

Exercising Theory: A Perspective on its Practice

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Published online: 20 April 2011
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Abstract What is the task of educational theory or philosophy if it is not merely conceived as specification of philosophical doctrines in the realm of education? In my view it is the particular task of educational-philosophical theory to *work critically on* the historically developed cultural constructs that shape our (educational) experience. Thus, the activity that educational theorists are to perform is the critical reflection of the “limits of our world” by drawing on philosophical references and theories. In this text I describe this activity drawing from my own research practice with a particular focus on its relation to what is called thinking.

Keywords Educational theory · Research practice · Writing · Différance

The starting point of my reflection is the objection to an understanding of theory as a remote and introspective whole which has detached itself from that with which it is engaged. This conception of theory has repeatedly been problematized within the tradition of Western educational philosophy. Self-sufficient binary oppositions such as ‘theory and praxis’ and ‘theory and empirical research’ have been continually called into question. Adorno has e.g. time and again described thinking as an *act(ivity)* and theory as a *gestalt of practice*. As such, thinking is part of an activity that is able to change something about the world. Simply put: theory is a world-changing act.

Adorno’s negative dialectics also distances itself from a conception of theory which defines itself in terms of its opposition to “empirical research”. For Adorno it is not the structure or comparison of data and thought that is decisive; rather what is problematic is the manner in which identification is at work in the prevalent conceptions of both “theory” and “empirical research”. This notion of identification is connected to a detached conception of method in which method remains external to the objects of study (to which it [method] is being applied). For Adorno the sterility of this methodological procedure

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cannot be productive in either a theoretical or empirical sense. Knowledge can only be generated in an activity where the limits of one's own approach become articulated. As such, theory constitutes a fragmented and self-reflexive undertaking.

My intention here is not to develop and defend a particular understanding of educational theory based on Adorno or any other philosophical figure. Thus, I do not want to provide "grounds for justification", which has been the mode of philosophical reflection since ancient philosophy: from the ancient Greek conception of *logon didonai* to Kant's epistemology as a critique of pure reason to Habermas' examination of validity claims to analytic philosophy's logical analysis. Philosophy has clearly held on to the demarcation between that what is justified and what is not, even when the line has been drawn very differently by various theoretical traditions. Moreover, it is not a question whether solid argumentation is a virtue—some even view it as the essential or defining philosophical characteristic within educational theory. And while I will not, in what follows, be dealing with "grounds for justification", this nevertheless does not mean that thinking and thought are excluded from my consideration.

The aim here is not to advance yet another "understanding" among many other approaches to theory to be argued for and possibly established. When I say that theory has little to do with a detached attitude, the question I am primarily interested in is related to that *what we do* when we exercise theory. In other words, I will examine this form of activity and, as such, expand the perspective of theory in its concreteness.

The importance of this kind of analysis and work is due to the recent and increasingly frequent association of educational theory as so-called "foundational research" within the educational sciences. The transfer of the concept from the natural sciences implies that pedagogical theory exists for itself, that it is something detached from social practices and thus from pedagogical practices. Is an educational-philosophical approach like the 15th decimal place of the gravitational constant? The transfer of the concept from the natural sciences also implies that there is something like *fundamentals* or *basic principles* in education, i.e. immutable and uniform points of reference standing in contrast to their "real-world counterparts". The concept of "foundational research" is part of a nomenclature that relegates theory to self-referential reflection, a place without the world. Correspondingly, "empirical research" is conceived as a mode of investigation that fully "engages" with the world, e.g. by providing governing knowledge within the educational system.

It is precisely such conceptual usages that stand in opposition to an elaborated notion of theory in relation to practice and empirical research. Perspectives and terminologies generate reality: They sketch out the educational field and contain certain tacit priorities. For this reason, I am interested in examining that which we often lose sight of when we conceive of theory simply as an available and objective foundation. The point of departure here is my impression that in the exercise of theory the activity is "extinguished" in order to make the result of this activity present, namely the "theory". I will elaborate this thought by looking more closely at the question of method; for it is method—in the "modern" sense—that guarantees the possibility of extinguishing the subjects' research activities. In other words, method enables an understanding of the scientific result as something which can be represented as detached or independent of the researcher's activity.

A critical analysis of method not only clarifies the process of the autonomization of knowledge in the modern period (i.e. its detachment from a truth-guaranteeing entity such as God), but at the same time constitutes a leitmotif allowing us to examine more closely the practice of theorizing. Descartes' proclamation "clare et distincte" can still be said to

characterize all scientific endeavors. That which is not clear and distinct—thus intersubjectively comprehensible—cannot be deemed “knowledge”, and thus remains mere belief. Corresponding to the methodological extinction of the research process is the inter-subjective validity-directed abstinence and self-discipline of the researcher.

However, to exercise theory means, as I will work out in the following, that we construct a relationship to the objects that we thematize, and that we also build a relationship to this practice—which includes a relationship to ourselves. These relationships to the issues and to us engaging with them cannot be made explicit in knowledge; for they are dependent on the subject and cannot be deducted from them. I will pursue this dimension of the “subjective” by shedding some light on several practices of doing or exercising theory. Applying a reflective view and carrying out a self-description, I will look at the practices of *underlining*, *contemplation* and *writing*.

Underlining is a widespread practice commonly accompanying the reading of texts. When I read, I let myself become part of what is read and expose myself to the text. However, reading does not occur in a linear fashion, and the connection to what is read is not consistent. The process of underlining is an activity by means of which I am able (besides deciding what is relevant) to *hold on to my own reading*. The line I draw is a manifestation of this relationship. The underlined text represents an accentuation which later re-iterates my attention. It is quite common that my reading is already directed by a particular question that guides it and to which my intonations are already aligned. Moreover, I sometimes jot something down in the page margin thus placing my own writing next to the text.

To perform this reading—a reading that does not become invisible—is the first step to that what is called thinking. In other words, when we begin to think, in fact, something dialogical is present—a duplication of the text, which represents an opening of oneself to the speech of the Other who is not present. In this sense we are not only concerned with the meaning and validity of “a text”—which one could claim represents a unity. Rather, the “text” is a virtual instrument that enables the reader to enter into a kind of relation to oneself—above all in the case where I attempt to remain *true* to a text.

Underlining provides me with concepts, fragments of thoughts, and even possibly arguments that outline the contours and shape of an issue. This outlining is not reducible to the construction of a body of knowledge or systematic thought. Because I do not attribute the underlining to myself, but rather the absent Other, I understand it as a caesura with what I previously understood. Reading unfolds itself around a difference of “thinking-this-way-and-otherwise”, a difference that the text already embodies. In our “listening”, our dispossession in exposition (Heidegger: *Hörigkeit*), we yield or give ourselves over to what we have read, whose polyphony is collected in reading.

The second practice that I will present is a form of *contemplation*. To be sure, this practice is associated with explorative forms of reading. When I, for example, read Derrida’s “A certain Impossible Possibility of saying the Event”, I make my reading visible. This, in turn, leads me to reflect on the category of the “impossible possibility”. In the practice of contemplation the various perspectives are brought together in order to ask how the object under consideration is identified, is referred to, and finally how this category “a certain impossible possibility of saying the event” is to be understood.

I consider such a condensation of the reading to be an essential moment of exercising theory because the issue to be observed and determined is viewed *in a variety of ways*. The issue detaches itself from a particular course or line of thought and starts to call upon innumerable reference points. By means of this, the issue takes up the quality of a *thing*—forming a conglomeration of irreducible perspectives and thus delineating the borders of

our thinking. In such situations the determination of the issue is exacerbated. Not only are various points of reference in the sense of different dimensions of explanation or theories invoked, but the issue takes up various categorical functions.

For example, Derrida's "impossible possibility" is part of a self-reflection that addresses the inaccessibility of the relationship to oneself (e.g. with regard to the "gift"). At the same time, it acts as a critical re-situation of Western philosophy, which always understood possibility as an optional availability and never in terms of impossibility. Eventually, Derrida endues the "impossible possibility" with a gesture alluding to the receptivity for the unknowable Other. As I see it, Derrida's category is relevant for educational theory because thinking the "possibility" is an integral part of every pedagogical process. This is due to the fact that education and *Bildung* are primarily concerned with the "not yet", but what *could come to be*. By moving the question of education and *Bildung* closer to Derrida's complex categorical figures, thinking becomes alienating and is experienced as resistance; for learning and educating represent exactly these relationships of ego and the Other—relationships that we commonly spell out in terms of conceptions of possibility as "option" or "alternative": "I can explain Foucault's concept of assemblage to students taking 'possibility A' or 'possibility B', etc.". In such thinking the possibility and what is to be done—the explanation of a concept—remain indifferent to one another. What happens, for instance, when the category of possibility becomes alienating? Rancière's thinking in "The Ignorant Schoolmaster" began precisely at this point, by asking how the *possibility of explanation* in educational relationships should be understood and what explanation implies for the listener.

As such, I 'perform' contemplation for the purpose of alienation, an uncertainty or multiplicity of what I had previously thought. By alienation I mean here the dissolution of the familiarity with an issue or object. This loss of familiarity can arise when competing and apparently incompatible perspectives of an issue are placed next to each other. A sudden shift or even intensification of perspective can also result in such a loss of familiarity. Here, I would like to introduce a further example.

When I reflect upon Adorno's often contemplated and widely discussed dictum "The premier demand upon all education is that Auschwitz not happen again", it is still possible that it draws the reader or listener into a deep alienation. The reason for this is that Adorno introduces a statement determining a theoretical concept (education) and, at the same time, he closes off the idea of conceptual determination: Adorno rejects conceptual determination and fills the concept of education with the *incomparable* Auschwitz. Adorno's *conceptual statement* presents the breakdown of education as a *concept*. What could education then be? Is a question like this one (from present to future) even possible? How can we talk about education after the insight that the theoretical engagement with it, not to mention its achievements rooted in the Enlightenment, were unable to prevent the incomparable horrors of the Holocaust? On the contrary, the idealized form of education, the self-confidence of humanism contributed to the catastrophic events. What do I think in this very moment?

The third practice that I will introduce, *writing*, represents to an extent the closure of alienation, even when conflict and resistance—as they are present in contemplation—are brought into the writing. Writing, which is not to be confused with what is written, is an activity, a committing of oneself to following a thought as well as its obligational force. I place certain things in the foreground and thereby fix other thoughts as points of departure or as presuppositions. I give myself over to a particular self-directed train of thought. This train of thought is not just a collection of whatever is present at hand, but rather that which is also characterized by an eventfulness and the fateful determination of this process.

Regardless of whether we continually revise what has been written, we cannot extinguish the performative quality connected to it.

A text that attempts to control everything and penetrates into the objecthood of the issues via a totality of perspective would most likely have *said* a great many things but is actually *saying* very little. In writing we exist at a limit. This limit does not just consist of the limitation of space to be filled or the limitation of time: All writing must eventually come to an end in order to *release* the text. Notably, I am always already at the limit in the process of writing because I must continually make myself into a reader: I read what has been written, and in so doing I read it differently. Perhaps I begin to underline, to contemplate in order to write anew—to write differently.

At the heart of a text taking shape lies a history of thinking, which, in order to become a text, becomes invisible. To be more specific, one cannot really speak of a finished text in terms of a “result”. There is nothing to read where reading does not occur, and thus *qua différance* will always be read differently: where the text gets under way and changes in the Other’s thinking.

Looking back at the various practices that I have described in a preliminary analysis, we may be estranged by conceptions of theory as constellations or totalities of sentences. There is so much more taking place when moving (not only between but) within the lines. Theory as totality does not grasp the activities and practices of thinking. This conglomeration of practices, which in my opinion possess philosophical qualities, does not remain external to how I see myself in what I do. *Underlining*, *contemplation*, and *writing* all move within a field of difference between understanding and not-understanding. All of these practices can be considered *translations* in which the difference between understanding and not-understanding is set in motion; a movement in which we approach ourselves by means of the Other’s voice and make ourselves speak.

What is it that I want to say here without bringing knowledge into the equation? I will follow up with a few remarks regarding the task of “theory” in the pedagogical and the educational field as I understand it.

It is relatively easy to portray the generation of theory concerning pedagogical processes when the underlying categories are clearly defined. Where “education” is measured referring to a state of knowledge or in view of defined tasks that are organized and rated according to their probability of solution, there exists a clear categorical make-up of the underlying pedagogical processes. This categorical structure may e.g. be differentiated according to different levels of competence. To be sure, in the process of constructing competence models conceptual problems can emerge. However, these models are not concerned with the categorical make-up of “education”; for here it has already been decided that we are dealing with constructs of a *capacity* that is attributable to a subject.

The category “education” or “*Bildung*” starts to lose its grip when we regard education or *Bildung* as an individual comportment or attitude. Since it is the individual’s task to understand and disclose its history and identity according to (socially mediated) references of meaning and human action, every moment bears the difficulty of its identification. One such example might be the refusal of a person to open herself to the idea of life-long learning. What does this refusal mean for the educational dimension of this person’s life? Who is in a position to decide whether this attitude might be considered a learning experience or the decision of its impossibility? To whom do we want to attribute the conceptual power to decide? It is anything but easy to judge the educational significance of experience as the example of Socrates shows: In the Platonic dialogues, he sought to demonstrate to his interlocutors that a close connection exists between ignorance and education, i.e. in the recognition of the limits of one’s own ability to know. The question of

education and *Bildung* becomes fascinating and challenging when the standards by which one could decide upon educational processes are also called into question.

It is the task of educational philosophy to reflect upon the categorical make-up of pedagogical processes. This includes the determination of pedagogical concepts such as “education”, “Bildung”, “learning”, “teaching” etc. Moreover, the reflective work extends to other categorical dimensions of education, e.g. “possibility” (see above) or “temporality”. Here, the linear logic of temporality and presence as it is widely understood in the progression of pedagogical processes—“beginning, process, end” or “pre-condition, performance, future prospects”—can be called into question.

Educational theorists concerned with categorical questions *work on* historically developed cultural constructs (such as the temporality of *Bildung* as experience or the relationship of education and power). More precisely, educational theorists are not merely executors of philosophical doctrines in the realm of education: They do not just figure out the topics and then arrive at a conclusion, e.g. the *result* when one brings together the modern concept of education with Kierkegaard. The particular activity that educational theorists are to perform is in my view the critical reflection of the “limits of our world” by drawing on philosophical references and theories. The “limits of our world” are in turn related to the approval of those categories that constitute our experience. This activity is critical and perhaps even deconstructive because it discloses the borders of our experience.

By exposing the difference between understanding and not-understanding, as I have described above, the horizons of possibility involving the constitution of pedagogically meaningful experience are critically evaluated. It should have become clear that I do not conceive of theoretical work as a self-complacent enterprise that operates from a comfortable distance. The critical self-confrontation that takes place in thinking refers as much to the work at the “limits of the world” as at the “limits of subject”; for they pertain equally to conditions under which we consider ourselves to be a “learning” or “knowledgeable” subject or even a ‘researcher’.

That we today conceive of theoretical work in terms of a self-referential framework, as a body of knowledge, as a systematic ensemble of sentences, etc. is connected to the revaluation and appreciation of method as well as the autonomization of knowledge in the modern era. What is forgotten in this context is a rich tradition that viewed theorizing as being connected with a *form of life* and a *work on oneself* (see for example Stoa). By focusing on knowledge, on the text, and on the valid proposition, we lose sight of the philosophical and scientific task to reflect upon how we see things and whether we could see them differently.