophical education might concentrate either on (educative) *consequences* of philosophizing or on (educative) processes *in* philosophizing. For convenience, we might refer to the first kind as *external* accounts, as they refer to effects extricable from philosophy, that is, to things that might be brought about by other means than philosophy. And we might refer to the second kind as *internal* accounts, as they refer to aspects inextricable from philosophy, that is, to things that cannot be realized by any other means than philosophy.

External and internal accounts differ in how they relate to the question of what philosophy *is*. An external account takes for granted a certain conception of philosophy and attempts to determine the empirical consequences of doing it. In an internal account, however, a conception of philosophical education is seen as internally related to a conception of the *nature* of philosophy so that a certain activity will not *count as* philosophy (in the preferred sense) if it does not impart that kind of education.

I think it is fair to say that when we now attempt a justification of philosophy as an educational force, we tend to think of it externally: we refer to relations between the skills exercised in doing philosophy and the (positive) consequences of exercising them, say, an increase in critical thinking. However, by thus regarding the value of philosophy instrumentally, one is left to wonder whether another activity might do just as well, such as any kind of rational discussion, which leaves us in the dark as to what the intrinsic point and

value of philosophical reflection might be. If we discovered that philosophy tends to make people fatter, loftier, or happier, would that mean that any of those effects were connected to the nature of philosophy? And would there not be more efficient ways of making people fatter, loftier, or happier? The same question might be asked regarding an oft-cited skill like critical thinking.

An internal account of philosophical education, on the other hand, does not set out to discover empirical consequences of doing a fairly well-known and well-defined activity called “philosophy.” Rather, in the internal mode a conception of the nature of philosophy and a conception of the education it imparts are to be developed *together*, the nature of both are put in question simultaneously. And since any empirical investigation must presuppose some idea of the nature of *what* it is investigating, an internal conception may be used as a basis from which to criticize an external. An internal conception may respond to a discovery of an empirical connection between some set of activities called “philosophy” and the development of certain skills by saying, “But that is not (really) philosophy” or “That is not what philosophy is (really) about.”

Although I distinguished above between philosophical education and philosophical schooling, the two are obviously connected. Some general conception of philosophical education is often used as a touchstone by which to evaluate what is going on in schools or universities, and which mode of conception we reason from, external or internal, will influence the form of criticism we will deliver. If we reason from an external conception, the criticism levelled at an institutional education will be that it does not have the desired consequences. If we reason from an internal conception, the criticism will be that it is not (truly) philosophy or not (really) a philosophical education that is going on. As I see it, though, this “reasoning from an

internal conception” is for the most part implicit, and that is why there is a need for the internal concept of philosophical education to be brought out. Therefore, I shall now leave external accounts behind and instead concentrate on conceptions where views on the nature of philosophy and on the nature of the education it imparts are worked out *together*.

So far, this is all very abstract, little more than a frame without a picture in it. To make up for that, I shall now delve into three archetypical pictures of philosophical education. As my issue is not exegetical, though, I will try to avoid being caught up in a debate with the commentary literature. Rather, I shall use Plato’s allegory of the cave, Descartes’ life of doubt, and Kant’s criticism of metaphysics as defining examples of the concept of philosophical education. Though I shall go somewhat detailed into the specifics of these three examples, they are intended as ideal-typical conceptions, not nuanced interpretations. Moreover I will almost exclusively concern myself with three texts: Book VII of *The Republic*, *Discourse on Method*, and the prefaces to *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Certainly, this is going over familiar ground, yet I hope to describe these examples in a way that will let their character as conceptions of philosophical education show forth. They will then give us a basis from which to outline the essential features of the concept of philosophical education (as will be explained, I am here employing a distinction between concept and conception).

## **2. Three conceptions of philosophical education**

### **a. Plato**

The allegory of the cave is put forward as a picture of education, more specifically, of *philosophical* education. At times, Plato even seems to identify philosophy with education, because he defines philosophy as the love of learning and education as the turning of the soul

towards eternal forms.<sup>i</sup> In other words, he defines genuine philosophy, as opposed to mere sophistry, as a kind of education, and he defines genuine education, as opposed to mere gathering of knowledge (in our sense of knowledge), as a kind of philosophy. Regrettably or not, that intimate connection between philosophy and education was broken somewhere along the line towards us. Nevertheless, the allegory of the cave has remained an archetypal image of philosophical education. And the challenge it puts forward is frightening.

The prisoners of the cave are like us. The implication is that we are not educated, that we are still in the dark, that we are not philosophers – yet. The journey out of the cave and up into the light is the philosophical education. Writing and speaking about Plato, one often divides this complex process into two stages, corresponding to the uneducated and the educated state of mind. However, the allegory describes at least five different stages, each unskippable: what seems at first only a station *en route* is perhaps just where the crucial change occurs.

Inside the cave that is our world, we see only shadows and hear only echoes. Everything is ephemeral, constantly shifting and flickering, impossible to pin down. Instability and insubstantiality make genuine knowledge unattainable. We are inmates in a world of intermediates, where nothing is fixed, and everything is ambiguous. Each object is like a bat or a eunuch; each property is like “big” or “heavy”.<sup>ii</sup> All we can say about anything is that it seems like this from here and like that from there, or like this compared to that and like that compared to this. Hence, the only way to believe oneself to have knowledge is to be simple-minded; those sophisticated enough to see the relativity of everything, but still not wise enough to turn their faces towards the light, can only despair, or delight, in the lack of *real* knowledge.

The attitude responsible for this condition is that our souls are turned towards *particulars*. We are practical people, concerned with whether this or that action is just, this or that state is good, or this or that thing beautiful. We “wander among the many things that vary in every sort of way” and are unable “to grasp what is always the same in all respects.”<sup>iii</sup>

The journey out of the cave, the philosophical education, is instigated in a mysterious moment in which “someone” compels one to stand up and walk towards the light. Who this someone is and what his method of liberation is we are not told. Yet in whatever strange way the philosophical spirit is ignited, it is soon threatened by extinction. Coming out of the cave and into the open, the future philosopher is at first pained and dazzled by the light; feeling not at home in this world of forms where he cannot see clearly, he longs back to his cave. When he returns to the dark, he is perhaps left with a vague sense that the objects of the ordinary world are not all there is; nevertheless, he is still inclined to see the particulars as truer, more stable, and more substantial than the hazy and elusive forms he has glimpsed with squinting eyes out in the open. In this state there is a danger that he might become what Socrates calls a *misologue*.<sup>iv</sup>

When a man without the requisite “skill in human affairs” repeatedly places his trust in someone who later proves to be untrustworthy, then he might become, especially if betrayed by people he held dear, a misanthrope, feeling that nobody can be trusted, perhaps even hating others and believing that “no one is sound in any way at all”.<sup>v</sup> Analogously, when a man on his way into philosophy takes part in “dialectics” without the requisite “skill in arguments” and repeatedly places his trust in arguments that later proves to be unsound, then he might become, especially if betrayed by arguments he held dear, a misologue, feeling that “there is no soundness or reliability in any object or in any argument” and “that all that exists simply

fluctuates up and down”.<sup>vi</sup> Thus the misologue may “spend the rest of his life hating and reviling reasonable discussion.”<sup>vii</sup> Whereas the “philodoxer” is only concerned with particulars and practicalities and thus simply oblivious to philosophy, the misologue has been attracted to philosophy but ended up disillusioned by it. Misology is, as it were, the evil twin of philosophy, the risk inherent in any philosophical education, perhaps something each philosopher will always keep an element of inside. So it is that perhaps just those who have tasted philosophy but become disappointed by it, because betrayed by it, becomes its most ardent revilers.

To avoid the fate of misology, the novice needs help. “Someone” must drag him out of the cave, and hold him by force until his eyes have adjusted to the light of pure reason. Slowly attuning himself to the forms, he will at first only be able to see them at night, in the light of the moon and the stars. The objects of philosophy now seem substantial only when enveloped in a hazy atmosphere. After sunset, when ordinary objects are in the dark, one sees clearly what justice, goodness, and beauty themselves are, but after sunrise the forms pale alongside ordinary objects and seem elusive compared to them. So at this stage the student will be dragged between philosophy and the ordinary world, now inclined to treat the forms as shadows and now as solid, now inclined to treat ordinary things as solid and now as shadows.

After this period of adjustment, the student reaches the apex of his philosophical education. He can now look directly at the sun. The true natures of things stand as clearly in front of him as concrete objects did in the past. Justice itself now “[lights] up as if we were rubbing fire-sticks together”.<sup>viii</sup> He has now become a philosopher. He is now on the other side of the “practical people,” the “lovers of sights,” the majority and their opinions. Where others see the many in the one, he sees the one in the many; where others see a manifold of eternally

changing objects, he sees the same eternal forms recurring. That is the difference between the philosopher and the philodoxer.

This, however, is not the state of the true philosopher; this cannot be the end of his education. In order to reach the end, the philosopher will once again have to be led. In the same way as he was once compelled to leave the cave, he must now be compelled to go back down. His eyes must adjust to the dark, as they once had to adjust to the light, and then, knowing what the good, the just, and the beautiful itself are, he will also be better equipped to judge which acts, people, and states are good, just, and beautiful.

Although Plato, perhaps unlike the historical Socrates, seems have held that the philosopher possesses some special (metaphysical) knowledge, the most prominent aspect of the philosophical education he describes is *not* the acquisition of some body of knowledge in our sense of “knowledge.” Above all, a philosophical education consists of a change in *attitude* (a conversion) and of *preparations* for philosophy (the summoners).

Plato’s philosophical education, the ascent out of the cave and the descent back into it, is not a matter of “putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes.”<sup>ix</sup> It does not seek the acquisition of anything new but strives for a form of knowledge that is always already present in the soul. It is a *conversion*, a turning of the soul towards something we have forgotten; it takes “for granted that sight is there but that it isn’t turned the right way or looking where it ought to look.”<sup>x</sup> The conversion lies in becoming concerned with universals rather than particulars, in becoming determined by reason rather than bodily

desires, and in starting to see everything in light of the good. Thus, a genuine philosophical education transforms the whole person – like a rebirth.

It is, though, a *slow* conversion, taking years of adjustment. True, there are indications in Plato of mysterious moments when the philosophical spirit is heightened and the soul is turning. It is with regard to such moments that Plato typically introduces the “someone” that compels the becoming philosopher. Nonetheless, the largest part of any philosophical education consists of *preparations* - philosophy cannot be faced ahead of time. The preparations include not only the physical training and the study of music and poetry that all guardians must go through, including the future philosophers. More pertinently, they include certain activities that are to prepare the soul for the timeless forms of philosophy: the summoners.<sup>xi</sup> They include, as one would expect of Plato, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, but even sense-impressions may summon one to philosophy. If things “strike the relevant sense at the same time as their opposites,” for instance, something both big and small, depending upon what it is compared to, then the soul would “be puzzled, would look for an answer, would stir up its understanding, and would ask what the one itself is.”<sup>xii</sup> As this is exactly the kind of ambivalence that all sense objects are characterized by, according to Plato, one might say that any object can summon one to philosophy, if it puzzles us in the relevant manner.

Even though it has its peculiar features, the Platonic picture of philosophical education has of course had an immeasurable influence throughout the ages. For some, its core elements have almost defined philosophy, and what philosophy is all about. The ideal-typical Platonic conception can be recognized wherever philosophical education is seen as a spiritual journey towards wisdom, an exaltation of the soul that raises it above not only the ordinary world but

also above the mere empirical and scientific; wherever it is seen as a conversion where the eyes turn towards universals rather than particulars; and wherever its aim is seen as an insight into timeless essences, forms, concepts, ideas, or necessities; wherever the education also consists in coming to live a philosophical life, contemplating the special philosophical truths (or Truths) that the philosopher has a unique knowledge of. Perhaps even parts of the analytic philosophy of the 20th century were closer to this Platonic conception than it might seem at first.

## **b. Descartes**

My second illustration of the concept of philosophical education is found in Descartes' *Discourse on Method*. Unlike Plato's allegory, Descartes' tale is a literal description of his own philosophical education. Yet its structure lends it an archetypal physiognomy, which facilitates its application to others. "I took the liberty of judging all others by myself," he writes.<sup>xiii</sup> In other words, he considers the trajectory of his own life *exemplary*, perhaps not in its details but in the main structure. That structure consists of two cycles, each with three stages: tradition, travelling, and meditation. These stages describe three different territories in which he searches for firm ground. The first moves back to the cultural heritage, the second moves out to the world, and the third moves inwards, towards the self.

The story starts with the image of a boy with an avid interest in intellectual matters, familiar with letters and with a good education "at one of the most famous schools in Europe."<sup>xiv</sup> Soon, though, a fateful expectation is induced in him by his teachers: he is "led to believe" that with the help of learning and letters one can acquire "clear and positive knowledge."<sup>xv</sup> Yet towards the end of his study, the expectation is still far from fulfilled: "I was assailed by so many doubts and errors that the only profit I appeared to have drawn from trying to

become educated, was progressively to have discovered my ignorance.<sup>xvi</sup> The writings of the “ancient pagans”, indeed, philosophy in general, are best compared “to the most proud and magnificent palaces built on nothing but sand and mud.”<sup>xvii</sup> And insofar as other sciences are built on principles of philosophy, then to that degree are they built on infirm foundations.

Whereas the first stage of the first cycle of his philosophical education comprises reading, the second comprises travelling. He abandons the study of letters and goes out to seek acquaintance with the world, spending the rest of his youth “seeing courts and armies, mixing with people of different humours and ranks, and in gathering a varied experience,” all the while attending to his underlying project: the improvement of his reason.<sup>xviii</sup> He hopes to find settled convictions in the practical world, where consequences will punish one if one’s judgements are false, in contradistinction to the academic world where it is of no consequence whether one believes one thing or its opposite. But no, practical men are just as much in disagreement as philosophers are.

So Descartes resolves to make *himself* an object of study. This is the third stage of the first cycle of his education. Yet despite his otherwise almost inhuman determination and dedication, the stage is entered only by accident. On an army mission in Germany, winter suddenly sets in, and Descartes is stuck. Yet this comfortable loneliness in the midst of men is also the perfect place for philosophical meditation.

It is here that Descartes comes upon the crucial thought “that often there is less perfection in works composed of several separate pieces and made by different masters, than in those at which only one person has worked.”<sup>xix</sup> Our mind are like ancient cities, which have gradually expanded as a result of contingent pressures, built by many different hands for many different

purposes. Compare this to the constructed city, where a single architect has designed the city so that elegance, harmony, and regularity characterize it. The beauty of details in an old city may surpass that of a constructed one, but the beauty of the whole is greater in the latter. Analogously, in our minds there are “opinions of many different people,” massed together without order, though perhaps with individual elements of brilliance.<sup>xx</sup> By implication, the work of philosophy should be that of reconstructing the city from the ground, building the Brasilia of the mind.

The work of philosophy, then, is to clean out the contents of one’s mind and to rebuild it on a firm foundation. However, the first cycle of Descartes’ philosophical education does not end with the actual rebuilding but with the finding of a *method* for doing so, which includes his four famous precepts, the first of which is never to accept anything for true that one does not clearly know to be so. Even so, he decides that he is too young to start unearthing the first principles of (his) philosophy; he must first take careful measures to slowly eradicate all doubtful opinions from his mind. This marks the beginning of the second cycle of his philosophical education, which has the same structure as the first: backwards (tradition) – outwards (travel/world) – inwards (retreat/self).

The practical nature of Descartes’ venture can be seen from the fact that he even thought of which principles to adopt during his period of doubt. One needs a house in which to live “while the work is going on”; the philosopher needs interim beliefs to act by when all his judgements are suspended.<sup>xxi</sup> Accordingly, Descartes formulates three maxims for the philosopher with no philosophy, one of which is to provisionally accept the established laws and values of one’s own culture. Now from a purely theoretical perspective, these maxims may seem superfluous: if our only concern is with theory, the final product, then the journey

itself will be felt to be irrelevant. From an educational perspective, though, these maxims are essential: it is *not* superfluous to reflect on how one is to live during a prolonged period of doubt, which, after all, lasts nine years.<sup>xxii</sup>

Descartes is now ready to begin actively ridding himself of what remains of his former opinions. That is not done *in abstracto* or in a moment but takes time and effort. Now this is an aspect of Descartes' methodical doubt sometimes overlooked: the final meditation is only the culmination of a doubt that has been exercised for years. And this long-lasting doubt does not take place in seclusion, "shut up in the stove-heated room," nor in studying books or conversing with "men of letters," but in "frequenting other men" and "wander here and there in the world," though always with the attitude of a "spectator rather than actor in all the comedies which were being played there," reflecting in each situation on what can be doubted, and thus gradually rooting out from one's mind "all the errors which had introduced themselves into it hitherto."<sup>xxiii</sup>

At the end of these nine years of wandering the world in methodical doubt, Descartes has still not found any philosophical principles on which to build, nor does he feel ready to commence the work of finding them – it seems too difficult. Once again, though, an accident pushes him on and into the last stage of his education.<sup>xxiv</sup> Rumours circulate that he has already completed his mission and found some indubitable first principles. He wants to show himself worthy of the reputation, and once again he seeks the seclusion that nine years earlier had delivered him his methods. Then, in front of the fire, his meditations lead him to the firm foundation he sought for the best part of his life: *cogito ergo sum*. On this ground he is able to rebuild his mind, even up to the point of establishing the principles of the natural sciences. This marks the end of the Cartesian philosophical education.

Pierre Hadot has claimed that ancient philosophy was not primarily a theoretical activity but a set of spiritual exercises meant to transform one's attitude and make one capable of living a (more) philosophical life, the specific character of which varied from school to school.<sup>xxv</sup> The point is not to know that death is no evil but to have no fear of death. Even though this idea of philosophy was lost in the Middle Ages, according to Hadot, one can find traces of it even in the modern period, and in Descartes it is still very much alive.

[It] was no accident that Descartes entitled one of his works *Meditations*. They are indeed meditations – *meditatio* in the sense of exercise – ... and Descartes recommends that they be practiced over a certain period of time<sup>xxvi</sup>

In this respect, Descartes' debt to the ancient philosophers, especially the Stoics, is remarkable. As the meditation itself was a sort of exercise, it had to be *done*, and done repeatedly, though not too often.<sup>xxvii</sup> If it were a method whose value lies exclusively in arriving at a valid argument and conclusion, then it would be no need to repeat it and no need to do it oneself if one was convinced that others had done it properly. It should thus be compared not to a scientific but an educational method, a method of "self-instruction."<sup>xxviii</sup>

The Cartesian philosophical education as carried it out by Descartes himself may seem extreme; he devoted his entire life to the project of cultivating reason. Whether such an education *requires* that kind of dedication is another question. At any rate, we do sense in Descartes a calling that we should all, from time to time, rethink the contents of our mind in order to establish anew the ground on which to build, freeing ourselves from tradition and authority in order to gain true independence and ultimate responsibility. Descartes did not intend to do it for us. As a consequence, one can follow the Cartesian path and still arrive at

another place than he did. For instance, it could happen that a Cartesian mediation led one to re-establish the senses as the only way to attain knowledge. Hence, we have to distinguish between the *form* of a Cartesian philosophical education and the specific content and conclusions of Descartes' journey.

### **c. Kant**

The third paradigm of philosophical education is reconstructed from Kant's philosophy. This example has a quite different texture from the other two, as it is not cast in the form of a tale or allegory. Nonetheless, it might be recast as a description of an educational journey, as it implicitly involves a series of stages that the soul passes through in philosophizing. Distinctive of this type of philosophical education is that it involves an overcoming of (a part of) *philosophy itself*. More specifically, it pictures philosophical education as a struggle between two aspects of philosophy: metaphysics and critique.

The implied first stage of a Kantian philosophical education is not marked by ignorance or doubt, but *innocence* or *naïveté*. It could be thought of as a condition where we simply lack the urge to ask metaphysical questions, yet it would be more in line with Kant to think of it as dogmatism. Dogmatism, we might put it, is to speak about supersensible structures as though that was as straightforward as to speak about trees and stones. At this stage, we do not *suspect* our statements but treat them as wholly transparent as to what they say, what they are about, and what their truth or falsity consists in. As dogmatists we seem to believe that it is possible to attain metaphysical knowledge without previous criticism, without investigating whether human reason *can* elevate itself above experience.

The *second* stage is the stage of confusion, the normal state of metaphysical thought. We do not know where to start, where to stop, what methods to be used, what models to follow, and what criteria there are for a good answer: “metaphysics is nothing but rhapsody, in which one never knows whether what one has is enough, or whether and where something may still be lacking.”<sup>xxix</sup> Time after time, we start out full of enthusiasm only to get stuck in confusion; time after time, we have to retrace our steps and begin anew. For each assertion that can be proved, we can also prove the opposite, and these antinomies make us suspect reason itself, which leads to scepticism or indifferentism, the heirs of Plato’s misology. In all this, philosophy is far removed from a science that progresses steadily. All the same, we do not stop and cannot stop; with “restless striving” we continue to reach out for something we do not know what.<sup>xxx</sup>

The despotic rule of dogmatic metaphysics has now been succeeded by chaos. Dogmatism, in which we uncritically make assertions about the supersensible, and scepticism, which denies the synthetic a priori altogether, join in a seemingly endless dialectic dance. A natural response is *indifferentism*, to simply not care about the questions that motivate dogmatism and scepticism. Yet indifferentism is no answer. Besides the fact that it is often dogmatism or scepticism in disguise, metaphysical questions belong to our nature, and if we grow weary of them, then that should be taken as an opportunity to examine *why* our powers of cognition disappoint us, or else the questions will come back to haunt us.

The *third* stage is where the actual work goes on: criticism. Of course, we cannot go into what this stage is all about unless we go into what Kant’s philosophy as a whole is all about. That cannot be our concern here. Through the distinction between two ways in which an object may be taken, a phenomenal and a noumenal sense, the critique results in a conception of the

limits of human knowledge and thereby shows that we are unable to transcend those limits theoretically, which is just what we are trying to do in metaphysics. To the extent that the part of philosophy that Kant calls metaphysics is an essential part of philosophy, then to that extent is this also a criticism of philosophy itself.

Only at this third stage do we arrive at a proper understanding of the second stage, in the form of a diagnosis of the former confusion. Our predicament was that as we ventured beyond the bounds of sense we also ventured beyond the limits of (theoretical) human knowledge. We were confusing phenomena and noumena, for instance, by applying principles that belong to the field of experience in the transcendent field, upon which they remain “completely empty and without consequences.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Like a “light dove,” we felt bounded and burdened by the atmosphere. Yet without the friction that the safe ground of experience offers, we can make no progress; despite our efforts, we are merely spinning in “the empty space of pure understanding.”<sup>xxxix</sup> The understanding is seduced by an unavoidable illusion to “a transcendent use, which, though deceitful, nonetheless cannot be curbed by any resolve to stay within the bounds of experience, but only through scientific instruction and hard work.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Resolution is not sufficient; work is required, in the form criticism.

The aim of this philosophical education is not so much the finding of new knowledge or the ordering of old knowledge, but of attaining a state of acknowledgment of the limits to human knowledge. One might describe this state as one of *maturity*, set against the childish hubris that characterizes reason when not restrained by criticism. We are no longer ruled by the vain fancies and desires of dogmatism that can only be satisfied by the exercise of “magical powers.”<sup>xxxix</sup> The illusions are destroyed; we have grown up. Or one might describe the state as one of *humility*, because it involves staying on the ground instead of flying away into a

void: “High towers, and the metaphysically-great men that resemble them, around both of which there is usually much wind, are not for me. My place is the fertile bathos of experience.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

As with Descartes, we may extirpate the Kantian *form* of philosophical education from the specific content that Kant gave it. We may, for instance, make the following three claims. First, there are innumerable confusions of the general form that Kant demonstrated. Second, the various antinomies, illusions, and perplexities must be resolved again and again. Third, everyone must work through these illusions themselves: this philosophical education is never over and done with – neither for the individual nor for humanity. In making these three claims, we get closer to the idea of philosophical education implicit in Wittgenstein’s writings, which might nevertheless be placed under a broadly Kantian heading. Both have the same form: we start in innocence or dogmatism; we are then overtaken by a confusion that is in part a result of a part of philosophy; next, another part of philosophy, criticism, resolves the confusion; finally, some kind of acceptance, acknowledgment, or reconciliation is attained. We fall into philosophy, and we struggle to overcome it.

#### **4. The Concept of Philosophical Education**

Accounts such as these are what I mean by conceptions of philosophical education. I do not mean the specifics on how to realize that education institutionally, but rather regulative ideas or pictures that might be used as standards to assess practical implementations.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Without such an idea, we do not know what we are doing when we are designing an education in philosophy, be it in universities or in schools, which does not imply that we do not know what we are doing, but it does imply that conceptions of philosophical education are mostly

implicit (“implicit,” though, does not mean much more than “not on the face of it,” and what is “on the face of it” depends of course on who is facing it).

We shall now move up a rung on the ladder of abstraction, going from *conceptions* of philosophical education to the *concept* of philosophical education. This involves a distinction John Rawls used to make: “Roughly, the concept is the meaning of a term, while a particular conception includes as well the principles required to apply it.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> Equally, and equally roughly, the concept of philosophical education is the common core, or perhaps the shared form, of the various particular conceptions of philosophical education, which on their part also includes specific interpretations (“principles required to apply it”) of the constitutive concepts that make up the complex concept of philosophical education, primarily the concepts of philosophy and education, but also truth, knowledge, illusion, and so on.

Rawls was mostly concerned with the movement from concept to conception: “To develop a concept of justice into a conception of it is to elaborate these requisite principles and standards.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> Here, on the other hand, we are moving in the opposite direction, from three particular conceptions to the concept. Since “philosophical education” is not a term in much use today, at least not as a *philosophical* term, my aim has been to develop a philosophically interesting concept of philosophical education by means of three particular conceptions (admittedly ideal-typical). Naturally, that would not be possible if we did not already have an implicit understanding of the concept, but I think we have that.

After going through the three conceptions above, the concept of philosophical education should ideally “[light] up as if we were rubbing fire-sticks together.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Yet due to the nature of the topic, it is hard to say much *substantial* about what the three examples have in common. The

problem of defining “philosophical education” is thus identical to the problem of defining “philosophy”: a conception of its nature seems to be internal to a particular philosophy (it is an “essentially contested concept”). Accordingly, any such nature or set of common features seen from outside any particular perspective is likely to seem vague or peripheral compared to a conception of its nature seen from inside a particular perspective. Yet whereas any outsider-account is likely to be feeble, any insider-account is likely to be controversial, though that is a controversy that we neither can nor should attempt to avoid.

Yet despite the inherent problematic character of the topic, we may still point to some *formal* features shared by the above conceptions of philosophical education, which make them, as it were, isomorphic.

First, in some sense that is singularly difficult to pin down outside of any particular philosophy, each picture of philosophical education could be recast as a journey from some kind of illusion to some kind of truth (or from some kind of ignorance to some kind of understanding or knowledge). Moreover, that journey is typically undertaken by or by way of *reason*, the specific sense of which also depends on the particular conception in question. The transformation that the student undergoes is not mere development but *progress*, and it is not exclusively a progress in terms of happiness or morality, though that is often part of the story as well, but of *wisdom*: one is not only different or happier or better, but one *sees* or *knows* or *realizes* something one did not do before – it is, that is to say, a process of enlightenment.

Yet though there is this cognitive or epistemological aspect of any philosophical education, an account of philosophical education is never exhausted by an increase in some familiar, well-defined, and shared concept of knowledge or understanding. In so far as those terms are used,

they are usually given a meaning internal to the particular account. The most that can be said is that the philosophical knowledge or understanding attained is in all cases something higher, deeper, more fundamental, or more important than ordinary or scientific knowledge or understanding. For Plato, of course, it is the perception of the ideas or forms, the true nature of things like justice and beauty. For Descartes it is a knowledge of first principles, an understanding of the arrangement of knowledge, in particular its basis. Even in Kant, where the philosophical education is not easily described as the acquisition of new knowledge, it is still the winning of a kind of *insight*, an insight into the limits of knowledge.

Second, inasmuch as the three accounts are all of education, they are essentially *diachronic*. None of them conceives of philosophical education simply as a matter of subscribing to certain theories or of acquiring knowledge of some set of facts. That can be done in a second, whereas education takes time, even years. It is not accidental or merely ornamental that a conception of philosophical education is typically pictured as a journey: there is a starting point; there are characteristic stages; there are transitional phases; there are challenges that must be overcome; the view of the journey changes as we travel; and there is a destination, the character of which is not usually seen until we have arrived. In Plato the journey goes from the dark cave up into the sunlight and back down again, where each phase has its characteristic challenges. For Descartes, there are even real journeys involved, though the last journey goes into the self, but whereas in Plato there are gradual transitions between the different stages, in Descartes the stages are sharply separated, even dateable. Finally, Kant pictures the philosophical education as taking off from the ground, flying into thin air, and then struggling to get down to the rough ground. Prominent in Kant's conception is how the character of the preceding stages first gets clear to us as we proceed.

Third, a philosophical education is never merely cognitive or intellectual but typically transforms the stance, the attitude, or the character of the individual going through it. So though a philosophical education always ends in some kind of knowledge or understanding, it is always something more as well. R.S. Peters famously argued that personal transformation is conceptually constitutive of becoming educated, and while one might take exception to that as an analysis of the concept of education as such, it is certainly true for the narrower concept of *philosophical* education.<sup>x1</sup> Conversion is a tempting word to use, since a different person comes out at the other end, with new needs, new experiences, new interests, and so on. For Plato, the conversion involves becoming concerned with universals rather than particulars, and in becoming determined by reason rather than bodily desires. For Descartes, the conversion results in the deep peace of mind that follows from knowing and feeling that you are on firm ground. In Kant, too, there is a peace of mind to be achieved, the peace that follows from no longer being tormented by questions that cannot have any answers. Yet there is also a change of perspective involved: no longer obsessed by speculations, one dedicates oneself to real work – science.

A note on Kant is needed, though, as he was not completely clear on this point. On the one hand, he seems to have regarded the metaphysical impulse to be as natural as breathing. At other times he seems to think of future metaphysics, even future philosophy, as an endless repetition of his own critique – “nothing will be left for future generations”.<sup>xli</sup> Accordingly, the young can jump straight to the final stage, doing serious science instead of frivolous philosophy, knowing that Kant has taken care of the rest for us:

.. how much better young people hungry for knowledge might spend their time than in the usual dogmatism that gives so early and so much encouragement to their complacent quibbling about things they do not understand, and things into which neither they nor

anyone else in the world will ever have any insight, ... and thus to neglect to learn the well-grounded sciences<sup>xlii</sup>

We do not need philosophy any more; Kant seems to say that he has been educated for us. Is that possible? Can one be educated on behalf of somebody? No. That is what the third essential feature of the concept of philosophical education comes down to.

Over to the fourth and last feature. Pictures of philosophical education typically include pivotal metaphors. Plato sees a cave and a sun; Descartes operates with houses and cities; Kant has his fields and limits. These metaphors are important enough, but perhaps not necessary to a conception of philosophical education. More elementary metaphors, however, like up and down, light and dark, in and out, and so on, are unavoidable, probably because a philosophical education cannot be defined as a straightforward increase in some well-known entity called “knowledge”. Sooner or later we find ourselves appealing to such elementary metaphors when we are to describe or justify a conception of philosophical education. Is that perhaps why such accounts so often take the form of tales, allegories, and even myths? Be that as it may, these elementary metaphors are often what carry the crucial normative force. That is obvious with regard to a pictorial pair like deep and shallow. In other cases, the normative force depends on the particular picture they are part of. For Plato, philosophical education is “the upward journey of the soul,” whereas for Kant (and Wittgenstein) it is a descent down to the rough ground.<sup>xliii</sup> For Descartes it is both, we work ourselves first down to the ground and then upwards again by constructing the house of knowledge anew. Though perhaps the most telling direction of a Cartesian philosophical education is *inwards*.

As mentioned, any such set of common features abstracted from particular conceptions seems vague compared to the features “fleshed out” within a particular conception. That this is so, is

itself indicative of the concept of philosophical education and could, indeed, should, be counted as its fifth essential feature: there is no neutral or external viewpoint from which to describe a particular conception adequately. Yet this seems to lead to a problem. Does it mean that any such conception can only be assessed from within? Or to pose the question with respect to the first feature: If a philosophical education involves a journey from some kind of illusion to some kind of truth, does that not imply that in order to recognise a person as having undergone such an education one must accept his or her philosophical conclusions, or at least not find his or her project completely futile or impossible? For example, if I hold that a Cartesian isolation of the self from its social and cultural context is impossible, then must I not also withhold the title of philosophical education from whatever process the Cartesian undergoes?

This problem in fact points us to an ambivalence built into the concept of education itself. On the one hand, “education” can be used normatively. As Peters noted several decades ago, concepts like education and reform are like “stamps of approval,” proclaiming that some process has “come up to certain standards.”<sup>xliv</sup> In other words, Peters found a logical connection between the *concept* of education and what is worthwhile, where it is a further question “what the particular standards are in virtue of which achievements are thought to be of value and what grounds there might be for claiming that these are the correct ones” (a question which is, in my terminology, up to the particular *conceptions* to answer).<sup>xlv</sup> On the other hand, “education” might also be used descriptively, as when we speak about “educational institutions” without implying that anything particularly worthwhile is going on there or that they are successful in what they are trying to do (because of these two senses there is no logical contradiction in saying that our educational institutions do not educate). Now one way of overcoming or, rather, avoiding this ambivalence in the case of

“philosophical education,” that is, one way of avoiding that conferring that title has a normative import, is to recast the first feature as requiring only that the student himself or herself *thinks* that they have made a journey from illusion to truth. Yet that would be a mere stipulation and I cannot see what kind of purpose that would serve in this context. Personally, I think we should acknowledge the ambivalence built into the concept of (philosophical) education, since we can then acknowledge how a particular conception of (philosophical) education might be prone to denying the title of (philosophical) education to other such conceptions. In this essay, though, it has not been my intention to promote a specific conception, but to outline the main features of the concept of philosophical education, though it is certainly in the nature of the case that that is best done through examples.

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<sup>i</sup> *Phaedo*, 82c; *Republic*, VII, 518d. The quotations in this section are from Plato, *Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub, 1997).

<sup>ii</sup> *Republic*, V, 479a-c.

<sup>iii</sup> *Republic*, VI, 484b.

<sup>iv</sup> *Phaedo*, 89d-90e.

<sup>v</sup> *Phaedo*, 89e.

<sup>vi</sup> *Phaedo*, 90b-c.

<sup>vii</sup> *Phaedo*, 90d.

<sup>viii</sup> *Republic*, VI, 435a.

<sup>ix</sup> *Republic*, VII, 518b-c.

<sup>x</sup> *Republic*, VII, 518d.

<sup>xi</sup> *Republic*, VII, 523b-c.

<sup>xii</sup> *Republic*, VII, 524d-e.

<sup>xiii</sup> Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method, and other writings*, trans. F. E. Sutcliffe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 29.

<sup>xiv</sup> *ibid.*,

<sup>xv</sup> *ibid.*,

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<sup>xvi</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>xvii</sup> *ibid.*, 31.

<sup>xviii</sup> *ibid.*, 33.

<sup>xix</sup> *ibid.*, 35.

<sup>xx</sup> *ibid.*, 36.

<sup>xxi</sup> *ibid.*, 45.

<sup>xxii</sup> F. E. Sutcliffe, the translator of the *Discourse*, finds the work “curiously obscure, its plan a caricature of logical composition” (*ibid.*, 11). True enough, from the point view of theory, which expects a systematic exposition following logical lines rather than biographical, it is. Yet the work does not set out a theory in this sense; it is a description of Descartes’ journey.

<sup>xxiii</sup> *ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>xxiv</sup> What is the significance of the fact that in both cycles of his education an *accident* has to push Descartes into the third stage?

<sup>xxv</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Malden MA: Blackwell, 1995).

<sup>xxvi</sup> *ibid.*, 271. Hadot criticizes Foucault, who was much influenced by Hadot in his later work, for holding that the “theorisation” of philosophy began with Descartes. Hadot’s claim is that Descartes’ philosophy was rather one of the few places where the ancient idea of philosophy as exercise was kept *alive* (Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 263-264). I follow Hadot in this respect.

<sup>xxvii</sup> In the letters to Princess Elizabeth from June, 1643, Descartes states that one of his most useful rules is “never to spend more than a few hours a day in the thoughts which occupy the imagination and a few hours a year on those which occupy the intellect alone,” that is, on meditation. The rest of the year, the philosopher should relax: “[It] is very necessary to have properly understood, once in a lifetime, the principles of metaphysics ... But I think also that it would be very harmful to occupy one’s intellect frequently in meditating upon them” (Rene Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes – Volume 3*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 227-228).

<sup>xxviii</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 88.

<sup>xxix</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics that will be able to come forward as Science*, trans. Gary C. Hatfield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 82.

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<sup>xxx</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Bxv.

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>i</sub> Kant, *Prolegomena*, 87

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>ii</sub> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A4-5/B8-9

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>iii</sub> Kant, *Prolegomena*, 85

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>iv</sub> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Axiii

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>v</sub> Kant, *Prolegomena*, 125

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>vi</sub> Plato, of course, has ideas about the institutional realization, too: 5 years of this, 10 years of that, and so on. I cannot go into that scheme here, although Plato's demand that a true philosopher must also be a *soldier* is an index of how different his world is from ours.

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>vii</sub> John Rawls, *Political Liberalism, The John Dewey Essays in Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 14

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>viii</sub> *ibid.*

<sup>xxx</sup><sub>ix</sub> *Republic*, VI, 435a

<sup>xl</sup> R. S. Peters, "What is an Educational Process," in *The Concept of Education*, ed. R. S. Peters (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1967), 6-8.

<sup>xli</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Axx

<sup>xlii</sup> *ibid.*, Bxxxi

<sup>xliii</sup> *Republic*, VII, 517b

<sup>xliv</sup> Peters, "What is an Educational Process," 2.

<sup>xlv</sup> *ibid.*