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www.aipph.eu

Dr. Werner Busch
Président

Rothenberg 21
D 24 109 Melsdorf / Kiel
Tel. +4340 8501
e-mail: Werner.Busch002@aipph.eu

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Some remarks on the teaching of philosophy at the secondary level against the background of the UNESCO Publication Philosophy a School of Freedom (2007)

Following the experience and discussions in the Association Internationale des Professeurs de Philosophie (AIPPh) I will present 4 points as commentary to the UNESCO study Philosophy a School of Freedom from 2007 and to the UNESCO report from 2011.

After a preliminary consideration of some prejudices against the teaching of philosophy at schools my topics are:

- 1. We have to avoid false controversies: There never was a real contradiction between an approach to philosophy by history and that by problems.
A real controversy is that between wisdom and rationality.**
- 2. Viewed historically there are no difficulties in teaching in the framework of competences. Philosophy is stronger.**

- 3. There is a large gap between theoretical and pedagogical research at the universities concerning philosophy.**
- 4. For expanding philosophy in the schools we have to demonstrate in new ways, that the basis of philosophy is good citizenship.**

Preliminary consideration: The danger of the contingency of philosophy

Even in our western societies we often find the prejudice that philosophy in schools is not very helpful for education because in philosophy there is no position which is not also denied by another philosopher. Those who do not want to admit philosophy in schools seem to follow the curious sentence of Cicero in "De divinatione", where he wonders, that there is no so absurd argument which is not proposed seriously by a philosopher.¹ There is a similar remark by Hannah Arendt. In 1964, in the famous interview with Günter Gaus about the terrible turn of Germany in 1933, she said that the bad thing with intellectuals is that they find a reason for anything whether they understand the circumstances or not. This seeming contingency of philosophy is an obstacle for many politicians and persons who are responsible for schools to confront children and students with philosophy. That is why I think that it would be necessary to develop a strategy to convince our public that philosophy – in our sense and naturally in the serious sense of Cicero and Hannah Arendt – is essential for a rich, creative and responsible growth of our young generation. I know that it is very dangerous to divide philosophy into a good and a bad one. But as the UNESCO study "Philosophy – a School of Freedom" supposes, the great tradition of our philosophy in West and East is peace as a condition for open dialogues however controversial they are.

Before finding this strategy how to convince, we have to avoid false controversies, because the public doesn't understand us, if we argue in a wrong direction. For one I think that the discussion about a historical or a problematical approach to

¹ Cicero, De divinatione 2,219: „Sed nescio quo modo nihil tam absurde dici potest quod non dicatur ab aliquo philosophorum.“

philosophy was of this sort. The basic document of UNESCO Paris for our conference now declares the eternal peace between the chronological and the problematical approach to philosophy. As corroboration of that peace I'll give two examples to underline my

first thesis:

1. There never was a contradiction between an approach to philosophy by history and one by problems. By tradition both are integrated.

Naturally I know for a long time that there are different national curricula according to the history of philosophy or by themes. But how to integrate both ways? In her introduction to UNESCO publication 2007 Moufida Goucha mentions the tension between the notions of philosophy and philosophizing.² With these distinctions she follows Immanuel Kant in the presentation of his university courses for the year 1765/66. It is well known that Kant intended to teach his students philosophizing against a simple historical knowledge of philosophy. But also philosophizing naturally includes and presupposes using methods and arguments from other philosophers whether they lived in the past or are contemporary. We know that for Kant e. g. Plato and Aristotle from the history and Moses Mendelssohn from his present time was essential. In other words, for Immanuel Kant there is no philosophizing without history of philosophy or without the arguments of other philosophers, whether they lived in the past or were contemporaneous. This reference can be helpful for the teaching of philosophy today.

I will give two examples.

The first one: Some years ago I had to teach a philosophy group of 25 boys and girls who were at the age of thirteen. Under the theme of Play or Game I decided

² Goucha, Moufida: *Philosophy – A School of Freedom*, UNESCO-Publishing, Paris 2007, p. XVII

that every student should present and explain a computer game according to criteria we had developed. They liked doing this. After the presentation we asked whether we could define the notion of play or game, in German: Spiel. We all know that we touch the problem of Wittgenstein with his reflections about definition, about description or analysis of language. We can introduce the methods of Plato and Aristotle; we can treat Friedrich Schiller or the homo ludens of Johan Huizinga and so on. In other words, a theme or a problem in philosophy leads us to history, if the teachers are so honest that they communicate from whom they have learned the used methods.

The second one: International Philosophy Olympiad - IPO

Who ever has read essays written by the selected IPO-students, realizes very quickly that these texts consist in an interesting combination of self developed arguments and materials which the students found in the great philosophers of our tradition. I remember very well the essay of the Finnish student Sarri Nironen, a girl, who won the gold medal in 2009. The chosen topic given by FISP was: „Must a work of art be beautiful in order to be a work of art, or may a work of art be ugly as well? If the latter is possible, why should we take interest in it?“ Beside many artists and poets Sarri Nironen cites Aristotle, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Heidegger and Wittgenstein for her convincing argumentation in a very independent form. The later discussion of the IPO students about the problem of time at Helsinki University showed the same phenomenon: For the young philosophers there is no contradiction between historical and actual self-argumentation.³

Concerning the curricula in fact I noticed that, even if the students like to go back to the roots, they prefer being taught after themes because there is more choice than in a purely historical way. I propose to integrate history of philosophy by discussing themes methodically.

³ IPO Helsinki Finland 2009, Publications of the Finnish National Commission for UNESCO No 85, ed. Pekka Elo et alii, Helsinki 2010, esp. p.39 ss.

There is another controversy which should be solved as a condition for a successful argumentation for the teaching of philosophy in schools: the controversy between the priority of wisdom, generally attributed to eastern philosophy, and of rationality, generally attributed to western philosophy. I think that's no seeming controversy but a very important real one. Even in our western societies there is a strong trend to wisdom against rationality too, but up to today I do not notice any plausible argumentation for combining both notions and showing the compatible adequate place for them in the area of human understanding. At this point I formulate a desideratum.

In February 2011 we got the program for the World Congress of Philosophy in Athens in 2013. There is a plenary session announced under the title "Philosophy as Practical Wisdom". I'm very curious whether we'll find there the solution of the projected problem.

My second thesis is:

2. In a historical view there are no difficulties teaching in the framework of competences. Philosophy is stronger.

During my long time as philosophy teacher in schools we had some different frameworks for structuring teaching and learning. We had aims and objectives of instruction; we had key- competence instruction; we had standards of formation and key-qualifications, now we have the competences. In the Land of Germany where I had been teacher we had four competences: Self-competence, competence of experience, competence of the methods and social competence. In the future we will have most likely other frameworks university pedagogues and administration will give to the teachers.⁴ But fortunately we have the history of philosophy. It is well known that Immanuel Kant explained the common understanding as thinking by three points: 1. To think oneself, 2. To think always at the place of someone else (a view he found in Adam Smith), 3. To think without contradicting himself.⁵

⁴ UNESCO Report Teaching Philosophy in Europe and North America, Paris 2011, p.41 n. 60.

⁵ Kant, Immanuel: Kritik der Urteilskraft, § 40

The result of the three aspects of thinking is a critical one. It is easy to distribute these three points of Kant between the four competences. The first point naturally is self-competence, the second point is intellectual and sensible social competence against solipsismus intellectualis and moralis, in other words to imagine how another human being realizes the world with all the different circumstances and acts in it necessarily in a different manner. The third point includes that it is impossible to think without contradiction without being able using methods. For Kant it is clear that there is no real thinking without knowledge of objects and materials, in other words: There is no teaching and learning without including reality – by nature interdisciplinary -, called competence of experience. The opposite would be nonsense. My conclusion is that we naturally can organize philosophy teaching after the four competences or some other competences, but philosophy as key-discipline is always stronger all over the time, so that we can wait quietly for the next invented framework. I think that we have to defend our best philosophical tradition.

My third thesis is:

3. There is a large gap between theoretical and pedagogical research concerning philosophy at the universities

Teaching of philosophy in schools means to translate philosophical theory into the Lebenswelt of the children and into forms and examples youngsters can understand. Often this translation is not so easy to do.⁶

Considering the subjects of the conferences in philosophy, nearly all are dedicated to the theory of philosophy itself. Very few conferences address philosophy teaching in the schools. For the enrichment of the philosophical culture that is certainly a good proportion, but it is evident, too, that there is not much support from the universities for the teachers who have to manage the difficult reality of the classroom. The consequence of this lack of support is that often philosophy

⁶ Busch, Werner: Philosophieunterricht zwischen Normalität und Abenteuer, Zeitschrift für Didaktik der Philosophie und Ethik (ZDPE), 2/2005, p. 151-157

teaching in schools is deemed as too academic, a criticism which Time Magazine from October 2010 raised against the form of philosophy-lessons in French schools. This criticism is a challenge to give a clear answer defending philosophy in schools by AIPPh steering board members Vice-president Herman Lodewyckx (Belgium) and Secretary Riccardo Sirello (Italy). Even if we have to estimate the strong efforts of Ekkehard Martens and Johannes Rohbeck⁷ to promote philosophy didactics in Germany, our demand must be that all universities themselves procure the translation of academic philosophy by training their students in teaching philosophy, too, also by pictures, stories, films, every day problems and other illustrations, all sustained by good readers. On the secondary level too we have to use teaching materials as they are mentioned in the UNESCO report of 2011 for philosophy for children. Only in this practical, concrete way can we find the public appreciation we want for the teaching of philosophy in schools. Researches in philosophical didactics must open highest university careers too.

A great advantage of philosophy teaching in schools is that we have the chance to use all methods which were developed in the history of philosophy, the phenomenological, hermeneutical, analytical, dialectic and the speculative method. This pluralistic turn, focused on by mentioned Ekkehard Martens from Hamburg, mostly is opposite to academic philosophy whose researches often are based only on one way to philosophy.

This charming pluralistic form of philosophy in schools leads to the problem, how philosophy can procure good citizenship.

My fourth and last thesis is:

4. For expanding philosophy in the schools of the world we have to demonstrate in new ways, that the basis of philosophy is good citizenship.

In November 2010 'l'Association Française des Professeurs de Philosophie de l'Enseignement Public' had a meeting with high representatives of the Ministry of

⁷ See UNESCO Report 2011, p.56.

Education in Paris concerning the reform of philosophy teaching. The report says that the teachers in schools offered resistance against the expectation that the philosophy courses would contribute to the lowering of social tensions.⁸ The French teachers of philosophy presented an open concept of philosophy, but confronted with the above mentioned contingency of philosophy how can we help to produce good citizenship by real philosophy?

Before this background many countries prefer to promote religious education with firm regulations or a restricted curriculum in morals or in civic affairs.

Many essential relations between human beings are not direct, but indirect, a fact the new UNESCO report stresses in respect of the use of philosophy which seems to be indirect.⁹ This indirect relation can be shown by the antinomy between the rule of law and free thinking. That's a tension which Socrates and Immanuel Kant lived in their special historical contexts and which we have also to sustain in our philosophy instruction. Without obedience to the laws there is no peace in our societies, without free thinking we cannot answer the ever changing challenges which are given always by nature and by the diversity of human beings themselves. There is a need of much courage and much confidence of citizens and politicians to bear this existential tension. But this antinomy is a very fruitful one considering that it is one of the keys to creativity without whose power we will have no good future. I think we will find a way to convince our social and political partners. An excellent example can be Finland whose school system is evaluated as one of the most successful systems of the world. Naturally the Finnish curriculum includes several compulsory courses in philosophy.

At the end I would like you to follow me by going back to my third thesis:

As a concrete step in establishing a bridge between theoretical philosophy and teaching philosophy in schools, I propose emphatically that one of the main contributions in the plenum at the World Congress of Philosophy (WCP) in Athens 2013 should be a conference about the practical teaching of philosophy. Although

⁸ Revue de l'Association des Professeurs de Philosophie de l'Enseignement Public, novembre-décembre 2010, p.81s.

⁹ UNESCO Report 2011, p. 43

the program proposed for the next WCP seems to follow business as usual, there could be a convenient place for teaching philosophy in the plenary session under the title "Philosophy and Public Life". Every philosopher in the world should realize that there is not only the theory of philosophy but also the concrete teaching of philosophy in schools.

If there is a universal right on philosophy¹⁰, this right cannot just mean participating in university lectures. This right basically means getting to know philosophically well-argued standpoints of everyday habits and religious representations, well-reflected standpoints which can help to achieve and keep peace. That is ultimately possible by teaching philosophy in schools.

¹⁰ Vermeeren, Patrice, *Die Philosophie und die UNESCO*, translated by Hans Jörg Sandkühler, Deutsche UNESCO Kommission e.V., Bonn und Frankfurt, 2011, p. 58