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Kant on Teaching Philosophy

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1. Introduction

In 1765, Kant issued an *Advertisement* for the four lecture courses he would be delivering in the winter semester of 1765/66, on Metaphysics, Logic, Ethics, and Physical Geography (Kant 1905). Instead of merely outlining the course syllabuses, Kant prefaced the document with what would nowadays be called a ‘statement of teaching philosophy’.¹ As far as I am aware, this is the only place

¹ As a teacher of philosophy, I find this expression profoundly irritating, because of the ambiguity between ‘teaching *philosophy*’, and ‘*teaching* philosophy’. It also makes it almost impossible to use a search engine to find anything about teaching *philosophy*, since most of the hits are statements of *teaching* philosophy.

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where he explains his approach to teaching,² and it is an approach which (apart from the first point below) is remarkably consistent with what professional educationalists consider to be best practice in the 21st century.

In view of the radical nature of Kant's ideas, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to them. John Ladd (1982) summarises the *Advertisement* in a general account of Kant as a teacher, derived largely from Vorländer's biography. His main purpose is to show that Kant's approach to the teaching of philosophy presupposes that philosophy is very different from other disciplines, in that it fosters the independence of thought which is central both to the concept of enlightenment and to the concept of the autonomy of the will in ethics. Eugene Kelly (1989) provides a complete translation of the *Advertisement* into English, and prefaces it with a few brief remarks. Interestingly, Kelly is almost entirely negative about the *Advertisement*. He says that if Kant had submitted it for publication in the *APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy* (of which Kelly was editor at the time), he would have rejected it, on the grounds that it was too long-winded, it contained too much technical terminology and it said too little about the *content* of his lectures. Its only saving grace, according to Kelly, was that Kant showed a genuine *concern* for his students.

The articles by Ladd and Kelly are the only two writings I have been able to find which discuss Kant's *Advertisement* in any detail. In what follows, I shall give a much more sympathetic account of Kant's approach to teaching philosophy, and relate what he says to current theories of good practice in university education.

2. Students too Young for Philosophy

Kant starts off on the wrong foot by telling his prospective students that they are too young to study philosophy, since their understanding

² Kant's late work *Pädagogik*, edited by F.T. Rink, might be expected to contain something about teaching philosophy; but in fact it is about the upbringing of children, and not 'pedagogy' in the modern sense.

and reason are not yet mature enough for it. Being taught philosophy too young is the cause of:

the precocious garrulousness of young thinkers, which is blinder than any other form of self-conceit, and less curable than ignorance.

It is unclear from the rest of the document how far Kant believed the problem could be overcome. If he seriously believed, with Plato for example,³ that there is a minimum age below which philosophy cannot be taught without doing more harm than good, then he should not have been teaching philosophy to undergraduates at all. And it needs to be remembered that students entered university even younger than is the norm today—Kant himself matriculated at the age of 16 (Kuehn 2001, 62). If he merely believed that there was a problem which could be addressed by more enlightened teaching methods, then he could have been less patronising, and given his students more positive encouragement. He should have addressed them directly rather than in the third person, as did his contemporary John Stewart at Aberdeen, in his *Some Advantages of the Study of Mathematics, with Directions for Prosecuting the Same* of 1748 (Wood 1993, 10–11). Again, he should have told them, for example, that they were embarking on a peculiarly difficult but rewarding course of study, which he would help them through.

Nevertheless, Kant did believe that it was possible to teach philosophy to young people, provided the teaching followed the natural order in which the human understanding develops. The problem was not so much that undergraduates were too young, but that certain preliminary stages had to be gone through before students were introduced to philosophy itself. As Kant says:

³ Plato set the minimum age as high as 50 (*Republic*, 540a), though Socrates was perfectly happy to discuss philosophy with youngsters such as Theaetetus. In the late 1980s there was a public debate as to whether philosophy should be taught at A-level, with some professional philosophers arguing that, although students were mature enough at 18, they were not at 16. In my view, children are more open to philosophical discussion before they are subjected to the rigidities of GCSE and A-level curricula. Some of the most exciting philosophical discussions I have witnessed have involved primary schoolchildren using the methods of Matthew Lipman (Lipman 1988). Kant (1912a, 146 fn.), seems to backtrack somewhat when he says ‘Thus it is quite easy to ground enlightenment [i.e. thinking for oneself] in *individual subjects* through their education; one must only begin early to accustom young minds to this reflection.’

The natural progress of human knowledge consists in the understanding:

- first training itself to arrive at clear judgments on the basis of experience;
- then attaining concepts through these judgments;
- then knowing these concepts through reason, in relation to their foundations and consequences;
- and finally knowing them as a coherent whole by means of science [in the German sense of *Wissenschaft*, meaning the systematic knowledge of any discipline].

Teaching must follow exactly the same route.

In other words, students should not be presented with highly abstract concepts until they have matured enough to understand them. This means starting by making judgments about particular cases, and only later bringing them together into a theoretical structure. This is good advice for any discipline, and it anticipates modern educational techniques, such as problem-based learning, and the use of case studies. To give just one example, it is notoriously difficult to teach statistics to students of psychology or economics, if it is presented as an abstract system which has to be mastered before it is applied. It is much better to start by introducing individual statistical techniques as and when they are needed for solving particular problems, and only later to put them into a theoretical context. Much the same might be said of formal logic, which often mystifies students if it is not first applied to concrete and relevant examples of reasoning.

3. Philosophy and Employability

Kant's implicit message is that, to be a genuine philosopher, you must have attained the last of the above stages. However, this stage is *not* relevant to employability, because Kant agreed with Socrates (Xenophon 1923, 1.6.13) that philosophy should not be a paid profession (despite the fact that Kant himself received a salary as a philosopher):

you will clearly see that it is very unnatural for philosophy to be a paid profession, since it contradicts its essential nature if it accommodates itself to the craziness of market forces or the rule of fashion.

Instead:

by its very nature, it should essentially be reckoned only as an adornment of life, and, so to speak, one of its dispensable embellishments.

According to Kant, one of the evils of modern society was that people considered it necessary to be a sophisticated intellectual in order to advance in life. There was therefore pressure on the universities to give students a semblance of philosophical wisdom, without going through the stages necessary for their intellectual development. The consequences were dire:

the students pick up a sort of reason before their understanding is fully developed. They wear borrowed scientific knowledge, which is, so to speak, draped over them rather than having grown within them. Consequently, their mental capacity is as undeveloped as it was before, but at the same time it has been seriously corrupted by the delusion of wisdom. This is the reason why you often come across intellectuals (especially academics) who show little understanding, and why universities send more dull wits out into the world than any other state institution.

This is strong language indeed, and one wonders what Kant's colleagues would have thought of his addressing his students in such terms. Kant was equally rude about (at least some) academics in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In B172–3, he argues that judgment, or the ability to apply rules to particular cases, is an innate ability, which cannot be taught. It cannot be taught, because teaching consists in supplying 'rules drawn from the insights of others', and if the person concerned cannot apply rules, they cannot apply any higher-order rules as to the exercise of judgment. In a footnote he adds:

Lack of judgment is essentially what is called 'stupidity', and it is the sort of handicap which cannot be remedied. If people are obtuse or mentally limited simply because they lack the appropriate level of understanding, or concepts of understanding, they can certainly be improved through education, even to the point of becoming scholarly. But since

lack of understanding is usually accompanied by lack of judgment, it is not unusual to come across very learned people who, in the application of their learning, often betray that lack of judgment which can never be rectified.

These ‘scholarly’ and ‘very learned’ people presumably include fellow academics.

So far, Kant has stressed the irrelevance of philosophy to employability. The other side of the coin is that all the stages of intellectual development necessary to become a philosopher are highly relevant to employability, except for the final stage:

It is expected that a teacher will educate students first to use their *understanding*, then to use their *reason*, and finally to become *academics*. Most students do not become academics. So the advantage of such a method is that, even if students never reach the final stage, their education has made them better trained and more intellectually accomplished for a non-university career.

Indeed, university teachers are neglecting their duty if they do not inculcate general intellectual skills:

The trust of the state is being abused if teachers fail to increase the intellectual abilities of the young people in their charge, and educate them to *their own* more mature insight in future, but instead deceive them with a supposedly already complete philosophy, which was thought up for their benefit by other people.

In other words, teachers should remember that only a small proportion of their students are going to become academics. Students should be taught in such a way that they all develop their understanding so as to benefit them in any later career. This is also essential for those few students who are destined to become academics, since they will become bad academics if their heads are filled with abstractions before they are ready for them—postgraduate training can be left till later.

Again this is good advice. Some academics think of university as a training school exclusively for future academics. For example, Dennis Hayes (Hayes 2003) writes:

. . . [the] sole purpose [of the university], as a creator of knowledge, is research, and such ‘teaching’ that goes on is subject to the requirements of the research process. . . . The

only test of the success of university 'teaching' is whether it produces a new generation of creative and critical academics.⁴

Related to this is the widespread feeling among academics (and students) that anyone who fails to obtain a reasonable 2.1 is really a failure, because they are not qualified to proceed to postgraduate research.⁵ Such an attitude has always been unsustainable, and it is even less sustainable in an age of state-supported mass higher education. As Kant was aware, philosophy is the ideal subject for developing the understanding, or, as we might put it today, for training students in 'transferable' or 'key' intellectual skills and attributes. The corollary is that these skills should be made explicit; that teaching methods should focus on developing them through the subject content of the discipline; and that students should be assessed positively on the extent to which they have acquired such skills (as well as knowledge), and not negatively on the extent to which they have failed to make the grade as potential academics.

Kant's biographer, Manfred Kuehn (Kuehn 2001, 358–9), citing Rudolf Malter (Malter 1990, 398), tells the following little story, which throws further light on Kant's attitude towards the majority of his students in the middle:

One of Kant's students reported that he often introduced his lectures by saying that he lectured neither for the very bright (*Genies*), because they would find their own way, nor for the stupid, because they were not worth the effort, but only for the middle, who were seeking to be educated for a future profession.

⁴ See also my reply (MacDonald Ross 2003).

⁵ This became very evident during a nationwide consultation carried out in the mid 1990s by the then Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC). It attempted to formulate a definition of 'graduateness' which would apply to *all* graduates, whatever their subject and whatever their degree class. The project failed, partly because of the difficulty academics had over specifying any positive skills or attributes distinguishing graduates with a low class of degree from non-graduates. The HEQC's successor, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), took the bit between its teeth, and produced 'qualifications frameworks', defining minimum standards of attainment for all graduates (QAA 2001). Interestingly, these include just the sorts of critical and argumentative skills Kant considered to be exclusive to *philosophy* graduates. For further discussion of the qualifications frameworks, see MacDonald Ross 2002, 106–111.

One might quibble about Kant's neglect of the extremes—the best students can be stimulated to an even higher level of performance, and the weak can often be raised to an acceptable level. But his point remains that the focus should be on the large majority of students in the middle, who are unlikely to become academics.

4. Philosophy as *sui generis*

Kant makes a sharp distinction between the teaching of philosophy and that of other disciplines, on the grounds that other disciplines have a body of knowledge which can be taught, whereas philosophy does not. There is no textbook of philosophy, because there are no established philosophical facts. As he puts it:

Many of those who have learned history, jurisprudence, mathematics, and so on, nevertheless decide on their own accord that they have not yet learned enough to teach it to others. On the other hand, why are there so many people who can seriously imagine themselves, in addition to their other business, being perfectly able to pontificate about logic, morality, and the like, should they wish to get involved in such trivialities? The reason is because in the former sciences there is a common standard, whereas in the latter everyone has their own.

The mistaken belief that there is a body of philosophical knowledge which can be transmitted to students is:

the origin of an illusory science, which passes for genuine currency only among particular people in a particular place, but is rejected everywhere else.

If Kant had been writing after he had developed his critical philosophy, he would have had to modify this claim. Although he retained the view that *metaphysics* as a body of transcendent knowledge cannot possibly be a science, he came to believe that the synthetic a priori knowledge contained in the Transcendental Analytic could be taught as a systematic doctrine like any other science. This would have been what he confusingly calls his *System of Metaphysics*, which he promised in the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique*

of *Pure Reason* (Kant 1904, Bxxxvi), but which he never wrote. It is confusing because he normally uses the word ‘metaphysics’ in the pejorative sense of the illusory science of transcendent reality—God, immortality, freedom, and cosmology. So his mature position would have to be that there *are* some philosophical facts in relation to the world of experience, but that there is no body of *metaphysical* knowledge about the reality which transcends experience.

Many philosophers will no doubt disagree with Kant’s claim that there is no metaphysical knowledge, and may even see it as reinforcing the student relativism they strive to overcome. However, this is not a reason for rejecting Kant’s approach to the teaching of philosophy, because everyone must at least agree that all claims to metaphysical knowledge are *contested*. This means that students cannot become philosophers unless they learn to think and reason for themselves, rather than absorb a body of established knowledge, like lawyers or medics.

Elsewhere Kant makes it clear that philosophy is *sui generis*, not merely in the negative sense that it lacks of body of knowledge, but in the positive way it develops the habits and skills of rational criticism. In *What is Enlightenment?*, Kant (1912) begins with the following clarion call:

Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his understanding without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* ‘Have courage to use your own reason!’—that is the motto of enlightenment.

Kant accepts that there are many circumstances when people must toe the party line: civil servants and soldiers must do what they are told, and pastors must preach the teaching of the church, even when they disagree. But in an age of enlightenment, everyone has the separate right to function as a ‘scholar’ (*Gelehrter*), as Kant puts it— that is, to publish writings which subject established policies to rational criticism.⁶ And as we shall see, it is this ‘scholarly’ disposition which is developed only through the teaching of philosophy.

⁶ Kant says more about this in 1912a, 144–146.

In the *Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant (1907) argues explicitly that the Faculty of Philosophy is superior to the higher faculties of Divinity, Law, and Medicine, which are ‘higher’ only in the sense that these subjects are studied after a degree in philosophy. Its superiority consists in the fact that, whereas the higher faculties merely provide a professional training, philosophy uses reason to criticise the very foundations and methods of the other disciplines. It is interesting to note that, in modern times, research has shown that graduates in philosophy are better prepared for postgraduate programmes in subjects such as business studies and law than graduates in explicitly vocational disciplines (Adelman 1984).

Kant’s triumphalism about the special nature of philosophy is unlikely to endear him to the teachers of other subjects. At least in recent times and in the West, it has been the mission of universities to produce graduates of *all* disciplines who are distinguished from mere trainees by being autonomous, critical thinkers about their specialism. Kant may well have been correct about how students in other faculties were taught in the eighteenth century, but the very idea of a university has moved on since then. However, the real question is whether actual educational practice conforms to the rhetoric. When I said at the beginning that Kant’s prescriptions for the teaching of philosophy were remarkably close to modern educational theories, I was referring to theories about university education in general, covering all disciplines. But unlike other social scientists, educationalists are as *prescriptive* as they are *descriptive*. They are not primarily concerned to describe how university teachers actually teach, but how they *ought* to teach if they are to achieve the objectives of a university education. The general view is that the traditional format of lecture, seminar, and sat examination are not conducive to autonomous critical thinking, and that teachers in all disciplines (including philosophy) need to change their ways quite radically—and in precisely the way Kant recommends. Kant’s claim about the special nature of philosophy would have seemed much less outrageous if he had said that philosophy is unique in that it *cannot* be taught by traditional didactic methods without turning it into a pseudo-science, and that other disciplines would be taught *better* if they used the methods which are necessary for philosophy.

5. Starting from the Students' Level

If we now move to Kant's more specific recommendations as to how philosophy should be taught, he says that teachers should take into account the level of understanding which students have actually attained, and not assume that they have the same level of understanding as the teacher:

But all this must be proportionate to the level of understanding which the preceding exercise must necessarily have brought about in the students, and not to the level of understanding which the teacher observes (or thinks he observes) in himself, and which he even falsely assumes to be present in his students.

This may seem obvious, but it is a common failing of teachers in all disciplines to assume that students are, or ought to be, capable of understanding anything which the teachers themselves can understand. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that, in the post-Humboldtian university, teaching is supposed to be conducted in the context of the latest research, which encourages teachers to talk above the heads of their students. However, this ideal can be realised without assuming that students are capable of understanding the latest articles in journals intended for an audience of professional academics (MacDonald Ross, forthcoming). If we are to give students a hand-up towards our own level of understanding, we must reach down to where their hands currently are.

It is also worth noting another of Kant's digs against his fellow academics—that they themselves sometimes understand less than they think they do.

6. Philosophy as an Activity

Kant's next recommendation comes in the form of a sound-bite:

students should not learn *thoughts*—they should learn *to think*.

This expresses the essence of Kant's educational philosophy, and it is in complete accordance with the modern stress on active learning.

Students should not be the passive recipients of the thoughts of others, but they should acquire the ability to think for themselves. Graduates who have acquired this ability will continue as life-long learners, whereas those who have merely learned what they have been taught are unlikely to develop further.

7. The Teacher as Guide

There then follows another sound-bite:

the teacher should not *carry* [students], but *lead* them, if he wants them to be destined to *make progress* by themselves in future.

In other words, students will not make any progress after they leave university if they passively follow what they have been told. The teacher must lead them, in the sense that they are guided to make their own progress. This is essentially the same as the modern dictum (*horribile dictu*) that the good teacher should be ‘a guide on the side, not a sage on the stage’.

8. The Transition from School

Kant then recommends that university teaching has to undo the damage done to students by the way they have been taught at school:

Students come fresh from school, where the method of teaching accustomed them to *learning*. Now they think they will *learn philosophy*; but this is impossible, since they must actually *learn to philosophise*.⁷

⁷ Kant makes a similar point in the Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1904, Bxiii), when he says 'However, reason should not learn from nature like a schoolchild, who merely regurgitates whatever the teacher wants, but like an authoritative judge, who compels the witnesses to answer the questions *he asks them*.'

I am sure that most of today's philosophers will sympathise with Kant's complaint. Pupils at school are trained to give the best possible answers in examinations, at the expense of thinking actively for themselves. There are exceptions to this generalisation, but the pressure of league tables makes it increasingly risky for schoolteachers to encourage originality. When school leavers arrive at university, especially in subjects such as philosophy, they are confronted with a totally different philosophy of education, in which they are expected to involve themselves actively in their own learning, and manage their own time. They find it difficult to accommodate themselves to an academic culture in which philosophy is something you *do*, rather than something you are *taught*. Many of them assume that the curriculum will be delivered to them through their ears in lectures, and they flounder when they are expected to read difficult texts critically, and to think for themselves in discussion and when writing essays. Unfortunately, Kant doesn't provide any specific recommendations for bridging the interface between school and university.

9. Philosophy as an Inquiry

Kant's next recommendation is that:

The distinctive method of teaching philosophy is *zetetic*, as some of the ancient philosophers called it (from the Greek *zetein*), meaning 'enquiring'; and it only becomes *dogmatic*, or 'definitive' in various of its branches when people's reason has already been more practised.

The term *zetetic* comes from Sextus Empiricus (Sextus Empiricus 1933, I.3), who described the sceptical school as:

the *zetetic* school, because of its activity in enquiring and thinking.

Here Kant is flagging his indebtedness to Sextus, whose scepticism he was familiar with long before he was awoken from his dogmatic slumbers by Hume (Kuehn 2001, 48). He agreed with Sextus that we

are compelled to believe in the reality of phenomena, but that we can never satisfy our desire to know noumena; and the Kantian terminology of phenomena and noumena is already there in Sextus (Sextus Empiricus 1933, IV.9). Kant's method of thesis and antithesis in the Transcendental Dialectic is exactly the sceptics' method of balancing the arguments in favour of a dogmatic claim with equal and opposite arguments against it. In short, Kant's whole critical philosophy can be seen as an attempt to objectivise the world of experience against a background of scepticism about our knowledge of transcendent reality.

Kant doesn't specify which branches of philosophy become legitimately dogmatic, but he clearly thinks that students should learn in a *zetetic* way until their reason is fully developed. The implication is that, even if philosophy teachers have sufficient grounds for supposing that they themselves have access to the objective truth, they should not teach it dogmatically, but they should lead their students towards it zetetically. This is wholly in accordance with modern methods of learning by inquiry, whereby students are led to use the research methods of their teachers to construct their own understanding of the content of their discipline.

10. No Authorities in Philosophy

Kant's final recommendation is that any course text should be used, not as an authority, but as a piece of writing which should be thought through and argued with:

the philosophical author used as a primary text for teaching should not be treated as the archetype of judgment, but only as an occasion for making one's own judgment about him, or even against him. The method of thinking through the text and drawing conclusions from it oneself is essentially what students want to be proficient at. Not only can it be useful to them, but any definite insights acquired at the same time must be treated as incidental consequences, and they only have to plant their fertile roots within themselves in order to enjoy an abundant harvest.

I am not convinced that all students *want* to be proficient at thinking through the text and drawing their own conclusions from it. Many would prefer to be told what to think. Nevertheless, Kant makes the fundamental educational point that university students, especially in a subject like philosophy, *ought* to apply their own thinking to texts, and not merely accept them as delivering a curriculum to be absorbed passively.

Kant is even more radical when he says that any insights acquired are incidental. His thesis is that education is primarily about developing intellectual competence, and that subject knowledge is relatively unimportant. This again is fully in accordance with current thinking.

Kant comes back to this point at the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1904, B865), in the Architectonic of Pure Reason. Here he distinguishes between ‘historical’ knowledge⁸, when people know only what they have been taught, and ‘rational’ knowledge, when their understanding has arisen from the use of their own reason. For Kant, it is only the latter sort of knowledge that has any value. As he says:

So suppose someone has, in the strict sense, *learned* a system of philosophy—for example, that of Wolff. They would have in their head all the axioms, explanations, and proofs, together with the structure of the whole system, and they would be able to count everything off on their fingers. However, all they would have would be a complete *historical* knowledge of Wolff’s philosophy. They know and judge only as much as has been given to them. If you criticise one of his definitions, they won’t know how to come up with an alternative one. They have taught themselves on the basis of someone else’s reason—but the capacity to imitate is not the capacity to be creative. In other words, the knowledge did not arise in them *from* reason.

Although, objectively, the knowledge is certainly an instance of

⁸ In English and Latin as well as in German, the term ‘historical’ had long been used to contrast the empirical with the rational—for example, the Natural History Museum in London contains empirically discovered exhibits, and Hobbes contrasted the historical, or empirical, with genuine, deductive science in the Epistle Dedicatory to *De Corpore* (Hobbes 1839, ii). However, here Kant seems to mean second-hand knowledge (literally, ‘learned by being told a story’), as contrasted with knowledge acquired either by direct experience or by independent reasoning. This is made clear in his ‘What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking’ (Kant 1912a, 141), where he contrasts ‘historical’ belief based on mere testimony with knowledge based on empirical evidence.

rational knowledge, in the learner as subject it is merely historical. They have understood and remembered, that is, they have learned well; but they are no more than a plaster cast of a living human being. Knowledge that is objectively rational can only *originally* have sprung from the reason peculiar to humans. So knowledge in the subject can also be called rational only if it is drawn from the universal sources of reason. And the same sources, namely principles, give rise to criticism and even rejection of what has been learned.

Kant could hardly make it clearer that mere rote learning is not philosophy. For students to become philosophers, they must learn to *think* autonomously and critically.

11. Accommodating the Ideal to Reality

Despite Kant's bold claims about teaching methods, there is no evidence that he actually implemented them. Like everyone else, he delivered traditional lectures.

He was operating in a climate in which teaching methods were closely controlled by the state. At the beginning of the document, he says that the problem of teaching philosophy within these constraints 'cannot be completely overcome'. At the end he says that:

Only extreme necessity, which has power even over philosophy, can force it to conform to what is generally approved.

I take this as a confession on Kant's part that managerial constraints prevented him from implementing his ideal philosophical education. A quarter of a millennium later, we must ensure that similar managerial constraints do not prevent us from fulfilling Kant's ideals in the 21st century.

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