

Review of

## *A History of Western Philosophy of Education in the Age of Enlightenment (vol. 3)*

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*R, my inner self, sits patiently on the shoulder of M, my professorial self, as M stares dejectedly at the screen, trying to start a review with the deadline for submission approaching.*

R: Hey, M. Why so glum?

M: It's tough reviewing the volume on Enlightenment philosophy of education in Megan Laverty and David Hansen's five-volume history.

R: Why's that?

M: There's much to admire – an informative introduction by Tal Gilead and seven essays on big thinkers and important developments. They deal with so much: Locke by Lisa McNulty; Rousseau by Amos Hofman; Condillac, Helvétius, and Condorcet by Grace Roosevelt; religion, rationalism, philanthropinism, and *Bildung* by Rebekka Horlacher; Pestalozzi, Herbart, and Fröbel by Jürgen Oelkers; Wollstonecraft and Harriet Taylor Mill by Katy Dineen; and Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller by Naoko Saito. And yet they leave out so much as well. I'm stumped acknowledging that and raising a concern I have in 1,250 words.

R: As I see it, five impressive volumes in print attest to substance and value. Concentrate on your question. What's on your mind?

M: Remember the commercial with a little old lady, bug-eyed at a big bun with a tiny burger, yelling, "Where's the beef?" I'm yelling, "Where's the history?" Let's see the historicity of life from which Western philosophy of education has emerged!

R: That's a vivid image but explain your question. You just said the Enlightenment volume deals with big thinkers and important developments. Isn't that giving us the history?

M: In a way. Philosophers, and philosophers of education, often abstract away the historical setting of past texts, concepts, and questions. Too often it leads to expanding waves of exegesis around a shrinking patty of historical experience.

R: Okay. Exegesis isn't history. What would make it history?

M: Of the essays, I most admire Naoko Saito's on the historical voice of American transcendentalism. She does not ignore the textual basis but interprets its intended meaning through the circumstances in which it was voiced. She suggests that Emerson, Thoreau, and Fuller's exhortations in their time should speak to us too, for outward pressures now confine self-transcendence even more strongly. The historical context, then and now, sets the locus of interpretation.

R: And you think the other essays don't do that as well. They take past texts as a given, each not an advent. Without accounting for the text's coming to be, interpretative discussion largely ignores the context of it and subjects selected passages and points from primary and secondary sources to exegesis. To you, that's too much bun. But to others, the given text is the burger. Why is that wrong?

M: Because today the philosophy of education generates lots of exegesis weakly rooted in our current lifeworld. Does the philosophy of education now help persons form themselves in their historical circumstances?

R: Well, contributors talk about important issues.

M: Of course. There are circumstantial foci – feminism, critical pedagogy, decolonization, Indigenous peoples, climate and environment, social justice, and many variants of critical theory. But we do it primarily by discussing a few generative texts tangential to the historical lives that most people are living.

R: Perhaps, but you're vague. What do the essays miss from the Enlightenment lifeworld? Out with it!

M: Okay. Take how Amos Hofman boils Rousseau's philosophy of education down to child development and the formation of citizens, concluding in the first that Rousseau usefully raised consciousness, leading to child-centred pedagogies, and in the second that he chased down dead ends and then gave up on them.

R: Well, subsequent literature on both education and Rousseau features those topics.

M: Some. But were they central to Rousseau or his lifeworld? Child development and the formation of citizens have been other people's issues projected onto Rousseau's work and experience.<sup>1</sup>

R: Let's not debate that. To engage Rousseau in his lifeworld, what did interest him and why bother with it?

M: To begin, far more than Hofman does, we need to recognize empathetically how wildly improbable a historical occurrence Rousseau's life and work was. Motherless at six days old, functionally fatherless at 12, a lone, ill-educated vagabond with only the clothes on his back, manages through a picaresque youth to... It's a story well told by Rousseau himself, and Leo Damrosch, and examined in depth by major critics such as Jean Starobinski.

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<sup>1</sup> Rousseau commended Plato's *Republic* to those interested in the formation of citizens and added "public instruction no longer exists and can no longer exist, because there is no longer fatherland, there can no longer be citizens. ... It has nothing to do with my subject." (Rousseau, 1979, p. 40.) Rousseau used the advanced thinking about child development available to him to illustrate and exemplify his moral argument that what appears as original sin in human character emerges from faulty educative practices (see Rousseau, 1979, p. 48, with the argument developed in pervasive detail throughout *Émile*). Religious authorities, both Catholic and Protestant, proscribed *Émile* on the basis of this argument and Rousseau defended it thereafter in works such as *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, citoyen de Genève, a Christophe de Beaumont, Archevêque de Paris*.

R: Yeah, it's a story you can't make up. But why do we need it for Rousseau's philosophy of education?

M: By itself, chains of textual exegesis can make a substantial body of work mean most anything. Historical context helps eliminate implausible ones and suggest possibilities that may be important.

R: I suppose you see Hofman's exegesis of Rousseau as needing such contextualization.

M: Indeed. To me, much of it is historically implausible, as when he draws Rousseau's basic premises together: "A successful union of this man [Émile] and that woman [Sophie] will be the nucleus of a new social order, one based on the principles expounded in the *Social Contract*. This entire process is perceived as an obedient response to the call of nature..." (p. 74; cf. p. 81). Condorcet might have entertained something like this a generation later, but the historical realities of Rousseau's life experience make it highly probable that he had something other than "a new social order" on his mind in the *Émile* and the *Social Contract*.

R: So, what might that have been?

M: Rousseau developed an acute awareness of two basic life challenges. First, he found himself weak and dependent, and yet at odds with encompassing collective authorities – social, religious, political, economic – that had no rightful claim to his loyalty, deference, or conformity. Hence, Rousseau, and everyone else, lived in a despotic world. Second, to conduct his life in the face of that situation, he needed sound self-recognition and the ability to recognize the self-awareness of others. Self-actualization entailed working the interstices in a despotic system. That's what he aimed at.

R: I can get that, as long as we read the *Social Contract* as setting criteria of legitimacy that no power or authority could actually meet, and see the problem of recognition of self and other as an aspirational problem imposed on us by our constraining actualities. Do you take those two concerns as the central ones in the Enlightenment?

M: Largely. I'm not sure how it applies to Locke insofar as he was an apologist for the ideology of possessive individualism, but I may be overly critical of Locke. Otherwise, the problem of living in the face of absurd and arbitrary authority and of recognizing human worth in oneself and others, finding a way around the former to the latter, had very wide, many-sided pertinence.

R: Could you illustrate that breadth?

M: Well... doesn't Goethe restate Rousseau's *First Discourse* as powerful tragic drama through *Faust*? And doesn't Hegel's concept of recognition, and the role of the master/slave in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, sublimate into high abstraction the process of recognition Rousseau laid out in "Émile and Sophie," the posthumous coda to *Émile*?

R: That's interesting, a very shorthand exegesis? Can history as lived experience actually have a role in our understanding of what people were thinking in other times and places?

M: Obviously, it must be Janus-faced, a looking back at looking forward, the reciprocity of text/context. But let's be radical and start with the root. The root is neither the text nor the context. As Saito's Emerson recognized, as did many others, the root is *the person thinking*. It's a historical root, too often lost sight of in philosophical exegesis, as *In the Age of Enlightenment*. What we call the Enlightenment arose as persons became aware of the difficulty they had understanding themselves and other persons, as they recognized that to realize their human possibilities they had to engage in acting with, on, and for themselves and other persons, all not merely in obeying their inner urges and external constraints, but in deciding how to try to use those in forming their lives. That's the person entering

into human majority, into maturity, a process Kant called *Aufklärung* [Enlightenment], a contingent, active self-clarifying, over and above the roles one had to play. Why? Because we suffer the consequences.

## References

Rousseau. (1979). *Émile: Or, on education* (A. Bloom, Trans.). New York: Basic Books.

## About the Author

**Robbie McClintock** served on the faculty of Teachers College, Columbia University, until retiring in 2011 as the Weinberg Professor in the Historical and Philosophical Foundations of Education. Since then he has published on formative education and its cultural effects and has been developing an innovative website, A Place to Study, to support self-formation and liberal learning in the digital commons.