Stanley Cavell and the Education of Grownups

Edited by Saito, Naoko and Standish, Paul

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Stanley Cavell and the Education of Grownups is a volume in the ongoing series ‘American Philosophy’ (Fordham University Press). Given this, the former part of the title does not arouse any suspicion, for Cavell is an American philosopher; in contrast, the latter half may have a mystical flavour, both because of the paradoxical combination of ‘education’ and ‘grownups’ and with regard to its pertinence to philosophy. Odd though it may seem, however, the central intention of the editors, Naoko Saito and Paul Standish, is fully articulated in that very expression—the intention to rethink philosophy as ‘the education of grownups’.

Perhaps surprisingly to most educational researchers, ‘What is philosophy?’ is a live question, concerning which there is no agreement even among first-rate contemporary philosophers. This is not least because ‘what is philosophy’ is a normative question rather than an empirical one about what philosophy is or has been taken to be. Nonetheless, there has, since the professionalisation and institutionalisation of philosophy as a distinct academic enterprise, existed a near consensus among ‘academic philosophers’ that the philosophy of education is a branch of practical philosophy, namely an applied philosophy in the sense of the ‘philosophy of’ the sub-field of education. The editors find this stance totally unsatisfying. Drawing insights from Cavell’s notion of philosophy as the education of grownups (which was first characterised in his The Claim of Reason, 1979), therefore, they aim to transform academic philosophy’s conception of itself: ‘questions of teaching and learning, as of what it is to progress toward the good (and what that good life is), are internal to philosophy in its most characteristic and perhaps central endeavors, … In consequence, the idea of philosophy of education as a branch or as an applied field of the pure discipline of philosophy misunderstands the nature of both. Hence, the truth of philosophy as education. Hence, the importance of the education of grownups’ (pp. 12–13).† It is in this light that this book, I think, deserves not only the attention of philosophers and those interested in Cavell, but also a broader response from educational researchers. For, presumably, more than a few educational researchers share concerns about the relationship between educa-

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tional disciplines and their ‘parent’ disciplines.

Following the editors’ lucid ‘Introduction’ comes Cavell’s own contribution, ‘Philosophy as the Education of Grownups’, in which he revisits his own phrase by reflecting once again upon the opening paragraphs of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. His Wittgensteinian portrayal of the human condition highlights our dependence on our two essential directions: ‘conventionality’ and ‘naturalness’ (p. 29), and gives credit to the very idea of philosophy as the education of grownups: ‘It is … the internal connection between what Wittgenstein proposes as the signature practice of philosophizing … with the most fundamental of the matters we can be said to learn … that I am calling the positive sense Wittgenstein gives to the concept of philosophy’ (pp. 23-24). In his brief ‘Coda’, with which this book ends, Cavell echoes the main point in the notion of philosophy as the education of grownups, by stressing the endlessly continuing process of our self- and communal- renewing. He expounds the idea of § 109 of the *Investigations*: ‘that we already know what we need to know when philosophy comes into play, that what seems unknown is something in principle familiar to us’ (p. 208, italics in original). The core idea of philosophy as the education of grownups is crystallised in the ongoing link between ceaseless learning, our familiar language and the human condition. The link is by no means fixed, but is rather the interaction involving what Cavell calls ‘the truth of skepticism’ or ‘the moral of skepticism’ (Cavell, 1979, p. 241): ‘for Wittgenstein human language plays the role of the a priori. What we have “always known” is the condition for our knowing anything whatever, namely human language’ (p. 208).


Rather than discuss every article, I will, due to space limitations, allude only to the editors’ articles respectively, and then to Hilary Putnam’s: the latter stands out for me and for my purpose here, as his concern over the subject of philosophy, especially over the split between analytic and continental philosophy, is distinctively aligned with (and perhaps occasionally against) Cavell’s and the editors’.

Paul Standish, in ‘Skepticism, Acknowledgement, and the Ownership of Learning’, resists the sense of ownership prevailing in contemporary educational settings. He claims that ‘while it [the sense of ownership in education] opens some possibilities, it forecloses others, with implications for the nature of knowledge and the nature of the learner alike’ (p. 75). Standish’s discussion is buttressed by Cavell’s main thrust that our basis in the world or our relation to it is not that of knowing but of *acknowledgement*. The force of his argument becomes more apparent when he makes a convincing case that the opposite of ‘disowning’ is acknowledgement (p. 83).

Naoko Saito in her chapter elucidates Cavell’s notion of philosophy as the education of
grownups, by making more explicit the interrelatedness between the items Cavell has long addressed: democracy, language, ‘the politics of interpretation’, moral perfectionism, Emerson’s idea of ‘the gleam of light’, what Thoreau calls the ‘father tongue’ and so on. Her account makes it clear that at the root of the existence of human beings, both collectively and individually, lies our ‘prophetic dimension’, namely the process of education. Her perspective is well expressed in the following two sentences: ‘we need always both initiation into and departure from the language community’ (p. 176, italics in original) and ‘the self’s relationship with language already and always necessitates the standpoint of otherness within and without the self’ (p. 184).

Compared to these editors’ straightforward remapping of philosophy as the education of grownups, Hilary Putnam does not seem quite as vocal about this reconceptualisation, although he was one of the first to make the point and elaborates elsewhere on it (Putnam, 2006). Putnam devotes his chapter to his persistent assault on the fact/value dichotomy which, while a philosophical issue, still exerts ‘a powerful influence’ (p. 44) on many who ‘consider themselves “grownups”’ (p. 37). A flaw in the dichotomy, in his view, was first acknowledged by Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch, and then further discussed ‘by Stanley Cavell and more recently by John McDowell and myself [Putnam]’ (pp. 51–52). Education is needed, Putnam argues, to get out from under the pernicious influence of the fact/value dichotomy, hence philosophy as ‘the education for grownups’ (p. 37). This indirect approach to the issue of this book is certainly not a smooth path, but one that, for that reason, invites the reader to examine the possibility of reconfiguring philosophy as the education of grownups. I shall say a few words on this.

For all their commonly dismissive attitudes towards the fact/value dichotomy, it is important, Putnam reiterates, to recognise the difference between Cavell’s and McDowell’s views. While McDowell focuses on the way we agree with one another through our conceptual and linguistic capacities, Cavell draws much more attention to disagreement. It is not difficult to see that the space given to education in philosophy depends on their stark difference in emphasis. Whereas the McDowellian approach is backward-looking, the Cavellian approach is forward-looking, as it were. A most obvious difference, in my view, can be found in their interests in the issue of realism. McDowell is concerned with ‘whether we are in touch with reality’ (McDowell, 2009, p. 121); Cavell’s central preoccupation is something quite different. In their interpretation of a passage of Cavell’s Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism, the editors remark that: ‘What is aspired to is typically understood in terms of a new reality—the good city, the good society, with the recognition that our city is necessarily a “city of words”’ (p. 11, note deleted, italics added).

Connectedly, Cavell’s refusal to use the (conventional) terms and parlance in which the issues concerned have been framed also shows both the attractions and difficulties of establishing a new mode of philosophical endeavour as the education of grownups. Cavell’s prose is certainly idiosyncratic, although, as the editors put it, ‘[i]t is certainly not that he writes in any kind of specialized jargon—say, like Heidegger—nor that his prose is technically demanding—like, say, John McDowell’ (p. 3). However, McDowell’s technical style has at least one advantage: the existence of an immediate and appreciative audience of his writings. This shared form of cumulative academic sensibilities and responsibilities should not be underestimated, both because academic disciplines often ‘progress’ this way and because a new mode of enquiry can come from within. It is here that Putnam puts some distance between Cavell and himself: ‘philosophy in “the more conventional sense” can also be “education for grownups”’ (p. 52).
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says more bluntly, in the interview article (whose interlocutors are the editors of this book), that ‘when Stanley [Cavell] describes his vision for philosophy it’s hard to see any room for analytic philosophy. That’s my problem’ (Putnam interviewed by Saito and Standish, 2014, p. 13). It might be debatable, albeit fascinating, to assume that the philosophy of education is at the centre of philosophical enquiry. Even if it is the case that many traditional philosophical questions and human experience are, to a lesser or greater extent, penetrated by ‘the educational’, much the same would be true of ‘the political’, ‘the religious’ or of course ‘the linguistic’ (in their broadest possible senses).

This is not so much a criticism of Stanley Cavell and the Education of Grownups as my view of its achievement: to ensure the effects of two-way traffic between general philosophy and the philosophy of education (as a distinct part of general philosophy).³ The massive achievement of this book is not only this. It also opens the door to another partner, the education community. This book can be read in a number of ways. What I have discussed here is but one way of reading it. And yet, I do believe that this book will inspire many educational researchers to investigate further the relationship between their disciplines and their ‘parent’ disciplines, thereby adding a new set of voices to those ‘parent’ disciplines and expanding the possibilities of educational studies as well as of the concept of education itself.

Notes
1. Unless otherwise indicated, the page references in brackets refer to the book under review.
2. For a fuller review of all articles included, see Stanley Bates, 2012.
3. It should not be assumed, however, that I still fall into the dualistic split between general philosophy and the philosophy of education, the overcoming of which is a central ambition of this book. My view is rather that, given many different types of philosophy being written today, it would be very hard or perhaps simply vain to make generalisations about ‘what philosophy is’. I do not think there is a single heartbeat in philosophy, but this book assures us that a great deal of work in what has been called ‘the philosophy of education’ would be taken to heart by ‘general philosophers’ of various kinds. That is, even if it may be empty to attempt to ‘generalise’ what philosophy is, it is certainly of great importance to recognise diverse lines of possible development of philosophy. This is to suggest that the work called ‘the philosophy of education’ broaden what philosophy can do.

References