

Fusing Philosophy and Fieldwork in a Study of Being a Person in the World: An Interim Commentary

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Abstract In this article, we describe a longitudinal inquiry into what it means to be a person in our contemporary world. Our method constitutes a dynamic, non-objectifying fusion of empirical and philosophical anthropology. Field-based anthropology examines actualities: how people lead their lives and talk about them. Philosophical anthropology addresses possibilities: who and what people could become in light of actualities while not being determined by them. We describe and illustrate our fieldwork in the classrooms of 16 teachers who work in New York City public schools. We have sought in our observations to identify and think about signs or expressions of persons-in-the-making. We also touch on a series of dinner-discussions we have held with the teachers. These meetings have centered on the question of becoming a person in today's political and cultural environment, and how education figures into the equation. Finally, we also describe the weekly meetings we have held as a research team, in which we engage the play of concepts and percepts. We close with remarks on the conceptual and existential ties that can link philosophy and fieldwork in schools.

Keywords Person · Education · Teachers · Schools · Philosophy · Fieldwork · Cosmopolitanism

What does it mean to be a person in the world today? For the past two and a half years we have been addressing this question through a combination of fieldwork, discussion with teachers, and philosophical inquiry. The endeavor began with a pilot study in a local primary school in 2011–2012, where we tested ideas about what it might mean to explore

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the topic through the vehicle of fieldwork in schools and talks with teachers. During our second and third years, we have been observing life in the classrooms of 16 teachers from eight public schools in New York City. We have also met for dinner-discussion meetings with the teachers. We have addressed with them the question of being and becoming a person, drawing heavily on their experience as educators. In our classroom visits, we have sought to identify ways of thinking about how children and youth express their evolving, or emerging, personhood through the vicissitudes of the highly complex cultural life which their day-after-day attendance in school makes possible. We have been trying to formulate questions, perspectives, and descriptions that can help capture what it means to be a person in our contemporary times. In the meetings with teachers, we have sought to listen to how they perceive the question of who their students—and they themselves—are as persons, as well as whom they might be becoming.

Our purpose in this interim commentary on the project is to sketch its guiding aims and to describe our fieldwork and method of inquiry. As we proceed, we will include snapshots of what we have seen and summaries of what we have heard. We accent our method because we are not in a position, as yet, to offer conclusive remarks about our view of being a person in the world. Another preliminary point is that the perspective on the project that we express here is our own. Each of the participating teachers has contributed in singular ways to the endeavor and would have their own perspectives. We hope to assemble some of these with them in a subsequent writing.

Thinking About Persons in the World Today

The concept person is notoriously complex and controversial, both inside and outside the academy. Scholars frame the concept in moral, psychological, and sociological terms. They debate whether there is a biological or spiritual ‘essence’ to persons, or whether persons are a dynamic amalgam of nature and nurture, of biology and culture. They refine differences between the term person and notions such as self and identity. For juridical, medical, religious, cultural, and other purposes, some critics seek a boundary, with person on one side and non-person on the other. Other commentators raise ethical and political questions about such boundaries.

We do not propose to enter these debates, at least at this juncture of our inquiry. We have no settled definition of what we take to be an irreducible reality. For us, the concept person serves as a heuristic for gathering expressions of human being, as they come into view, that we witness in the classrooms and hear in the voices of the teachers. These expressions take many spoken and gestural forms. They include interactions between teachers and students. They often pivot around the academic subject matter under consideration. Their duration may be no longer than a second or two. Their diversity has mushroomed the longer our inquiry continues.

We attend to public, visible expressions of personhood. We take the latter to be signs and indices of a person exercising agency, who in the moment makes a commitment to ‘be’ a certain kind of being—for example, interested rather than complacent, responsive rather than indifferent, involved rather than removed, and articulate rather than passive (we intend these terms in a descriptive sense, because removing oneself from a situation, for example, can sometimes be a strong expression of agency). It may be true to say that persons existentially move into the world, or break into the world, every second of consciousness: one moment here in space and time, the next moment there. However, some ways of moving constitute *a reaching out, an engagement with*; whereas in others, the

person may be more or less propelled by any number of forces including routine habit. We have paid attention to how teachers and students come into the world in active ways that their shared time and space makes possible.

The study mirrors an emerging literature in which philosophers focused on educational questions undertake fieldwork while drawing upon philosophical resources for framing and interpreting their data (see the Introduction to this issue by Doris Santoro and Terri S. Wilson). Our particular approach could be construed as a union of philosophical and empirical anthropology. We picture the human being as an open (or unfinished) work, and we regard our method of inquiry in the project as an open work (Eco 1989; Jackson et al. 1993). We do not presume to be social scientists. We are not seeking to ‘explain’ personhood-in-the-making. But nor are we proverbial armchair philosophers, spinning conceptions of personhood entirely out of whole cloth. We seek understanding of what it means to be a being engaged in becoming: a being for whom education can constitute an adventure of joining the larger world (Oakeshott 1989, p. 23). Our approach is inductive, in which as mentioned the concept person functions as a term of art for capturing ways in which teachers and students substantiate their being in aesthetic, moral, reflective, intellectual, emotional, and other ways. To pay attention to these ways—and sometimes just to be able to see them, in the first place—we find it necessary to question continuously our habits of perception.

Empirical anthropology is a diverse field marked by ongoing methodological debates. Some researchers eschew traditional notions of scientific method—perceiving them as reductionist when it comes to interpreting human affairs—while others practice what Wendy Griswold (1990) dubs a provisional, provincial positivism (i.e. applied to particular, current cases or parcels of data rather than constituting an overall methodological orientation). Regardless of their theoretical differences, anthropologists as a rule engage in fieldwork. They are interested in realities: how people actually conduct their lives and what they say about them. Empirical anthropology incorporates theoretical work geared toward making sense of what people say and do. It often attends to a community’s conception of what it is to be a person or self (Geertz 1973, 1983).

Like its field-based cousin, philosophical anthropology constitutes a wide-ranging domain of inquiry (Landmann 1974). It encompasses reflection on what it means to be a person that is informed but not constrained by concrete realities. Put another way, philosophical anthropology entails normative inquiry into human possibilities, with regards to becoming persons, in light of actualities. Human beings have described themselves in a multitude of sometimes incommensurable cultural, moral, psychological, spiritual, and other terms. Philosophical anthropology calls our attention, among other things, to where persons are standing existentially as they render such descriptions. Is it necessarily inside the terms of the description itself? Or does this capacity to describe, through various media, imply an ever-widening horizon of thought and possibility? What manner of being is this that seeks to describe its own being? The persistent, worldwide diversity of art, philosophy, and religion seems to imply that persons are always something more or other than what any given description makes them out to be. We would nominate as commentators in this tradition of inquiry thinkers as diverse as Michel de Montaigne and his contemporary Marie de Gournay, Ralph Waldo Emerson and his contemporary Friedrich Nietzsche, and Hannah Arendt and her contemporary Karl Jaspers.

The fusion of empirical and philosophical anthropology as a non-objectifying approach to inquiry lacks a suitable name in its own right, one that would disassociate the method from explanatory social science, on the one hand, and from theoretical philosophy, on the other hand. The fundamental point is that our anthropological and educational imagination

in the project derives inductively from a kaleidoscope of actual human voices and acts. Rather than beginning with an hypothesis, a laser-like research question, or a fixed idea about personhood to examine, we have immersed ourselves, in a more than metaphorical sense, in the amazingly convoluted reality of classrooms. That reality has colored, textured, and complicated our philosophical predilections. We have not had a clairvoyant look into the contours of social reality and the emergence of personhood in classrooms and schools. What we have had is a no-turning-back engagement with the reality of reality which, as thinkers from Dewey (1988) to Murdoch (1970) have argued, can constitute existential protection against the sometimes imperial force of theory (as well as of fantasy and wishing). The fieldwork and discussions with teachers have afforded us a privileged glimpse into the complex, ever-shifting normative ethos in which teachers and students dwell. We characterize the ethos as normative because it seems saturated with conduct-oriented 'oughts' and 'shoulds' that flow from teachers and students alike. Some are articulated, others unspoken but nonetheless discernible. If not in so many words, these expectations (or hopes) have to do with who they are as persons and with the ways of the world writ large.

The first author's research on the moral dimensions of teaching, and later on cosmopolitanism, constitute the immediate intellectual backdrop to the project. In a series of studies based upon extended fieldwork in schools, Hansen sought to illuminate the moral and personal significance of everyday aspects of teaching (1989, 1992, 1993a, b, 1995, 2002). The method of inquiry guiding these studies featured aspects of empirical anthropology and theoretical philosophy, boiling down to an attempt to 'see with' the world rather than regarding it as a disembodied spectator might (Merleau-Ponty 1964; for discussion, see Hansen 2007). This body of research derived from The Moral Life of Schools Project, directed by Philip W. Jackson (Jackson et al. 1993). Jackson (1990) had already pioneered an aesthetically attuned, epistemically diverse method of fieldwork in schools that remains at once both impossible to categorize and inexhaustible in the insights it can yield.

The other backdrop to the present undertaking is the first author's research over the past decade on cosmopolitanism understood as an embodied, educational orientation toward experience in the world (Hansen 2011). This educational framing of a much-debated term derives inductively from multiple sources in philosophy, the arts (including literature), travelogues and autobiographies, and contemporary anthropological and sociological field-based research. Embodied cosmopolitanism points to ways in which people learn to blend reflective openness to new people, ideas, practices, and values, with reflective connect-edness, or loyalty, to local commitments and forms of life. The qualifier 'reflective' implies a critical as well as appreciative aspect. It conjures familiar notions of open-mindedness coupled with a commitment to local values and origins that is neither idolatrous nor dogmatic, and yet rooted all the same (cf. Appiah 2005). In this framing, cosmopolitanism does not constitute a new identity, as such, but rather describes a responsive, supple way of perceiving, holding, and expressing local or particular identities.

These inquiries into cosmopolitanism and the moral aspects of teaching derive, in part, from concerns about the threats to educational experience from encroaching market mentalities associated with what is often called neo-liberalism. Such mentalities commodify education and render it into a mere means to economic ends. In so doing, they can drain aesthetic, moral, and intellectual meaning out of the classroom, and thereby undermine the very process of cultivating the persons people are and might become (we have in view both teachers and students). At the same time, the inquiries originate in a hope to put forward ways of substantiating, or re-substantiating, the quality of educational experience

in school and in life. They seek to spotlight, and thus position people to build upon, ongoing attempts to render such experience deeper rather than shallower, richer rather than more impoverished, and broader rather than narrower in meaning.

We have not sought to apply or test ideas such as embodied cosmopolitanism in a direct manner in the project. Instead, they constitute a prevailing background source of perspective and questioning, alongside other sources such as our individual reading histories, previous work in educational projects, and experience as teachers. Taken together, these sources generate the ‘prejudices’ (or pre-judgments) we bring to bear, in the hermeneutic sense of forming our perceptual and conceptual points of departure—though not, we like to think, our points of arrival. We have come to appreciate anew why no single philosophical or theoretical frame can do justice to the wonders, complexities, challenges, and possibilities in being a person in the world. We have found the concepts person and becoming-a-person difficult to pin down, and this despite or because of the fact that we are amongst persons every minute of our fieldwork (and, moreover, are conscious that we ourselves may be changing). The concepts remain elusive and magnetic.

In and From the Field

Critics on both the Left and Right in the United States have for years been hammering the nation’s public school system. The critics include scholars, politicians, think tank commentators, community spokespersons, journalists, and more. Some contend that schools oppress educators and students alike under a burden of top-down dictates; others suggest that schools are still dominated by forms of ethnocentric curricula; their opposites complain curricula have been watered down because of multiculturalism; still others decry what they see as a tide of poorly prepared teachers deploying a shallow, ineffective pedagogy. Today’s discourses are also rife with contradictory claims about actual realities inside classrooms, not to mention about the fundamental purposes of schooling. We thought it would be worthwhile to inquire into possibilities for becoming persons in educational settings caught in the very midst of this unsettled political and cultural ethos. Thus we have chosen to work in public schools.

We based the selection of schools largely upon teachers who would be willing to work with us. Five of the eight settings are what are called in the USA charter schools, which feature varying degrees of additional agency compared with ‘regular’ public schools in terms of curriculum and governance, even while adhering to state standards in areas such as science, mathematics, and reading. The schools enroll students from across the city (selected through various examination and lottery procedures) and also serve students in their proximate neighborhoods. Taken as a whole, they embody the diverse cultural and linguistic tapestry of New York City. They have large numbers of students adept in several languages, and they have majority percentages of Asian, Black, and Hispanic students.

The 16 teachers teach differing grade levels and academic subjects. Every grade from Kindergarten through 12th is represented. The primary school teachers are responsible for subjects such as arithmetic, art, reading, and science. The middle and high school teachers teach one subject, which include English, history, music, science, social studies, and theater. One of the teachers provides special education services to children in the early primary grades. Twelve of the teachers are women, and four are men; twelve are White. They range in age from roughly their mid-20 s to mid-50 s, and in teaching experience from 3 to nearly 30 years. They are a self-selected group. The first author recruited them through recommendations from colleagues and other educators. All agreed to participate

during the individual meetings he held with them the summer before the second year of the inquiry. They understood that the three of us would be observing their classroom interaction with students, meeting with them for dinner-discussions, and undertaking this activity throughout the entire school year. They initially signed on for the 2012–2013 school year. However, thanks to external funding we have been able to continue working together this current academic year.

Beginning with our first meeting as a group on October 3, 2012, we have stressed the philosophical nature of the endeavor. We are not testing a hypothesis nor attempting to prove a thesis. We are not there to evaluate the teachers' work or to offer pedagogical advice. Our dinner-discussions are not *de facto* group interviews. We seek an open-ended, dialogical approach to the orienting theme of being and becoming a person. This decision parallels our relation with the concept person—that concept being at once both central to the study and (for us) impossible to define—and our commitment to an inductive approach to exploring the question of personhood within the context of schools and classrooms.

Each of our scheduled meetings with the teachers—16 as of this writing—has begun with a catered dinner. We usually convene on our campus in the evenings, although we have also met in one of the teacher's school buildings as well as twice at a particular teacher's home. After breaking bread, we launch into a 2-hour-long activity featuring considerable discussion. In our initial semester, the first author jump-started the conversations with comments and questions having to do with the guiding theme of being and becoming a person. In the ensuing semester, one of the teachers took the lead in chairing each session, putting on the table a particular question touching on the project topic. The questions included how learning and play relate to becoming a person; how various institutional classifications used today may blind people to aspects of students' personhood; how the ways teachers describe their students can deeply influence their understanding of them as well as their own self-understandings; and how social and institutional bias closes down ways in which people can cultivate freely their capacities and potential. The most recent semester has featured continued teacher-initiated discussion as well as discussion of several poems that have triggered further thought about the project theme.

Our conversations have been energetic, frank, and often passionate as we address conditions that liberate or constrain the emergence of children's as well as teachers' personhood in school and society. In almost every single session, the predicament of widespread standardized testing—and top-down policy-making in general—has surfaced, provoking comments by the teachers that we would characterize as deeply felt and principled. They applaud professional accountability, but like numerous critics of the current system argue that crude auditing has supplanted anything that would resemble a true accounting (cf. Sockett 2012). They have described how the current policy regime undermines the morale of teachers and students because it can hamstring meaningful, formative educational work (cf. Santoro 2011a, b). At the same time, as we have discovered first-hand, the teachers are adept and accomplished in making the most of their circumstances. Put another way, they enact a vision of education rather than merely react to institutional forces.

The classroom observations have been experimental in a Deweyan sense of that term. All told, we have observed approximately 275 classes taught by the teachers (counting each 45 min of observational time in the primary schools as the equivalent of a class). With some exceptions, such as visiting the same school two or three days in a row, we have not been systematic in trying to follow the development, say, of an entire curriculum unit. Instead we have postured ourselves as best as possible in a listening and perceiving mode, on the lookout for any incident or situation that might shed light on the dynamics of personhood-in-the-making. We have experimented with what might surface if we focus entirely on the teacher,

on students, or for a time on a single student. We have experimented with and explored our perceptions by pondering classroom materials: their arrangement as well as how they are used. Our work moves slowly. We often feel we are there to wait, to be still, and to delay, until things ‘appear’ in a sense we would attribute in part to Heidegger’s (1975, 1976) later work. For Heidegger, a person can take reality in hand not by grasping for it but by readying oneself to receive it, a task that necessitates patience and attentiveness. We are finding that the question of personhood is best approached indirectly. To paraphrase Claude Lévi-Strauss, there are times in fieldwork when an inquirer must use a magnifying glass and look at small, apparently insignificant things, a point we illustrate below.

We visit the teachers individually so that there is never more than one of us in a particular school. Each of us has had multiple opportunities to observe each participant’s classes. We try to find a seat in their classrooms that allows us to take in as much of what transpires as possible, although we also move around since almost all of the teachers deploy small-group work. We do not interfere or try to participate (the latter is hard to avoid from time to time, especially with younger children). We take notes, jotting down descriptions of what people say and do as well as features of the surroundings. We spontaneously pen reflective and personal ruminations, including the ways in which our observations surface and sometimes unsettle our preconceptions. We try ‘to look and think philosophically’: a term of art for the peculiar, unpredictable play of scrutiny and wonder we enact, in which much of what we witness lingers in thought and imagination for days, weeks, or even longer. We expand our individual notes back at home, where we craft fuller descriptions and begin to interpret them.

The three of us have met almost every week of the past academic year to talk through our observations and the many questions they have raised, as well as to plan subsequent steps. The sessions get underway with a text contributed by one of us, a 1,000–1,500 word description and commentary on classroom scenes. We problematize matters by posing questions to the author. To echo tropes from philosophers such as Hans-Georg Gadamer, Heidegger, and Jaspers, these questions put us on the way to thinking together. In thinking together, we engage concepts and their relation to percepts. We end up conceptualizing together, in a dynamic mode reminiscent of what Michele Le Doeuff (1989) characterizes as “polygenesis”: beginning and beginning again from ever-shifting sources. With regards to our meetings, no single voice among us dominates the talk. New thoughts come into play via all three of our evolving voices. Each of us is continually challenged in our viewpoints in an unpredictable rhythm that mirrors Dewey’s familiar concept of experience, in which persons form or cultivate themselves through acting in the world and undergoing the consequences of that action.

We intend the diverse vignettes that follow (in which all names, by prior agreement, are pseudonyms) to be illustrative of what we have witnessed and the sorts of questions this witness generates. They provide glimpses into being-and-becoming-a-person understood as a dynamic gestalt. They illuminate our previous remarks about the presence of an ever-shifting normative ethos, informed by teachers and students alike, in which they move in the classroom. However, the vignettes are neither representative of our fieldwork as a whole, nor of the respective teacher’s classroom, and nor of our collective thinking about personhood. They are promissory notes for a sustained analysis that is still to come.

One morning in September, the teacher, Linus, engages the 36 students in his 5th period combined technology and history class in a discussion of freedom. He has mentioned this topic since the first day of school, and returns to it often as they explore the history of human uses of technology and study contemporary relations between science and society. “Are you free?” Linus interjects in the midst of a unit that incorporates the film “The Matrix.” His 10th–12th grade students seem to leap into the sudden space created by the question.

“No, technology has become its own force today.”—“Our WiFi went off at home the other day, and we were all so bored! We don’t know anymore how to live without it.”—“We don’t use our freedom, we have freedom of speech but we don’t use it.”—“We’re not free at all, in this school or anywhere, to do what we want.”—“But we’re free right now; nobody is telling us what to say.”—“We are free: we’re free not to do the wrong thing.”—“Can you choose not to be free? Can you choose not to have choices?”—“But ‘choosing’ means it’s you doing it, not anybody else.” (The next day the discussion picks up again mid-stream.) “We’re free to do some things, but not others.”—“Well, it’s good we have laws; but we should be able to talk about them.”—“We are free because we don’t have to believe what’s said to you or about you. We’re free to use our own judgment.”—“No, it’s impossible to be free. You can’t be independent; you are always being influenced by others.”—“I want to be free from myself sometimes.”—“I want to be free from people who won’t let me grow.”

Throughout these phases of class, Linus and/or a student interpose questions about what makes freedom different from, or similar to, autonomy, independence, license, and other terms. In due course during the school year they also debate freedom ‘from’ and freedom ‘to’, issues of determinism and free will, and more, all within a context of the place of technology and science in human life.

Comment Why are some teachers and some students able to generate such meaningful, potentially formative experience in their classrooms? Why do their classrooms become, at least at moments, places where they can genuinely cultivate the persons they are and are becoming? This capability renders the fact that they have 9 months together (the length of the school year) into a miracle of societal organization. Although the vignette is highly compressed because of space limitations, and thus constrains what we might say, it seems to us that between 11:33 and 12:20 on a typical weekday there are few better places for both this teacher and his students to be than together in their classroom. It seems to be... a place to be, rather than merely to go through the motions of being. Put another way, their time together in moments such as those touched on here is not something they strive to *get through*, but rather something they *inhabit* with mind, heart, and spirit. How might those who care about such meaningful experience work to render it the norm for all teachers and students?

One morning in March, Samantha’s combined 1st and 2nd grade science class is working on their individually designed books about mealworms. She has charged each of the 25 youngsters to put together a five-page volume that should include a title page, a table of contents, several pages each containing a drawing of one stage in a mealworm’s life followed by at least one full sentence of description, and finally on the last page a self-description as the author of the book. Samantha has provided handouts that list words the kids can use in their accounts. On each of the six tables where they are working, she has placed a glass box containing a few mealworms, all of them looking quite worn out from being handled endlessly by the children.

A girl named Rebecca focuses diligently on her little book. She writes down her self-selected title: “The Mealworm Book of Life.” She completes her drawings using a range of colored crayons, and then uses her pencil to write out her sentences. She entitles her last page, “Abat the ather.” (The school’s academic policy is not to press issues of spelling in 1st and 2nd grade.) Then she draws a box, and in that box she executes a self-portrait with her face, her long, tangled brown hair (which is mottled with a bit of blue paint from her previous class in art), and a bright orange sweater or blouse. Beneath this self-portrait she writes, “This is one of my favorit things.” Then she contemplates her work. She examines her self-portrait, while fingering various crayons and her pencil, as if unsure whether to

put on a few finishing touches. Then she writes some more: "My favorite animal is the dolphin and I was 7 years old when I made this book."

Comment What shall we make of Rebecca's utter absorption with her book? Her classroom of fellow 1st and 2nd graders is always buzzing with voices, whoops of delight or amazement, and a refrain of hopeful "Sh's" from Samantha even as she consults individually with one child after another who bombard her with questions or who she tries to steer back on track. Rebecca remained singularly undistracted, seemingly at one with her crayons, pencil, pages, mealworms, and mind. What does this 'at one' mean? What is it to be 'at one' in the world? What sense of time, of space, of being, of a dawning sense of personhood, is wrapped up in the words Rebecca wrote about herself: "I was 7 years old when I made this book"? It seems the book made her, too. Her school, classroom, and teacher helped create the possibility for her evidently *substantial* engagement with self and world. What would it take for both the educational system and teachers themselves to perceive and work for such possibilities?

One morning in October, Earl, an 11th grade English teacher, is about to initiate a new unit with his class on August Wilson's play entitled "Fences." He reminds his 20 students that the first thing they'll do is use, as he puts it, "an opinionator to activate your knowledge." Since the play triggers questions of tolerance and forgiveness, Earl poses several questions about the students' own attitudes toward forgiveness. After he enunciates a question, students get out of their seats and gather in one or another corner of the room where there is a hand-drawn sign reflecting their view: "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," "strongly disagree." Earl's final question is whether people should forgive their parents, including for what they may feel were egregious mistakes and failures.

This question provokes strong opinions from the class. Most students argue that forgiveness is ultimately the way to go. Patrizia, a student who does not agree, offers a range of comments about how harmful bad parenting can be. She engages her peers energetically, time and again parrying their counter-arguments.

The discussion becomes heated, though not ad hominem (the teacher has worked hard, since their first day of school, to help the class avoid such a turn). Suddenly Patrizia, in the very midst of saying "parents just have to be accountable," shakes her head vigorously and falls silent. She rushes to her chair by the far wall and, taking her seat, lowers her head on her arms. A tall girl, Cornelia, with whom she had been debating, goes over and, brushing the girl's knee with her hand, asks "You okay, Patrizia?" The teacher, Earl, also goes over and, kneeling down to eye level, asks if she is okay. Patrizia keeps her head down and offers no response. Meanwhile the class has been returning to their seats, sensing that the opinionator activity is over.

Earl turns on an overhead and shows the class the title page from their edition of August Wilson's play. He asks students about possible associations with the single word that forms the title, "Fences." On the overhead he jots down their ideas, while encouraging students to do the same in their notebooks. Within a minute or so of the start of this activity, Patrizia raises her head from her arms and follows the discussion, taking notes as do the other students. She appears calm and composed. Suddenly she sneezes. In that very instant, Cornelia and the teacher both say "Bless you," in a gentle but firm tone that sounds almost rehearsed in its two-part harmony.

Comment The discussion of parenting and forgiveness clearly affected Patrizia, but neither her teacher nor her peers patronized her or acted as pseudo-psychologists. Through their conduct, they acknowledged both her contributions to the discussion and her discomfort, and at all times seemed to treat her as a being with dignity, with agency, with a

mind. The almost choreographed aspect touched on at the close of the vignette evokes the subtle ways in which it seems we human beings ‘carry’ one another, affirm one another, and help one another substantiate (literally) our personhood. Why is it that such seemingly behavioral acts can be so expressive of personal singularity? What renders some classrooms, at least at times, into a space for grace, for sanctity, for vulnerability, for potentially deep human cultivation of the mind, the heart, and the spirit, all of which is larger in formative terms than what we sometimes characterize as ‘learning’? Why is it that some teachers and some students are able to exercise such cultural and moral creativity?

Conclusion: Philosophy and Fieldwork, or the Ties that Bind

We close by drawing on remarks by Ludwig Wittgenstein and John Dewey regarding, respectively, empirical and philosophical inquiry. Our comments on them bring together what we have tried to show in this article about our method of working.

In a wide-ranging critique of a famous early twentieth century work in anthropology—James George Frazer’s *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*—Ludwig Wittgenstein stated the following: “I think one reason why the attempt to find an explanation is wrong is that we have only to put together in the right way what we know, without adding anything, and the satisfaction we are trying to get from the explanation comes of itself (1993, p. 2e). Wittgenstein found Frazer’s interpretive approach to be both ethically and epistemically problematic. In the course of analyzing minutely a range of Frazer’s claims, Wittgenstein emphasizes how easy, and dangerous, it can be to distort or to reduce human realities in order to fit them into an explanatory framework (and see Hirschman 1979). This concern seems especially apposite with regards to what we take to be a many-sided being: the human person. Wittgenstein’s apparent aside—“without adding anything”—is a pointed caution to the theory-obsessed scholar not to overwhelm realities with pet concepts and ideologies. He refers elliptically to the scholar’s “satisfaction,” leaving it an open question whether putting what we know together “in the right way” will respond to our curiosity about the world and/or to our desire to meliorate the world.

In a provocative critique of what he perceived as unmoored theoretical philosophy, John Dewey wrote that “a first-rate test of the value of any philosophy which is offered us” is the following:

Does it end in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful? Or does it terminate in rendering the things of ordinary experience more opaque than they were before, and in depriving them of having in ‘reality’ even the significance they had previously seemed to have? (Dewey 1988, p. 18)

Dewey refers to “testing” a philosophy by wheeling it up against lived experience, asking not whether it advances an argument within philosophy—valuable as that can be in its own right—but whether it can enrich the lives of human beings. He insists on the priority of experience over theory, while recognizing that theoretical analysis can be invaluable in articulating this very point (we do not picture him as an anti-theorist in the contemporary senses of the term). Dewey encourages his readers to regard philosophical work as itself an experience embedded in the world, just as are all other modes of experience. People can philosophize with and in the world, rather than just about it.

In the project touched on in this article, we aspire to practice philosophy in the field. We do not ‘turn off’ our philosophical imagination while parked in the corner of a classroom, only to reactivate it once we are back in the privacy of the home or office. Quite on the contrary. Our experience in the school and classroom is one of more or less constant wonder juxtaposed with phases of waiting for something to appear in the manner touched on previously. We feel continuously *active*, even while sitting still and quiescent. Questions of meaning, purpose, and value fill our minds, even as we note a word or gesture, or hastily scribble something down in order to capture an interaction or activity. We are not video cameras recording the reality in front of our noses. We are philosophers privileged to be in the world of the school and classroom, caught up in moments of discovery, perplexity, and hope. While among schoolchildren—to echo the title of W. B. Yeats’ well-known poem—we feel the joy, the pleasure, and the confusions of philosophy.

Like reading and writing philosophy, our mode of fieldwork can be fatiguing. There are times when we leave a school feeling not just drained but incapable of paying attention to anything. Our perceptual capacity is shot. Moreover, like reading and writing philosophy, there are times when we have little to show for our labors. Custom, habit, repetition, various personal worries, and more, sometimes conspire to make it hard to ‘see’, to open ourselves to the tide of education-focused life on the move in front of us. Wittgenstein expressed the point well: “‘Looking is difficult’. Because looking intently is difficult. And it’s possible to look intently without seeing anything, or to keep thinking you see something without being able to see clearly. Looking can tire you even when you don’t see anything” (1980, p. 74e). Philosophy and perception take their own time, and cannot be forced or rushed. We have experienced this truth repeatedly in our fieldwork.

Wittgenstein’s challenge in the quote inserted at the start of this section is formidable: “to put together in the right way what we know.” We are not sure whether we’re on the threshold of attempting the task he sets, whether we’re still making our way toward the door, or whether we’ve in fact wandered at least into the foyer. We do know things about the aesthetic, moral, emotional, and intellectual dimensions of life in schools and classrooms. We know diverse ways of thinking about what it means to be a person in the world today, for example as informed by the idea of cosmopolitanism described earlier in the article, a conception that is itself a child of the union of empirical and philosophical anthropology. We know a great deal more than we did at the start of the inquiry about the ways in which educational policy constrains what teachers and students can accomplish in their time together. We also know much more than we did at the beginning about how teachers and students can work creatively in both expressing and cultivating the persons they are. All of this working knowledge constitutes an invitation, an opportunity, and what feels like a calling. As our fieldwork winds to its conclusion, we hope to bring together “in the right way” what we’ve witnessed and learned.

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