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Philosophy's Contribution Toward Learning Beyond Specialization



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Introduction

The relationship between education and philosophy has changed dramatically between ancient and contemporary eras. In the ancient era, educated citizens were encouraged to practice philosophy as a way of life. Today, in American public higher education, philosophy, as well as other disciplines within the humanities, are classified as less practical and efficient. Therefore, philosophy's low job-market value renders a slim job perspective for students, mainly because of the highly specialized and market-driven education system. Yet disciplines with higher market values, such as the STEM¹ fields and other professional programs, lack sufficient guidance on the maturation of philosophical capacities, which require deliberate effort beyond what specialized expertise or technical education offers alone.

The deficiency of philosophical development across the disciplines leads to the perpetuation of the enduring conflicts within American higher education, as these conflicts are traced back to the ancient era. Students across many disciplines are deprived of the opportunity in their fields to regularly exercise their philosophical capacities. Exercising philosophical capacities, such as argument analysis, logical reasoning, decision making, identifying assumptions underlying methods and beliefs, sympathetic understanding, and adroit perspective shifting can foster a transformative learning experience that improves the personal, social, ethical, and cultural dimensions, while enhancing the quality of professional life.

My observations of philosophy's present role within American public higher education led me to further investigate two conflicts that contribute to philosophy's marginalization and devaluation today:

1. Traditional vs. Progressive values in educational approaches.²
2. Specialized job training vs. Philosophical development (self development).³

These two conflicts are deeply rooted in the ancient era and have carried on into our present day culture, consequently distorting the common conception of philosophy in a way that misrepresents the nature and function of philosophy's prospective role in academia and the larger society.

In recognizing the shift in philosophy's role between ancient and contemporary times, I draw a comparison between ancient Socratic and ancient Confucian educational approaches that suggest that philosophy, as an activity or practice, can become integrated as a foundational component of American public higher education.⁴ Through the examination of these two ancient pedagogies, I emphasize that the two conflicts that currently contribute to philosophy's marginalization and devaluation were present in ancient times as well. The purpose of showing that the two conflicts existed in the two ancient cultures is to demonstrate that historically, philosophical pedagogy has become a foundational component of educational approaches despite the presence of these two conflicts, without necessarily abandoning cultural traditions and practical skills. Furthermore, because

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1. STEM refers to the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics fields.
 2. Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 1995).
 3. Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002). Judy Whipps, "Learn to Earn": A Pragmatist Response to Contemporary Dialogues about Industrial Education," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (2008): 59-67.
 4. In this version, I include only a brief version of the ancient Socratic and ancient Confucian comparison as an introduction to a larger work that I plan to pursue in the future. In the larger work, I will include a detailed comparative analysis that thoroughly covers the depth and details of both ancient approaches in isolation from one another through the themes of Purpose of Education, Teacher/Student Relationship, Learning/Attaining Knowledge, and Teaching/Attaining Knowledge.

of the very fact that both Socrates and Confucius valued and implemented philosophical development within their education, I argue that the present conflicts in academia are insufficient explanations for philosophy's present state of marginalization.

I use Socratic inquiry, textual analysis, and comparative techniques throughout this exploration. Socratic inquiry has been the initial and underlying method that I practice. Asking myself what "philosophy" is, what "education" is, and attempting to understand the present relation between the two in relation to the past has led me to critically analyze and reflect on my culture, my education, and my career. As I live in these conditions, I find myself compelled to inquire. I use textual analysis for gathering data, in which I interpret works of previous scholars and philosophers in order to ground my inquiries and situate myself in the broad topics of philosophy and education. I use comparison techniques not only to elucidate the value differences between ancient Socratic and ancient Confucian education in both cultures, but also to reiterate that these value conflicts between learning practical skills and philosophical development, as well as traditional and progressive values, existed within ancient pedagogy.

Before I proceed, I will first provide a brief overview of the background and significance regarding my concern for philosophical development in American higher education. In doing so, I illuminate some early reactions to the enduring conflicts that have manifested within contemporary American educational approaches. From there, I move on to discuss the dynamics of the value conflicts within and between ancient Socratic and ancient Confucian educational approaches, which leads into a discussion of Pierre Hadot's interpretation of the isolation of philosophy within universities and the consequences of that shift

in philosophy's role. After describing Hadot's distinction between philosophical discourse and philosophy itself, I turn my focus back to American higher education through Martha Nussbaum's discussion of Liberal Education's persistent emphasis on personal, social, ethical, and cultural development and its intimate relationship with philosophy. I deduce from Nussbaum's interpretation that the Liberal Education tradition in American higher education serves as a model for how philosophical exercises can become implemented across all disciplines, or in an interdisciplinary context, without having to specialize in the field of philosophy.

Philosophy's Role in American Public Higher Education

Since public education funding primarily comes from government subsidies, and the government prioritizes funds that have higher market value, "administrators see little option except to respond to the marketplace, for if their institution does not react effectively, it will not have the necessary resources to offer high quality and diverse academic programs."⁵ With job placement as the educational priority and the funding priorities directed toward the STEM fields because of higher job market values, curricula focus on producing highly specialized experts through means of memorization and technical job training in highly competitive environments. Due to the conditions of the learning environment, along with the requirements of those disciplines, students lack proficient training in developing philosophical capacities that aim at self-development, which complement their professional development.

During the rise of American industrialization in the 19th century, Jane Addams, an American social activist and philosopher, witnessed the disparities between the educational requirements at

the time and the social cooperative skills required for progressive, industrialized work.⁶ Addams captures how cultural values affected educational priorities during the Industrial Revolution. In doing this, she implies that the traditional societal values of rural culture could not maintain the demands of the new, industrial conditions of city life: "The early ideal of a city that it was a marketplace in which to exchange produce, and a mere trading-post for merchants, apparently still survives in our minds and is constantly reflected in our schools."⁷ Subsequently, Addams describes how the societal priority of meeting the nature and demands of the marketplace hinders the quality of education citizens receive, which in turn perpetuates classism and the priority of narrow, specialized education within the culture: "We [Industrializing American society] admire much more the men who accumulate riches, and who gather to themselves the results of industry, than the men who actually carry forward industrial processes; and, as has been pointed out, our schools still prepare children almost exclusively for commercial and professional life."⁸

Around sixty years after Addams shared her concerns about the effects of new city-life demands in the midst of industrialization on the one hand, and educational values on the other, American psychologist Rachel M. Lauer observed that public school education in the United States "does not yet include in its curriculum one of the most exciting subjects known to man: the subject of his own inner life—his own feelings, reactions, and desires."⁹ A low priority of fostering self-awareness and social engagement in American public education moves Lauer to challenge educators' assumptions about the primary function of education and illuminate the conditions of the learning environment that arise based on those assumptions. She critiques the educators that teach "under the assumption that everything worth learning lies outside the learner."¹⁰ Here,

5. Peter D. Eckel and Jacqueline E. King, *An Overview of Higher Education in the United States: Diversity, Access, and the Role of the Market Place* (Washington D.C.: Springer, 2004), 16.

6. Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 81-97.

7. *Ibid.*, 86.

8. *Ibid.* Addams uses the term "industrial," to mean cooperative endeavors rather than how we commonly use the term in reference to factory manufacturing today. See Marilyn Fischer's "Introduction" to *Newer Ideals of Peace*, vol. 3 of *Jane Addams' Writings on Peace* (2003).

9. Rachel M. Lauer, "General Semantics and the Future of Education," *ETC; a Review of General Semantics*, 24, (1967): 391.

10. *Ibid.*, 393.

11. *Ibid.*

Lauer criticizes a learning environment that consists of memorization, independence, and competition. The denial of self-development and interpersonal awareness in education “actually defeats the schools’ most avowed purpose, which is to develop cognitive competency.”¹¹

Philosophical Discourse Vs. Philosophy Itself

With philosophy limited in its own specialized field, along with existing value conflicts within public education, a common misconception permeates throughout society and in many quarters of its academic institutions that philosophy, as an academic discipline, is limited to theoretical discourse and absent of praxis in occupational settings. Pierre Hadot believes the distinction between philosophy as an activity and philosophy as an intellectual discourse originated in the Middle Ages, when universities were established for “professionals who train professionals.”¹² Consequently, educational pursuits shifted from cultivating one’s life in relation to one’s studies to intellectual and professional training.

Isolated into its own discipline and confined to the scholarship of philosophical discourse within public higher education, philosophy continues to remain isolated from a large proportion of students and generates the common misconception that philosophy itself is the same as the philosophical discourse. Hadot’s distinction between philosophical discourse and philosophy itself attempts to reconcile the misunderstanding that the two are synonymous. In doing this, he accentuates the significance of philosophy within and beyond academia.

Philosophical discourse consists of theoretical instruction, dialogue with others, self-reflection, and spiritual exercises regarding sub-disciplines such as logic, ethics, and metaphysics each distinct from the other with its own compilation of theories. In educational settings,

distinctions between these sub-disciplines are necessary in order for professors to efficiently teach the material, yet the subject material may appear extracted and sometimes even irrelevant from everyday life. However, Hadot also emphasizes the practical function of philosophical discourse since it is often times categorized as useless speculation that sends interlocutors on an endless merry-go-round ride: “Discourse always has, directly or indirectly, a function which is formative, educative, psychagogic, and therapeutic. It is always intended to produce an effect, to create a habitus within the soul, or to provoke a transformation of the self.”¹³ In this sense, philosophical discourse can be understood as an exercise that facilitates a transformation of one’s life outside of academia.

Hadot describes philosophy itself, or as a way of life, as “the existential choice of a certain way of life, the experience of certain inner states and dispositions.”¹⁴ In other words, philosophy itself does not refer to a distinct way of life separate from the life of, for example, a natural scientist, psychologist, or engineer. Rather, philosophy is what makes up human life, no matter what field of study or education level. Living philosophically entails living, testing, and adjusting the theories that guide one’s everyday life, learned within but not limited to the discourse encountered in educational establishments. For example, instead of only “philosophizing” (or thinking) about ethical and logical theories, a philosophical way of life entails living an ethical and logical life, with frequent validity-checks in the process. The totality of one’s choices, influences, and beliefs make up a philosophy, which in turn define one’s character and overall quality of life. As humans, we all live a philosophy in the most basic sense, and refining our lived philosophies can substantially change the conditions in our world. Hence, philosophy itself is no less important to humanity than the importance of an individual’s life philosophy to him/herself.

Hadot describes the general relationship between philosophical discourse and philosophy itself as incommensurable, yet inseparable.¹⁵ In other words, although they are different by definition, in that the discourse is abstracted from common life experience, both still influence one another simultaneously. Philosophical discourse “justifies, motivates, and influences” the philosophical life.¹⁶ Our discourses inform our lived philosophies, and our lived philosophies are communicated and justified through discourse.

Overview of Ancient Socratic and Ancient Confucian Education

Before the rise of the university and the specialized discipline of philosophy branched off into its own separate department, tensions had already existed between educating for craft expertise and education for self-development. In Book VII of Plato’s Republic, Socrates proclaims, “Education isn’t what some people declare it to be, namely, putting knowledge into the souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes (518b-c).”¹⁷ Here, Socrates refers to an educational environment where an authority of knowledge claims knowledge and transmits information to students through a series of lectures in which students learn theories and skills to be applied to a craft or expertise. Socrates displays a similar disposition in the Symposium when he says, “If only wisdom were like water, which always flows from a full cup into an empty one when we connect them with a piece of yarn.”¹⁸ Socrates’ disposition reflects his criticism of the Sophists for assuming knowledge to be something that students can pay tuition for and be guaranteed to obtain through memorization, imitation, and manipulation.

The Sophists, who Pierre Hadot describes as, “Traditionally, people who developed an apparently philosophical discourse without trying to live their lives

12. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 1995), 269.

13. Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 176.

14. *Ibid.*, 173-174.

15. *Ibid.*, 172.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company 1992), 190.

18. Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehemas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), 5.

in accordance with their discourse, and without their discourse emanating from their life experience,”¹⁹ and “democrats of knowledge, who claimed to be able to sell their knowledge to all comers,” claimed to provide professional knowledge and wisdom to the sons of wealthy Athenian men.²⁰ The Sophists were professional educators who traveled and charged fees to teach rhetoric, politics, sciences, mathematics, and grammar in order to prepare their students for citizenship and professional life.²¹ In these circumstances, the teacher/student roles were rigid, little dialogue occurred, and the students passively submitted to the expert.

In comparison to the Western tradition of Socrates, Confucius viewed learning similarly to both Socrates and the Sophists in that he “defined the aim of education to be more than just the acquisition of knowledge, but more fundamentally, a transformation of the person and preparation for public service.” Similar to Socrates’ pedagogy, Confucius viewed education as a lifelong cultivation, aiming toward living a virtuous life:²³ “Do not worry over not having an official position; worry about what it takes to have one. Do not worry that no one acknowledges you; seek to do what will earn you acknowledgment” (4.14).²⁴ Unlike Socrates, however, Confucius introduced the six arts to his students, which resembles what we call a “liberal education” today. The six arts included ritual, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and arithmetic. In this sense, Confucius focused more directly on the practical/or public service aspect of learning than Socrates. For example, in the *Analects*, the Master stresses the importance of embodying virtues through our actions toward others over simply engaging in intellectual study when he says:

(1.6) As a young brother and son, be filial at home and deferential in the community; be cautious in what you say and then make good on your word; love the multitude broadly and be intimate with those who are authoritative (ren) in their conduct. If in so behaving you still have energy left, use it to improve yourself through study.²⁵

(13.5) If people recite all of the three hundred Songs and yet when given official responsibility, fail to perform effectively, or when sent to distant quarters, are unable to act on their own initiative, then even though they have mastered so many of them, what good are they to them?²⁶

Socrates, on the other hand, denied his title of “teacher” to make the point that the knowledge he sought (moral knowledge) was not something that could be transferred from teacher to student, but instead drawn out from within oneself through rigorous questioning and self-examination:

(Apology, 29e) Socrates: And if some of you objects and claims that he does care (for intelligence, for truth, and for the best state of the soul), then I will not release him on the spot and go away, but I will question him, examine him, and refute him; and if he does not seem to me to have acquired virtue, but says that he has, I will reproach him with attributing the least importance to what is worth the most, and the most importance to what is most base.²⁷

The difference I highlight here between Socrates’ and Confucius’ pedagogies illustrates that although both sought virtue through philosophical discourse,

Confucius placed a larger emphasis on serving the community through learning the arts, mastering a set of skills, and directly serving society.

In regard to the tension between traditional and progressive values, Socrates’ execution represents one of the consequences that arose from the traditional/progressive value conflicts, since he was accused of corrupting the youth because he “used skillful questions to bring his interlocutors to admit their ignorance and by doing so, he disturbed them so much that they were eventually led to question their entire lives.”²⁸ Socrates thought that teaching only conventional or professional knowledge and skills used in hierarchal learning environments, where teachers have intellectual authority over passive students and solely teach rote learning, resulted in students acting “under the influence of prejudices without any basis in reflection,”²⁹ imprudently appealing to the authority of teachers, and arrogantly believing that they were experts in their profession. By denying the title of teacher, Socrates intentionally disrupted the teacher/student social hierarchy and implicitly communicated to the student that he assumed the role of a learner and searched for the same knowledge. Dialogue was the main form of interaction between the teacher and student in Socrates’ approach and generally framed in a way that exempted the teacher’s responsibility of the content, as opposed to a less interactive lecture-style.³⁰

Similarly, Confucius’ pedagogy was “progressive” for his time, for he “selectively and creatively”³¹ used passages from the ancient texts in his teachings, rather than blindly following the texts as if the texts themselves had a predetermined, fixed meaning in all given contexts

19. Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 174.

20. *Ibid.*, 26.

21. Jonathan Lavery, “Meet the Philosophers of Ancient Greece,” (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2005) “The Sophists,” http://www.credoreference.com.ezproxy.gvsu.edu/entry/ashgtpag/the_sophists (accessed August 30, 2011).

22. Peimin Ni, *On Confucius*, (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2002), 6.

23. 23. Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, (New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 1998), 92.

24. *Ibid.*, 72.

25. *Ibid.*, 163.

26. Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. R.E. Allen (New Haven: Yale University Press 1984), 95.

27. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 149.

28. Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 26.

29. Paul Woodruff, “Socratic Education” in *Philosophers on Education: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (New York: Routledge 1998), 19-20.

30. Karyn Lai, “Learning From The Confucians: Learning From The Past,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (2008): 101.

31. Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, 192.

and circumstances. Confucius even discouraged his disciples from following his own teachings in an unreflective manner. On this matter Confucius said, “In striving to be authoritative in your conduct, do not yield even to your teacher (15.36).”³² He was known as the first to offer education to his disciples, whether they were wealthy or poor. However, his use of ancient texts as authority in his teachings, his transmission of culture, and his reinforcement of hierarchy can be considered more traditional in relation to the approach of Socratic education, which is grounded on doubting and questioning authorities. Although Confucius’ pedagogy was progressive for his time, I reiterate my point that regardless of the progressive tendencies found in Confucius’ teachings, his pedagogical style and methods were more traditional than Socrates’ pedagogy when we look in retrospect at the broader historical context.

Conclusion

The overarching purpose of this exploration is to expose the two conflicts that affect the quality of American public higher education today that also arose within both ancient Socratic and Confucian pedagogies: Specialized training vs. philosophical development and traditional vs. progressive pedagogical values. Historically, philosophical pedagogy has become a foundational component of educational approaches despite the presence of these two conflicts. Moreover, in explaining how philosophical exercises are used in the Liberal Education tradition, I accentuate the point that philosophical development is interdisciplinary and can be extended out to other disciplines such as the STEM fields.

The two conflicts that contribute to philosophy’s present state in academia are inadequate explanations for philosophy’s present state of marginalization for the fact that these conflicts will always be present. They are inevitable, and can even be called “philosophical problems.” Considering that the ancient Confucian approach is relatively more traditional AND more skill oriented in comparison to the ancient Socratic approach demonstrates

that philosophy itself is not polarized one way or another, since both Socrates and Confucius valued philosophical development and implemented it within their educational approaches.

Returning to the contemporary age, I do not suggest that American higher education entirely disregards self-development. In *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Martha Nussbaum connects Liberal Education’s persistent emphasis on personal, social, ethical, and cultural development, which historically and unavoidably connects to philosophy. The Liberal Education tradition in the United States serves as a model for how philosophical discourse can be utilized for developmental purposes, without students having to specialize in the field of philosophy. As a student studying within the Philosophy and Liberal Studies departments at Grand Valley State University, I notice that philosophy’s role in its own distinct discipline differs from philosophy’s role in the Liberal Education tradition.

In the discipline of philosophy, students learn the history, theories, problems, and methods of philosophical importance, which depends on the specialization of each department. Learning the methods of philosophy benefits students’ knowledge of philosophical topics, but it does not equate to the benefits of practicing the discourses, which facilitates self-development by holding students logically, ethically, and socially accountable for their practices.

The Liberal Education tradition integrates all learning experiences and philosophical capacities into a cohesive whole, while constantly requiring the student to relate that integration of learning experiences back to his/her self. Not only does the Liberal Education tradition require students to integrate what they learn back to themselves, but it also aids students in developing capacities of analytical inquiry, moral judgment, and social responsibility. Professors of Liberal Education not only expect their students to learn philosophical methods of thinking, but also to practice those methods through the examination of many great historical

thinkers across a variety of disciplines, cultures, and lifestyles, connecting social issues from the past with the persisting social issues of today. Developing philosophical capacities through engaging historical problems sharpens the application of those capacities to the encounters we experience everyday.

Primarily because of the highly specialized nature of the disciplines within American higher education, few disciplines hold students accountable for developing their philosophical capacities. The advancement of philosophical capacities does not necessarily entail registering for a philosophy class or two and reading the “canon philosophers” of the Western philosophical tradition. Reading a philosopher’s work may or may not influence a person philosophically because developing philosophical capacities requires more than simply a general reading of the texts. Rather, the advancement of philosophical skills requires a mentor’s guidance on how to apply philosophical thought and skills to texts, everyday happenings, life circumstances, political affairs, and social issues. Whether the mentor’s teaching approach is more comparable to a Socratic or a Confucian has little relevance in light of the enriching education a person could earn from developing his/her philosophical capacities to the fullest potential.

Through implementing philosophical discourse into the foundations of and across all disciplines in American public higher education as a requirement within each specialized field, students can have opportune access to the resources required for cultivating their philosophical capacities. Moreover, cultivating philosophical capacities can efficiently help us understand these nearly unsolvable conflicts and have the philosophical aptitudes to mediate them within the broadest contexts possible, rather than unknowingly drifting to one extreme or the other.

32. Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 8-11.

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