

Review of

A History of Western Philosophy of Education in the Modern Era (vol. 4)

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STEFANO OLIVERIO
University of Naples Federico II

A “Myōpic” *Geistesgeschichte* of the Modern Era

Volume 4 of *A History of Western Philosophy of Education* (henceforth HWPE) focuses on “the modern era,” which is understood as the period that spans the years from 1850 to 1914. There is a sense in which this is a fairly typical periodization – starting with the inception of the positivist age and finishing with the great conflagration of the First World War. To adopt an insight of Roberto Calasso (2019), this is the last period in Western civilization bearing distinctive and identifiable traits before what he calls “the unnamed present” emerged as our historical condition.

The volume is structured in nine chapters, which address the most important philosophical trends of the period under consideration: from Dewey and pragmatism (chapters 1 and 5, respectively by Leonard Waks and James Scott Johnston) to the continental traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics (chapter 2, by Deborah Kerdeman), the philosophies of dialogue (chapter 3, by Mordechai Gordon), psychoanalysis (chapter 4, by Deborah Britzman), critical theory (chapter 8, by Christiane Thompson), and the linguistic turn (chapter 9, by Paul Standish). Moreover – and I will come back to this later in this review – two chapters are dedicated, respectively, to philosophy and early childhood (chapter 6, by Stephanie Burdick-Shepherd) and to philosophy of race and the traditions of embodied knowledge (chapter 7, by Kal Alston).

In her introduction, the volume editor, Andrea English, suggests that a thread connecting all the chapters is a reflection revolving around “the question of what it means to be human” (p. 1). One of the philosophical-educational achievements of the philosophers and philosophical schools of the modern era was that of divesting this kind of question of any metaphysical tone and of recognizing “the *difference* and uniqueness of every human being” (p. 4). In this sense, this age of Western philosophy “gives us a toolkit for beginning to define a contrasting meaning of otherness” (p. 4). Accordingly, the three main concepts inherited from the Enlightenment era (see volume 3 of the series) – those of *perfectibilité*, *Bildung*, and relationality – also receive a specific spin in the modern era that takes seriously otherness and takes leave of the reference to an alleged eternal essence, which might have been still present in some interpretations of those concepts.

The way in which the authors of volume 4 engage with the period 1850 to 1914 is most interesting. I will confine myself to highlighting two points. First, with the possible exception of chapters 1 and 5, all the chapters also include figures clearly exceeding this chronological frame and, indeed, in many cases they include contemporary authors. The volume thereby insinuates something more than the fact that the philosophical schools and intellectual trends which it addresses have had a long-standing impact. In my reading, this stretching of the modern era up to more recent times indicates that – despite many undeniable differences – the questions we have to cope with today may find their roots therein, and, thus, the way in which the philosophies of the modern era held them in

thought still appeals to us. To pick up only several instances, one may refer to how chapter 3 engages with relational ethics not only in reference to Buber and Levinas, but also by establishing a most interesting bridge to Nel Noddings's educational thought; or, again, to the focus on Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, Wilfred Bion, and Donald Winnicott in chapter 4, dedicated to psychoanalysis and education; or, finally, to the way in which, starting with Marx, the discussion in chapter 8 about critique as "the mark of educational experience, or *Bildung*" (p. 221) culminates in the more recent appropriations of the heritage of the Frankfurt School in contemporary educational theory.

The second aspect I would like to highlight is the identification of the "educational meaning of difference" (p. 1) as the major characteristic of the modern era in philosophy of education. This is anything but an obvious interpretive move. In most intellectual histories of the modern era the stress usually lies, instead, first, on the rise of positivism and a cult of science which deeply impacted not only on theories and philosophies, but all societal machinery and practices; and, secondly, on the reaction to positivism (see, for instance, Masur 1960; Hughes 2008). In other words, in these histories, the question of science (and also of the containment of its imperialistic aspirations) is the very centrepiece of the modern era and this arguably holds also for philosophy of education: Has not the latter's status been constantly contested by the mounting challenge of the sciences of education? Has not a relevant part of its energy been devoted to resisting the indictment of insignificance that the positivist mindset (broadly construed) has made against it, mostly effecting what Odo Marquard (1981) has called an erosion of competence [*Abnahme der Kompetenz*], understood as the decrease of thematic domains in which philosophy (of education) is expected to be relevant (see Oliverio 2018)?

The issue of science is clearly present in volume 4, such as when the subject/object dichotomy presiding over social sciences and the cult of evidence are problematized through the conceptual tools of the phenomenological methods in chapter 2 and of the Wittgensteinian, Heideggerian, and Derridian views about language in chapter 9. However, this theme operates as an *undercurrent* whose significance derives from the specific perspective dominating the volume, namely that of humanness and difference. Thereby, the authors – precisely through their historiographical efforts – contribute to the ongoing endeavour to preserve for philosophy of education an "autonomous" place in the encyclopedia of education studies, and one which amounts to something more than just the compensatory task that Marquard seems to ascribe to philosophy. This may be one of the merits of this volume and of the undertaking of HWPE as a whole.

It is precisely to the project of the HWPE series which I would like to turn in order to provide a general assessment of the significance of volume 4. To begin with, we can consider HWPE as a history of philosophy *sub specie educationis* in that it spotlights "philosophy's contribution to conceptions of education" (p. xii), as David Hansen and Megan Laverty put it in their series introduction. This is evident when, in volume 4, important philosophical schools and traditions are revisited in the light of their meaning for education.

This happens through two "strategies": first, by taking into consideration the *explicit thematization* of educational questions in the respective traditions (e.g. *Bildung* in Gadamer's hermeneutics or the issue of education after Auschwitz in Adorno); and, second, by unearthing what a contemporary Italian educationalist, Franco Cambi, would call "the implicitly educational/pedagogical," that is, the innermost educational core which lies "enveloped," "enfolded" (this means, etymologically, "implicit") in philosophies. Speaking of the "implicitly educational/pedagogical" entails that the task of philosophy of education does not consist in applying philosophical theories as such or simply transferring some philosophical concepts to the educational domain in an extrinsic manner, but in unfolding, "developing" (that is, dis-enveloping) that educational/pedagogical tension which animates them. It means revisiting the history of philosophy through an educational lens rather than – as is the case in the first strategy – studying how philosophers have thematically spoken about education.

I would like to maintain that through the skillful balancing of these two strategies HWPE offers not only a history of Western philosophy of education but a refreshing take on philosophy in accordance with the Deweyan (Dewey, 1989, p. 261) idea that "[t]here is probably no better way to realize what philosophy is about when it is living, not antiquarian, than to ask ourselves what criteria and what aims and ideals should control our educational policies and undertakings."

Additionally, in the interpretation here proposed, there is a second (and complementary) gesture that HWPE undertakes, namely eliciting the philosophical significance of figures who do not belong *prima facie* to the classic canon of philosophy. For reasons of brevity, I will pinpoint only one instance in reference to chapter 6, dedicated to Maria Montessori and the Reggio Emilia pedagogy. To make my point, I want to note that one of the most important and original Montessori scholars in Italy, Giacomo Cives, is also the author of a valuable history of Italian philosophy of education in the 20th century *in which Montessori is, however, never mentioned (let alone discussed)*. In contrast, as chapter 6 bears out, addressing *Montessori as a part of philosophy of education (and not simply educational theory) in the modern era* can be highly rewarding and it can grant new insights in reference to both the author (think of the themes of “observation” and “invitation”) and the way in which we understand philosophy (of education).

This second interpretive gesture, which makes manifest the *philosophical* significance of figures not belonging to the canonic histories of philosophy, is particularly evident in the aforementioned chapter 6 and in chapter 7 (in which Kal Alston reconstructs “the genesis and development of a modern American analysis of education through the lens of Blackness” [p. 177]). I want to suggest reading this gesture in reference to Rorty’s (1998) survey of the four genres of the historiography of philosophy, distinguishing, in his terminology, “rational reconstructions,” “historical reconstructions,” “*Geistesgeschichte*,” and “doxography.” In his view, the first three are the only really fruitful ones, while the fourth is written off as merely inspiring boredom and despair about the meaning of philosophy. In addition, Rorty mentions what he calls “intellectual history,” which does not represent *per se* a genre of the historiography of philosophy but is fundamental in his argumentation because it is the backdrop against which we can operate with the three genres that he considers as valuable: indeed, we can deploy these “only once we have, with an eye both to contemporary needs and to the recent writings of revisionist intellectual historians, formulated a philosophical canon” (1998, p. 270).

Volume 4 contains both rational reconstructions and historical reconstructions, but I would like to intimate that, on the whole, it is *Geistesgeschichte* in the specific Rortyan sense of “canon-formation.” Indeed, it aims at establishing a “fresh canon” of philosophy of education, as Hansen and Lavery clearly state (pp. xi–xii), and does so in an “honest” way, as Rorty (1998, p. 270) would put it – that is, without the typical narrowness of so many histories of philosophy (of education) – precisely because it is able to enlarge our understanding of what can and should count as philosophy (of education), casting an eye over the broader field of intellectual history and, thereby, including also works, endeavours, and ideas that are not usually comprehended as a part of the typical histories of philosophy.

We can add that it is *Geistesgeschichte* with a specific character, which I will call *myōpic* (I will explain the reason for this spelling). Remarkably, the theme of “myopia” – in the usual, metaphorically derogatory application of the word – appears both at the very beginning and at the end of volume 4 (see, respectively, p. x, where the general editors highlight “[t]he redeeming fact that the conversation [in the Oakeshottian meaning of this idea] is always already at hand to assist us in facing the problems of ‘presentist’ myopia”; and p. 248, in chapter 9, where this same Oakeshottian motif of the conversation is rehearsed against the “myopic vision” typical of a technical, data-driven, and measurement-obsessed view of education). However, when using “*myōpic*,” I am referring to a completely different meaning and, indeed, a positive one. *Myōps* in ancient Greek is the gadfly, and this is the word that Socrates uses to describe his role within the city (see his *Apology*, 30E). Volume 4 as *Geistesgeschichte* is *myōpic* because it acts as a gadfly and invites us to shake up our routines as philosophers of education by looking at the questions of the subject in new ways.

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About the Author

Stefano Oliverio is an associate professor in the Political Science Department at the University of Naples Federico II. He is the co-editor, together with Gert Biesta, of the book series *Theorizing Education* for Routledge and a member of the board of co-convenors of Network 13 (Philosophy of Education) within the EERA (European Educational Research Association).