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# THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE TWENTIETH WORLD CONGRESS OF PHILOSOPHY

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# CHANGING PATTERNS OF TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

Adrian Miroiu

I investigate two issues that divided philosophers on how to teach philosophy to non-philosophers in East-European countries, specifically in Romania. First, should we focus on respectable philosophical ideas like Being, Truth, God, and Reason, or spend our time in classes discussing topics one faces in everyday life, like equity, famine, abortion, or pornography? The former alternative enforces the significant cultural role philosophy (and some philosophers) enjoyed in the last decades of socialism, while the second means a dramatic change in the way philosophy relates to real life. Second, should we support the idea that great values like goodness, justice, and freedom have an enduring, non-contextual, even absolute, character, or center on tolerance, our fallibility and the social context of life? I discuss background factors that make philosophers bound to choose between such alternatives, and argue that answers are independent of our own philosophical opinions on these topics.

**S**tarting with a story is a good way to introduce a problem (and sometimes to suggest a way out). Professor Evans told us about an Anatolian bus ride at the beginning of the nineties, during which a list of issues on teaching philosophy was formulated.<sup>1</sup> I remember that around the same time, i.e., nearly six years ago, I had been asked,

together with two other colleagues, to prepare a new handbook of philosophy for high-school students. The body that advanced the task was the Ministry of Education, the powerful and only authority in the domain, and the Ministry passed to us the entire responsibility for the project. We already had a great deal of experience in teaching philosophy, both to high-school and university students. We remembered well the restraints we met under the socialist regime, and were aware that, despite its breakdown, not many things had changed in teaching philosophy up to that very moment.

However, our task was twofold: *what*, and also *how* to change? We not only had to elaborate a new handbook for high-school students, but also to define what teaching philosophy at that level would actually mean. And, maybe surprisingly, we were aware that our work would eventually reach the hands of many people in the media, as well as writers and political leaders. Let me shortly explain why. In the eighties, philosophy enjoyed a high status in the Romanian cultural life. To adhere to venerable and high values was regarded as a mark of freedom of thought, and as an entry ticket into the world of the intellectual elite. To edit or translate great books of philosophy (like Plato's dialogues, Kant's critiques, or Heidegger's works) was a high-ranked activity. However, not all kinds of philosophical enterprise were equally applauded. The focus was on the philosophy of art, the philosophy of history and the philosophy of culture. Old ideas on the spirit of peoples were again in vogue. Seen as a sort of reflexive literature, philosophy was practiced not only by professionals, but also by literary critics and writers.

I am not sure if I venture too much when attempting to argue that this situation was, to a large extent, an answer to the political and economical conditions in my country. As different from other socialist countries, in the eighties the political system in Romania became extremely oppressive, and it was accompanied by a dramatic deterioration of living conditions. Philosophy, however, looked very attractive to us: it centered on abstract, ethereal and lofty issues and ideals which seemed far from our miserable lives. It pointed to venerable and respectable ideas like Being, Truth, God, Reason, as opposed to the lack of agreed on standards in our social and political life, in spite of the official claims. It pointed to enduring characteristics of people living together in our society, different from and non-reducible to the "socialist values." And it addressed our souls and hearts, while the official ideology pretended a monopoly on the rational understanding of social and political life.

Now, all these happened outside school. The official curriculum for teaching philosophy was strongly indebted (at least in form, if not in content) to the old *diamat* view. That is why, when in 1992 we started to

prepare the new handbook, we realized that one of our tasks was to connect teaching philosophy with expectations generally held about the role of philosophy.

But in the nineties things changed dramatically. Speaking of the role of philosophy requires specifying the context. While in the eighties the focus was on the cultural context, in the nineties the social and political contexts became more pressing. So our task was even more difficult than we had anticipated. The first group of issues we faced concerned the topics to be taught to the students. We all agreed that changes should be made, and we thus added lessons on moral and political philosophy, as well as on the philosophy of religion. But, another group of issues demanded that even more difficult choices be made. Let me mention just two of them:

- 1) Should we focus on respectable philosophical ideas like Being, Truth, God, and Reason, or devote our effort in classes discussing topics one faces in everyday life, like equity, poverty, abortion, or pornography?
- 2) Should we support the idea that great values like Justice, Freedom, and the Good have an enduring, non-contextual, even absolute, character, or center on tolerance, our fallibility and the social context of our life?

I agree with Professor Evans that a global agenda for the teaching of philosophy benefits much from a metaphilosophical account. In our case, it highlights the deep significance of the two questions I raised in the context of teaching philosophy. Answering such questions delineates the frame in which we can try to choose what to teach. In my opinion, speaking of a global agenda for the teaching of philosophy is pointless if this means that some topics are worth being studied every time and everywhere. If seen as an inventory of themes, ideas, or topics, philosophy is not able to nourish a global agenda. Consider, for example, the first question: if we decide that the focus should be on Being, Truth, God, and Reason, then what would be global? A straight answer would be this: we may favor a *text-based approach*. Under this approach, students usually become acquainted with Plato's dialogues, and learn the "philosophical method" from studying Socrates at work. Then they go to Descartes and the British empiricists, and learn to recognize philosophical ways of thinking, under different clothes. Now, this sort of approach encounters problems. First, it is too demanding. For the students have to become acquainted with the historical and cultural contexts within which Plato, Descartes, and Locke lived, and also to learn to critically read and interpret exemplary texts. It is very difficult to accomplish both goals at the same time. And, while many students found

it uninteresting to fully grasp the world of people who lived two thousand years, or even three hundred years ago, even more encountered unsurpassable obstacles in developing the ability to philosophize.

However, following the paradigm of philosophy that dominated in my country in the eighties, this was hardly regarded as a serious argument. Though different from and often even opposed to the official ideology, philosophy could not be seen as "plebeian" in its core, but rather as addressing a small elite. I strongly disagree with this position. The past nine years represented for many of those who live in Central and Eastern Europe an era of dramatic changes in attitudes and values. If we who teach philosophy can do something for our fellow companions, then we should be involved in the work of explaining and clarifying the values that face us, the attitudes we have and the choices we make.

Plato and Aristotle, Descartes, and Locke were concerned with the states of affairs in their own society. Plato's *Republic* is not just an exercise in intellectual imagery, as many of my colleagues still believe. Rather it is an attempt to answer specific, and very concrete, issues of his social and political context. For a contemporary philosopher, the extraordinary changes that took place in the part of world in which I live are very exciting indeed. But, if we are also philosophy teachers, then trying to address more people than a small elite is, in my view, a core part of our responsibility.

On the other hand, suppose that we take the focus of our activity with the students be on topics they face in their everyday life. Is it then possible to conceive of a global agenda? I have already given some examples of such topics: equity, poverty, abortion, and pornography. But to this list we can easily add religious tolerance, faith, destiny; and also other minds, thinking machines, minds and bodies, etc. The list suggests that even on this *problem-centered approach* we may account for the traditional branches of philosophy: ethics and political philosophy, philosophy of religion, and epistemology. I must confess that I and my two colleagues who worked for the handbook of philosophy were very impressed by this approach. It seemed to us that learning to philosophize by *doing* was a very good way to deal with both the *how* and the *what* in the tasks we face. For, indeed, on this approach the problems teachers choose are, hopefully, immediately seen by students as problems, and also felt as relevant to their actual concerns, not as imaginary worlds dreamt of by philosophers.

Putting this approach to work is no easy task. I will mention just two difficulties. First, it places heavy demands on the instructors. Instead of lecturing the students, instructors are supposed to guide discussions to stimulate further enquiry, to urge students to analyze ideas, clarify opinions, and assess arguments. But this could be possible only if the teachers

themselves were appropriately retrained; and that would involve a huge amount of work and funding coming from the Ministry of Education and the universities. Secondly, the agenda itself is not very easy to define. When working on the handbook, and subsequently when preparing new editions of it, reasons for developing a very specific agenda became compelling. To mention only the topics in "applied ethics," our students felt more attracted by issues like corruption, compromise, tolerance, responsibility, moral authority, and equity, rather than by euthanasia, racial discrimination or international aid. We thus found the problem-centered approach to be intrinsically context-sensitive.

This moves us back to metaphilosophy. Professor Evans has boldly stated: "philosophy is jealous and exclusive, metaphilosophy is pluralistic and tolerant." When we are in classes with our students, how can we combine these attitudes of commitment and tolerance? I will try to discuss this by focusing on an issue that was much debated in the past years not only in Romania, but also in other Central and Eastern European countries. I summarized it in the second question I raised before: Shall we support the idea that great values like Justice, Freedom, and the Good have an enduring, non-contextual, even absolute, character, or center on tolerance, our fallibility, and the social context of our life? This question is legitimate under the assumption that philosophy is functional to the survival and working of a particular society, like the post-communist ones. The question is tricky, since it starts by a contextualization of philosophy, and wonders whether or not that entails a de-contextualization. Does the fact that philosophy is functional in a certain society entail that it be transcendental, objective, and foundational? A contextualized metaphilosophy would then be jealous and exclusive, rather than pluralistic and tolerant.

The standard argument in this sense runs as follows<sup>2</sup>: under communist fundamentalism, attempts at contextualization, and emphasis on tolerance and relativism had liberating consequences. In some countries, like Poland, this was the case in the fifties; in Romania, this was still valid in the seventies and the eighties. However, after the collapse of communist fundamentalism, the need appeared for epistemological and moral certainty. People fear manipulation, and feel that objective, universal standards and values would prevent them from becoming subject to it. (It is no accident, then, that all polls show that authoritarian institutions like the church, the police, and the army enjoy the trust of a very large majority!) Note that this argument does not entail that absolute values are also needed in democratic societies like the United States. For it starts with a statement of contextualization, and only claims that in *some* contexts non-contextual, absolute, fundamental values are required.

Now, if this is correct, then there is a sense in which metaphilosophy is not tolerant and pluralistic. How then should we teach philosophy? A text-based approach looks to be favorable, since it is more feasible. But a problem-oriented approach will be more rewarding: students will become able to understand, through philosophizing on specific topics, what philosophizing consists of. They will be able to discern truth from error, right from wrong, etc. In the first year when our handbook was used in high schools, one of the main difficulty teachers encountered was choosing whether or not to lead discussions to a certain conclusion. (Sometimes teachers and students complained that the handbook did not clearly specify a true or correct answer to the questions asked, or suggest a right way to end a discussion.)

I believe that the argument is correct: contextualization may indeed entail the need for a non-contextual, absolute philosophical view. But I doubt that it is sound with respect to the situation in countries like Romania (and even Poland), for it is based on balancing two important values: liberty from manipulation on the one hand, and irreducible pluralism of opinions on the other. I agree that the balance depends upon context, but at the same time I am not convinced that the state of affairs in my country strongly points to a certain decision. Moreover, in the near future, I hope that the weight will be on pluralism and tolerance, rather than on the fear of manipulation.

I believe that philosophy has a social, though contextualized, role. For a long time my society lacked dialogue, tolerance, and an officially accepted plurality of reasonable though incompatible religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines. I consider that teaching students how to behave as citizens in a democratic liberal society in which difference and plurality are the rule is one of the main tasks of philosophers in countries like Romania.

To conclude: a global agenda for the teaching of philosophy is not to be found at the level of topics taught, nor even at the level of metaphilosophy. Philosophy is indeed exclusive and partisan in its favorite topics. But metaphilosophy is contextualized, and sometimes this condition entails competition, exclusion, and jealousy, rather than tolerance and pluralism.

However, I still believe that we can define a global agenda for the teaching of philosophy. How would this be possible? High school and universities are public arenas in which all reasonable, though incompatible philosophical doctrines should have their own places. When teaching philosophy, we must accomplish two tasks at the same time: presenting, or allowing students to express, different philosophical views; and making students understand the value of a plurality of views, and be able to discuss



them by appeal to argument. The goal of jointly accomplishing both tasks may look unfeasible as soon as we realize that philosophical views are not only different, but also incompatible. Then plurality boils down to inconsistency and intolerance. The problem can then be put as follows: How is it possible to teach philosophy to students profoundly divided by reasonable though incompatible philosophical views and attitudes? Or, in a slightly different way: How is it possible that deeply opposed though reasonable philosophical views and attitudes may meet and live together in our classes?

The answer has two parts: first, our students should be given the opportunity to discover the very existence of those different views and attitudes, and to become acquainted with their articulations. Living together presupposes knowing your neighbor, what that person feels, believes, and trusts in. That is why a part of a global agenda for the teaching of philosophy would consist of the main ideas, opinions, and methods philosophers have advanced, and our students should find out what they do or are tempted to hold. Secondly, our students should learn how to live in a divided world of philosophical views and attitudes, and to respect their fellow classmates opinions, attitudes and values. How to proceed in this sense? I do not have the time to discuss this issue at length here, so I shall mention just one approach. As you may have already guessed from the way I stated above our problem, this approach appeals to John Rawls concept of a political understanding of the plurality of such attitudes and views. A class we teach is a public space, and we may strive to foster in it what Rawls called an "overlapping consensus" as a basis for the common goal of learning how to philosophize. I think that going on this path will not be a waste of time, and that we will succeed in picking up other components of the global agenda we are searching for.

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#### NOTES

1. See David Evans, "Global Agenda for Teaching Philosophy," in the present volume.
2. I appeal here to A. Walicki's formulation. See L. Koczanowicz and A. I. Chmielewski, "The Condition of Philosophy in Totalitarian and Post-Totalitarian Poland," *Metaphilosophy* 28:4 (October 1997).