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Philosophy East/West

Exploring Intersections between Educational and Contemplative Practices

Edited by
Oren Ergas and Sharon Todd
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Introduction

OREN ERGAS AND SHARON TODD

This book addresses two interrelated themes that have emerged both from within philosophy and from within education. The first has to do with reading across philosophical traditions in order to address what educational and contemplative practices have to say to one another; the second concerns the recent ‘contemplative turn’ in education, with its focus on mindfulness and other forms of mind/body work that are incorporated into the curriculum based on scientific research, on the one hand, and their spiritual origins, on the other.

Contemplative practices can be broadly defined as ‘the ways that human beings, across cultures and across time, have found to concentrate, broaden, and deepen conscious awareness as the gateway to cultivating their full potential and to leading more meaningful and fulfilling lives’ (Roth, 2006, p. 1788). The interpretative space that this particular definition opens may be an appropriate way of capturing the diversity and complexity that characterises a current social arena in which contemplative practices are increasingly being incorporated into educational settings in Western industrialised countries (Barbezat and Bush, 2014; Ergas, 2014; Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott and Bai, 2014; Hart, 2004; Hyland, 2011; MLERN, 2012; Palmer and Zajonc, 2010; Roeser and Peck, 2009; Roth, 2006; Shapiro, Brown and Astin, 2011). It is this diversity that stands at the heart of this book that locates what might be justly paraphrased as ‘the varieties of contemplative practice in and as education’ as a dense intersection point. At this intersection several strands, dualisms and categorisations are brought to bear as ‘West’ meets ‘East’, wisdom traditions meet science, individual meets society, self meets world, mindfulness meets mindlessness, spirituality meets secularity and more.

Contemplative educational thought takes us back to the roots of philosophy of education as well as to the roots of East-Asian wisdom traditions. It is found in the Delphic ideal of ‘know thyself’ and in its application within the Socratic dialogue, that Pierre Hadot (1995) interpreted as a ‘spiritual practice’ in which philosophy was considered a pedagogy and a ‘way of life’. It is similarly found in Buddhism—what
Robert Thurman understands primarily as an ‘Educational tradition’ (2006, p. 1769) in which the cultivation of a contemplative mind based on meditative practice constituted an integral part of the curriculum. Thurman claimed that, ‘For liberal education to fulfill its responsibility, the teaching of contemplative skills is a necessity, not a luxury’ (p. 1767). Our interest is to examine how the above Western and East-Asian strands might be understood as a fruitful intersection that can shed light on such possibility that in recent years seems to be moving from theory into actual practice and from philosophy into education.

Analytic philosopher Owen Flanagan (2011) notes three different philosophical styles that work across the borders of Western philosophy and Eastern wisdom traditions. The first is a comparative approach in which philosophical approaches are merely compared and contrasted, with little exploration of how they might mutually inform each other. The second is a fusion approach whereby different philosophical notions are integrated into a whole. This, he cautions, can sometimes (although not always) lead to a disrespect of the very differences that constitute the respective positions under discussion. The third style is a cosmopolitan one. Here, Flanagan notes that doing this kind of philosophical work implicates the author in a critical and ironic openness to all positions, including one’s own: ‘the cosmopolitan is a listener and a speaker . . . he or she compares and contrasts, is willing to try fusings of silly and safe sorts, but mostly likes living at the intersection of multiple spaces of meaning, waiting and seeing and watching whatever happens happen’ (2011, p. 2).

It is this living in the interstitial space of meaning that informs the approach undertaken in this book. And although the essays would not necessarily embrace the call to ‘irony’ invoked by Flanagan, they nonetheless offer a vision of what Eppert, Vokey, Nguyen and Bai in this book call ‘intercultural’ philosophy. It is precisely an exploration of the intersections between educational practices informed by Western philosophical traditions and the contemplative practices informed by Eastern wisdom traditions that characterise the orientation of the articles collected here. Offering a range of perspectives that cut across analytic and continental traditions within philosophy of education and bridging these with Buddhist, yogic, and Daoist philosophies of contemplative practices, this book opens up possibilities for reframing our attention to mind/body as a central aspect of, and a site of resistance to, ‘doing’ education.

Philosophically speaking, then, the challenge becomes how not to typecast ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ thought as unified categories in the first place (Eppert and Wang, 2008). Using these two broad terms can hide a richness of differences within and not only between them.
There is no ‘essence’ of Eastern wisdom traditions. Although there are some interrelated threads that form a constellation of elements that are recognisable across traditions, these threads are not interchangeable across those traditions. Like threads on a loom, they are woven in varying patterns to create differently textured tapestries. Not only is the weave different for each, but the thread itself also changes appearance in its varying creations. We find, for instance, notions of ‘nonduality’ as ways of capturing our interdependence and interconnectedness with the world, yet these expressions take on different forms whether we are talking about Shambhala Buddhism, Daoism, Vedanta or Theravada Buddhism (Loy, 1988). It is these different nuances that the papers explore collectively in relation to—and not so much in distinction from—Western philosophical and educational concerns. Similarly, the fetishisation of Western philosophy into ontological dualisms and epistemological certainties does little justice to the kinds of pursuits that Western philosophers have indeed been preoccupied with, from the ancient Greeks through to Foucault and Deleuze. Again, the work of Pierre Hadot is noteworthy here in emphasising philosophy’s relation to life, which grants to philosophy its particularly educational character. In this ‘Western’ conception there is no border between the thoughtfulness occasioned by the life of the mind and the orientation one has to the world in the life of the body: knowledge is not disconnected from virtue, insight from compassion, or wisdom from ethics.

It is this broader and richer conception of philosophy that has led the articles collected here to employ a different kind of language. Instead of using words such as evaluation, assessment, and appraisal as comparative terms between ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ thought, the essays instead turn to resonance, significance, and implication. This alternative lexicon allows for a more complex picture of the intersections to emerge from reading across the traditions, ones that occasion a learning from each other, as opposed to one reigning over the other in some hierarchal game of philosophical—and educational—value.

Turning to the second theme of this issue, the ‘contemplative turn’, it is important to note that contemplation has been no stranger to 20th century curriculum theory and philosophy of education (Huebner, 1999; Miller, 1994; Palmer, 1983, Pinar and Grumet, 1976; Weil, 1956). Despite these rich and compelling accounts, and despite the depth of the traditions from which they have sprung, contemplative practices such as meditation have been quite a rare phenomenon within public schools and/or higher education institutions. Since around the turn of the millennium, however, there has been a dramatic shift in this domain, as various contemplative practices have been gradually moved from the margins to the mainstream of social discourse.