Theory and Practice:  
the Politics of Philosophical Character

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This essay explores the thorny issue of theory and practice, partly in response to the special issue of the Journal of Philosophy of Education (37.2, 2003) but more especially as a way of offering a critique of Joseph Dunne’s book, Back to the Rough Ground (1993). It argues that Dunne’s notion of phronetic techne risks the reduction of philosophy to the merely instrumental, and, in turn, that this approach threatens the significance of philosophical character.

FOREWORD

Imagine for a moment that philosophy were to suffer the effects of a catastrophe in which its previous consistency and coherence were lost. All that remained were broken fragments, torn-up pieces that together did not add up to the whole from whence they came. And imagine, further, that those practising philosophy had no idea of the catastrophe that is now their condition of possibility. All that would happen, or indeed could happen, is that, unknown to the practitioners, their work would re-organise and at the same time repeat the effects of the catastrophe. Someone might, for example, fall upon a fragment regarding a snub nose, and build from this a tower called moral philosophy.

Suppose one of these moral philosophers then tried to argue with his colleagues that philosophy had fallen victim to a catastrophe. He might, for example, argue that because of this catastrophe we live in a time after virtue where the totality of moral relations is known to us only in a fragmented, perhaps emotivist and subjectivist form. He might argue that traditions have been obscured in and by these new conditions and that in fact standards of virtue and excellence are still inter-subjective and are defined by creative, public practices. From this he can argue that the shape of philosophy itself can be explained post-catastrophe. He notes that there are those practitioners who enjoy the fragmentation and take a certain schadenfreude at the mess. There are those who seek to make encyclopaedic wholes out of the pieces and, in doing so, create terrors and tyrannies. There is both despair and rejoicing at the state of philosophy post-catastrophe and the Good gets lost in the endless
bickering between them. As in Benjamin’s interpretation of Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, both camps, in working with fragments, keep ‘piling wreckage upon wreckage’ (Benjamin, 1992, p. 249). For this angel, as for the post-catastrophe philosophers,

a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (Benjamin, 1992, p. 249).1

But there is a problem with this moral philosopher’s post-catastrophe perspective. His identity as a moral philosopher is an effect of the catastrophe. His understanding of the task of the (re-)unification of theory and practice is an effect of the catastrophe. The only tools available for the enquiry into the effects of the catastrophe are those bequeathed by the catastrophe. Crucially, his perspective on the catastrophe and its effects is itself a repetition of the catastrophe. If he is right about the catastrophe, then he is also wrong, for he is compromised by the very truth that he asserts. The only knowledge of the catastrophe available to him by the strictures of his own argument is that which the catastrophe makes possible. Even the notion of tradition itself, with its sibling of practice, is debris from the catastrophe.

This, however, does not deter him, and he proceeds to pronounce upon the effects of the catastrophe as if he were an angel granted a foothold against the storm. He alone has been able to close his wings. He can see the debris of liberal individualism and know it to be the effect of the catastrophe. Somehow, out of the storm, he can assure us that no one has yet managed to provide a ‘rationally defensible statement’ (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 259) from within the storm. Our philosopher can know the limitations of the storm but the storm’s limitations do not include our philosopher. As such, the judgement upon the storm by the moral philosopher is really only another judgement of the storm upon the moral philosopher. The latter is still being blown backwards. His perspective upon the storm is the wind itself.

INTRODUCTION

Philosophy of education has been exploring the question of whether or not teaching is a practice. In doing this, it can appear less concerned to retrieve philosophising as the heart of the relation between theory and practice, and more concerned to generate the concept of the wise and experienced practitioner. In what follows, I want to show how in the work of one philosopher of education, Joseph Dunne, philosophy itself is suppressed in the name of practice. I will argue that Dunne’s thesis is based on two presuppositions that together determine both the content of his thesis and its genesis. These presuppositions are of philosophy as *techne* and of the impossibility of a science or doctrine of experience.
Together they add up to the suppression of philosophical character. I will bring the considerable philosophical weight of Kant and Hegel to bear here, and although I single Joseph Dunne out for special attention, I do so in tribute to the fact that his book *Back to the Rough Ground* (1993) is one of the few contributions to the philosophy of education that struggles to realise a truly comprehensive philosophy of learning.

**BACK TO THE ROUGH GROUND**

Of the five intellectual virtues outlined by Aristotle—*techne*, *episteme*, *nous*, *phronesis* and *sophia*—Dunne argues that it is *phronesis* in particular that can resist the reduction of life to the merely technical. Before we explore this claim let us summarise each of these five virtues.

*Episteme* is theoretical or philosophical knowledge that deals with real knowledge of universals as opposed to mere opinions about them. The highest point of philosophical wisdom that can be reached is *sophia*, where inductive logic can apprehend first causes and trace particular phenomena back to them. *Episteme* and *sophia*, therefore, deal with an object that cannot be otherwise than it is. No production or ingenuity is required, only a training in *what is*. *Nous* plays an ambiguous role here, but allied to theoretical work it is the intuitive recognition or apprehension of first principles that occurs without prior understanding but has its actuality in experience.

If *episteme* and *sophia* are theoretical knowledge of what is, then *poiesis* and *phronesis* are practical knowledge of what ought to be, or what can be. They involve the production of that which can be otherwise. *Poiesis* involves the production of tangible objects, whilst *phronesis* involves the production of good character and true or right ethical action. A further distinction is between work whose object or purpose is external to itself—*poiesis*—and work whose *telos* is internal to the work or action itself—*praxis*. Aristotle is clear that the good character is internally located within and realised by the good action, just as the good action is imbued qualitatively with the goodness of character that performed it. Dunne says of his book that its underlying thesis is that ‘it is not possible without *phronesis* to be really virtuous, nor without virtue to be phronetic’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 305). His intention therefore is not to assign any priority ‘to either of the reciprocal terms but rather to try and understand its ratio as a circle’ (ibid.).

Key to Dunne’s thesis, however, is the one intellectual virtue we have not yet referred to, namely *techne*. From Marx we learned that making had been reduced to the instrumental. The modern industrial worker, he argued, ‘becomes an appendage of the machine and it is only the most simple, most monotonous and most easily acquired knack that is required of him’ (Marx and Engels, 1988, p. 41). Furthermore, from critical theory we learned that thought itself has been reduced to the instrumental. Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* speaks not only of the victory of modern positivism but of the totalitarianism of enlightenment.
Modern thinking reifies abstract or objectified human production, and modern subjectivity, in its protest, can only strengthen ‘the very power of the established order’ (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979, p. xiv) it seeks to break. From Habermas, also, we learn of the technical or instrumental knowledge-constitutive interest that separates knowledge from both its hermeneutic relation and its emancipatory potential. From each of these, then, we might reasonably infer that technē determines the nature of both poïesis and praxis (i.e. of production) and phronēsis (i.e. of being) as well as theorising (i.e. of thinking). Indeed, if we take teaching as our example here (and it is the example that Dunne says motivated his study), technē could be seen as a set of competencies and techniques that training teachers must comply with and perform if they are to be granted a licence to teach. Those who seek to express their own creativity through activities that embody an alternative conception of the good—perhaps a radical conception of good action as for emancipation or liberation—will find that all action has been compromised by technē. Althusser’s sombre apology is a reminder that no matter how ingenious the methods of the good teacher may be, their devotion ‘contributes to the maintenance and nourishment’ (Althusser, 1984, p. 31) of the system that trains the technicians of the future.

However, it is a key part of Dunne’s argument that he separates Aristotle’s ‘official’ concept of technē from his own re-interpretation of practical knowledge. In other words, for his thesis to hold, Dunne has to remove technē, in particular ways, from inclusion within doing, in order to retrieve the practical implications of the good in phronēsis. This means, in turn, that he emphasises the allegiance that Aristotle discerns between technē and theoretical knowledge.

To this end Dunne argues that, on the one hand, theory is obviously praxis. Unlike any kind of production, the pursuit of epistēme and its fulfilment in sophia is self-sufficient and loved for its own sake. The kind of knowledge it realises cannot be exploited in everyday life as a means to an external end. It is itself a way of life and certainly has, says Dunne, an educative import ‘for it transforms the character of its seeker and possessor and so has ethical substance as its core’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 239). He concludes,

to become a theorist is to acquire a disposition which allows the right order of the cosmos and the simplicity of the deity to work their way into one’s soul and to become its prototype. In this classic Greek position, human beings are not the measure of things but find their true measure through contemplation of an eternal order beyond themselves (ibid.).

For such a man, says Aristotle, ‘something divine is present in him’ (Nicomachean Ethics, 1177b28, hereafter NE).

On the other hand, however, theory deals with things as universals that cannot be otherwise than they are. There is no room for creativity or nous in the interpretation of the true. In addition, it is a characteristic of technē
that it can provide an explanatory *logos* of its work, and that it can be taught. In this sense *techne* must be codified and laid out in some kind of formal manner in order that its universality is available for each particular event. Seen in this way, *techne* applies as much to theoretical work as to *poiesis*. In both cases *techne* is the ‘rational account (*logos*)’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 250) of the work. Dunne is able to conclude here that there is more than a mere affinity between theory and *techne*. It is not only the case that *techne* resembles *episteme* ‘as a form of knowledge’ (p. 253) but also ‘that even within *episteme* itself there is a *techne* at work, that is, a logic, which governs reasoning and produces correct arguments’ (ibid.).

It becomes clear then that theory is by its very nature instrumental, demanding compliance to a pre-given set of rules for the production of knowledge. Flexibility, creativity and imagination are required when dealing with particular cases for no two cases can be the same. But they are not required when learning about the general rules that are the *logos* of each particular case. It is a feature of Dunne’s argument that the rigidity of Aristotle’s ‘official’ notion of *techne* is made distinct from *phronesis*. The latter is concerned not with discerning universality as a schema or *logos*, but rather with the truth of one’s character. Key to understanding *phronesis* is its ‘noninstrumental character and its mediation of the universal and the particular in a way that puts a premium on experience and perceptiveness rather than on formulated knowledge’ (p. 273). *Phronesis*, says Dunne, ‘cannot be instrumentalized’ (p. 268) because the good that is embodied in phrasonic action is a combination of the motives of the agent and the action being done. Therefore, not only does the requirement that the good be practically enacted mean that the good ‘cannot be determined in advance of the actual situations in which it is to be realized’ (p. 273). It also means that the good is not evident ‘except to the good man’ (NE, 1144a35). Indeed, despite Aristotle’s assurance that *phronesis* ‘is not supreme over *sophia*’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 241), Dunne’s reading of Aristotle also highlights the way that ‘for all its primacy [theory] does not displace *phronesis* as the ordering agency of our lives’ (p. 241). *Phronesis*, says Aristotle, ‘issues orders’ for the sake of philosophical knowledge and thus ‘provides for its coming into being’ (NE, 1145a9; Dunne, 1993, p. 241) but it does not issue orders to it. Dunne comments,


This relation between theory and practice is also affected by the fact that character ‘has the power to unseat reason in the conduct of our lives’ (p. 288). Politics is necessary precisely to try and cope with this situation. Thus in government as in all practical affairs one cannot have the same
levels of accuracy in knowledge as is possible in theory for we are dealing with what can be otherwise. In the real world reason has ‘to yield priority to experience and judgement’ (p. 288).

One final point on this relationship between theory and practice is that the purely theoretical man emerges as somewhat useless in the real world. Aristotle says ‘where there are things to be done the end is not to survey and recognise the various things, but rather to do them’ (EN, 1179b1). The men of theory ‘have not even a conception of what is noble and truly pleasant, since they have never tasted it’ (NE, 1179b15). What they can know is expertise in their subject of study, and they can become a good judge within that limited realm. But the only way that expertise can be gained in *phronesis* is through experience, something that the *vita contemplativa* militates against. The point of *phronesis* is not knowledge but action. Indeed, it is in action where character and excellence conjoin to produce the good. Dunne goes as far as to suggest that ‘the relationship between experience, judgement and character that is postulated here [can be seen as] a necessary replacement for pure theory’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 289). ‘The real defect of theory,’ he says, is that ‘it “brings no profit” with respect to the formation of character. And the reason for this defect is that character has played no part in the formation of theory. If we want to form our characters, in fact, there is nothing for it but to act’ (p. 290). What we must avoid at all costs says Aristotle, is to ‘take refuge in theory’ (NE, 1105b12; Dunne, 1993, pp. 290, 369).

How, then, does Dunne argue against Aristotle’s ‘official’ notion of *techne* and for a re-formed notion? It is in chapter 10 of *Back to the Rough Ground* that Dunne tries to finesse the distinction between theory and practice in Aristotle. He argues that at times in Aristotle one can discern ‘an explicitly nontheoretical conception of *techne*’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 331). In the sense that art imitates nature, so perhaps, argues Dunne, nature realises itself through ‘the craftsman’s activity’ (p. 338), thus bringing about new forms of itself. In a sense *phronesis* here becomes the soul of nature, inherent in matter but formed by work or action. As such, *techne* imitates nature without the need for deliberation, for the realising is in the doing and not in any prior formulation.

This theory of change implies that both mover and moved are implicit in the unity of matter. But from the point of view of reason and indeed from that of freedom, which Dunne notes is a problem (p. 374), Dunne still has to try and square the circle that open-ended production or action is also a meaningful compliance of means to the end in view. How does this theory of change avoid nature becoming the new tyranny of creativity and the imagination? Dunne responds to this conundrum by arguing that Aristotle ‘wants to avoid postulating any tertium quid between A and B, any mysterious influx into B that emanates from A and is, while the process is still going on, traversing some metaphysical space or “in-between” that somehow provides a medium between them’ (p. 339).

This third way has to be avoided because it would act as a regulator for the relationship between A and B. It would repeat the problem of *techne* being a predetermined plan to which action and object must conform, or,
as Dunne notes earlier, it would represent the viewpoint of a detached ‘third-person analyst who stood outside the experience’ (p. 293). This was a problem for the Aristotelian notion of poiesis. Now, if change were always in conformity to a pre-given universal, it would affect phronesis too. A third party would mean that phronesis was not found in experience for, says Dunne, ‘phronesis does not ascend to a level of abstraction or generality that leaves experience behind. It arises from experience and returns into experience’ (ibid.).

To avoid positing a third way, then, Dunne has to find a unity in the idea of change, a unity between subject and object. He finds this ‘unity’ (p. 340) in the substance that is ‘the real subject of change’ (ibid.). Following Sarah Waterlow’s revision of the Aristotelian concept of change, Dunne argues that ‘what we call agent and patient should be regarded, while the process of change is actually going on, not as two separate entities, but rather as forming one reality, or organic unity, as it were, which is the real subject of change’ (ibid.). As with substance, where agent and patient are united under ‘one superordinate telos’ (ibid.) and as with matter, where craftsman and material are united under the experience of (the knowledge of) form, so, now, the virtuous character will be the unity of the experience of action with itself. In each case the dualism that confronts us in some way masks the unity that is ‘at work’. The object that is to be produced is object for the thinking that knows itself as ‘distinct’ from it. Quoting Waterlow, Dunne says ‘the point of view of the voluntary agent is one for which the “halves” already present themselves as distinct’ (p. 342).

Dunne further defends his revised notion of change through Aristotle’s account of the soul. He rejects the reading of soul as mind, for that lends itself to the one-sided view that form is in the maker but not in the made. He also notes that in De Anima Aristotle sets up a dualistic picture of soul and body that he then subverts in the same way as the revised notion of change. The relationship between soul and body in fact is presupposed by ‘some community of nature’ (p. 347) that is their mutual dependence. A person is, therefore, already the unity of soul and body, or is ‘the embodied soul’ (ibid.). Furthermore, techne is no longer disembodied; it is embodied in and as the ‘knowledge’ that moves the hands or that, in moving, makes knowledgeable or disciplined movements. Thus, says Aristotle, ‘from techne proceed the things of which the form is in the soul’ (Metaphysics, 1032b1).

But Dunne is not satisfied here that even in regard to deliberation Aristotle retains the kind of openness to experience that phronesis requires. Again ‘making’ reverts to a one-dimensional model where deliberation is compared to geometrical construction, and where the uncertainty that must accompany any techne that is allied to the soul becomes ‘not only schematic but quite cut-and-dried’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 351). Dunne admits that Aristotle’s notion of deliberation is oversimplified but responds by arguing that it is the notion of soul, integral to the techne of making, that restores to techne the ‘sensitivity and responsiveness of the body’ (p. 353) and that, therefore, helps to redefine
ends as it goes. Thus Dunne settles on a ‘phronetic techne,’ one ‘whose responsiveness to the situation is not fully specifiable in advance and which is experiential, charged with perceptiveness and rooted in the sensory and emotional life’ (p. 355).

It is worth noting that at this point, towards the end of the book, Dunne relates his work, briefly, to contemporary debates within philosophy. He states:

the tension that I have been finding in Aristotle as the first great systematic thinker of the Western tradition of reason, is one that has a strong resonance in contemporary criticism of the ‘logocentrism’ of this tradition. Recent ‘deconstructionist’ and ‘postmodernist’ thought has taken issue strongly with a monopolistic reason defined as masterful, autonomous, technocratic and logocentric; and it has done so in the name of what has been suppressed by this monopoly: materiality, contingency, vulnerability, nature and embodiment (ibid.).

Yet whilst in sympathy with the critique of the rationalist account of practice, Dunne has no desire ‘to abandon the logos altogether’ (ibid.), only to redefine it within and by his notion of phrnetic techne. His re-reading of Aristotle, on the one hand, highlights problems within Aristotelian philosophy when compared to the modern free subject but, on the other hand, retrieves Aristotelian philosophy for those who are critical of the ‘detachment, sovereignty, and imperturbability’ (p. 374) of the Cartesian subject. These latter who take upon themselves the ‘burdens of finitude, contingency [and] situatedness’ are part of the project of kenosis that Dunne recognises in his own work, no longer aspiring to a ‘god’s-eye view of the human condition’ but rather ‘reincarnating the real person in the world of history and language [and] action and involvement with other people’ (ibid.).

To summarise, then, Dunne’s thesis is that whilst theory deals with what is and cannot be otherwise, practice is concerned with what can be otherwise. Thus philosophy deals with universals, whilst phronesis is concerned with each particular action. If practice is governed by theory, individual creativity and spontaneity are quashed and all action becomes merely an observance of, and a conformity to, abstract technical formulae. But in phrnetic techne the relation of theory and practice is recast such that action is related to a non-theoretical form of techne. Here the logos that unfolds in action is that which belongs neither to theory nor practice, but rather to the unity of substance or matter or soul where change is its own unfolding and experience is its own formation. In phrnetic techne there is a theory of learning wherein learning and change, or formation, are an indivisible whole.

KANT

In some ways Kant approaches the issue of theory and practice from the opposite direction to Dunne. Where Dunne sees his task as rescuing action
from conformity to abstract formulae, Kant knows his task to be the re-uniting of practice with conformity to the universal that is known in and as philosophy.

Kant’s clearest exposition of his case is in the 1793 essay ‘On the Common Saying: This May Be True in Theory, But It Does Not Apply in Practice’ (1991). In this piece he takes against objections made by Garve which, in effect, argue that, whilst one might seek to act for the highest (theoretical) good, one’s action nevertheless always contains an individual choice and selection. Whilst we might aim for duty, in fact we act for happiness.

Kant makes two responses to this argument. First, he admits that ‘no one can have certain awareness of having fulfilled his duty completely unselfishly’ (Kant, 1991, p. 69). This he says is ‘too much to ask for’ (ibid.). Perhaps ‘no recognised and respected duty has ever been carried out by anyone without some selfishness or interference from other motives; perhaps no one will ever succeed in doing so, however hard he tries’ (ibid.).

But, and second, this is not the point. Garve’s concerns are themselves evidence that ‘man is aware with the utmost clarity that he ought to fulfil his duty completely unselfishly, and must totally separate his desire for happiness from the concept of duty’ (ibid.). Garve knows what he ‘ought’ to do, and the ‘ought’ for Kant is precisely the evidence of his recognition of the call of morality and duty. Indeed, says Kant, as an ‘honest man’ (ibid.), Garve has found in his heart the very distinction between what he wants to do and what he ought to do, which is, itself, the work of freedom. Kant’s notion of the categorical imperative has suffered, in the philosophy of education as in philosophy in general, from the assumption that it is a heteronomous imposition of external conduct. Nothing could be further from the case. The fact that the categorical imperative appears external is precisely because the modern zoon politikon is grounded in abstract notions of freedom that champion choice and happiness over duty and service to others. In fact, Kant’s categorical imperative is present when we know there is a choice to be made between what we ought to do and what we want to do. Kant is very clear here. Motives, he says, are

the absolute law itself, and the will’s receptivity to it as an absolute compulsion is known as moral feeling. This feeling is therefore not the cause but the effect of the will’s determinant and we should not have the least awareness of it within ourselves if such compulsion were not already present in us (p. 68).

Put simply, morality in the first instance is not the decision we make: it is the very existence of the dilemma itself. And against all readings of Kant, including Nietzsche’s, that complain of the smell of cruelty in the categorical imperative, or that see it as the imposition of an external formula or logos, the provisional nature of moral action is built into the ambivalence of freedom and the very existence of morality in the first
place. Kant cites morality as the negation of ‘the end which nature has imposed upon us and which is generally known as happiness’ (p. 67). ‘Absolute obedience’ (ibid.) to duty is absolutely different from obedience to personal desire. It is the ought of morality known in and as the moral dilemma that calls our attention to duty. Indeed, we feel ‘a revulsion at the very idea of calculating the advantages we might gain through violating our duty’ (p. 71). Kant has admitted that it is unlikely we will ever obey ‘in pure terms’ without some calculation. But nevertheless the ‘ought’ is that one ‘must indeed make every possible conscious effort to ensure that no motive derived from the desire for happiness imperceptibly infiltrates his conceptions of duty’ (p. 64).

The categorical imperative is not a decision: it is a struggle between nature and freedom. In this struggle the ‘moral’ man thinks ‘rather of the sacrifices which obedience to duty (i.e. virtue) entails than of the benefits he might reap from it’ (ibid.). And he adds, ‘I must first be certain that I am not acting against my duty. Only then am I entitled to look round for happiness, in so far as I can reconcile it with the state I know to be morally (not physically) good’ (p. 68). Judgements, then, require being made in conjunction with the understanding of general rules, in this case the categorical imperative. Someone may well have a natural talent for judgement, says Kant, but may still lack the premises on which to base them for the good. ‘It is therefore not the fault of the theory if it is of little practical use . . . The fault is that there is not enough theory’ (p. 61).

As such, he concludes that ‘everything in morals which is true in theory must also be valid in practice’ (p. 72). Read abstractly, this is taken to mean that what we do is predetermined, leaving no room for creativity or spontaneity. But read as Kant intends, it says that the truth of morality is present in every moral dilemma we face. We respect that truth in respecting the dilemma. The theory of morality is known by us not only in practice but as practice. Why, then, should we choose duty over happiness? Because the dilemma teaches us that choice itself is the result of the will, not its cause. Taken as the latter the will can be satisfied by personal happiness. But understood as the former the will is self-determining as moral feeling, the call of duty. Or, again, it is not in a choice between this action or that action that morality or the free will reside. It is in the awareness that a choice must be made. The awareness is itself the presence of the good. Duty is only our compulsion to be true to ourselves. It could never be our duty to choose personal happiness for then the will would not be free. Freedom is not in conformity to happiness, it is in conformity to itself. We must put our personal desires second, ‘and this,’ says Kant, ‘is sufficient for us to observe our duty’ (p. 69). Service is not a formal principle that lies outside us; it is a practical ambivalence that is true for us in each moral dilemma. Thus, Kant observes,

as a human being, a being subjected by his own reason to certain duties, each of us is therefore a man of affairs and since, as human beings, we never grow out of the school of wisdom, we cannot arrogantly and scornfully relegate the adherent of theory to the classroom and set

ourselves up as better trained by experience in all that can be required of him. For all this experience will not in any way help us to escape the precepts of theory, but at most to learn how to apply it in better and more universal ways after we have assimilated it into our principles (p. 72).

Some comparisons, now, between Dunne and Kant are instructive. First, whereas Dunne himself notes that the *phronimos* has been described as the archetypal English gentleman with no sense of ‘a broken world’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 374), the man of Kantian morality lives in the broken relationship between the universal and the particular. In this broken world the awareness of moral dilemma is ‘easily comprehensible to everyone’ (Kant, 1991, p. 70) and does not require years of experience as a prerequisite. Whereas in Aristotle ‘the man who had no experience of the action with which politics was concerned was thereby disqualified from claiming any valuable knowledge with respect to it’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 287), in Kant as a human being subjected by his own reason to certain duties, each of us is a ‘man of affairs’ (Kant, 1991, p. 72). As politics in Aristotle is ‘the failure of reason’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 288), in Kant it is the actuality of freedom and morality.

Second, whether ‘official’ or phronetic, *techne* contains no notion of freedom or the universal. This is because, for Dunne, when *techne* is related to philosophy, it becomes merely a formulaic recipe that can be applied to all particular events regardless of their distinctiveness. It might only be the case that this criticism is relevant to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant relies on a notion of schematic judgement. However, the same cannot be said for the Kantian notion of reflective judgement outlined in the *Critique of Judgement*. The key to these judgements is that, although they are particular judgements in search of a universal, nevertheless, aesthetically and teleologically, they further refine notions of freedom and the universal that lie within judgement. They most certainly do not discard these notions. Furthermore, as we have seen in the essay on theory and practice above, there is even a case for arguing that pure practical reason also refines subsumptive judgements in important ways. We saw that freedom was the condition of the possibility of moral dilemmas and was actual in the struggle to obey itself. This is hardly subsumptive, nor a technical recipe for action. On the contrary, each experience of morality, which is an experience of the ambivalence of freedom, is in its dualism of pure and interested motives essentially aporetic. Unlike Aristotle, and in my opinion unlike Dunne’s phronetic *techne*, Kant’s explication of theory and practice is able to sustain the political notions of freedom and the universal without sacrificing contingency, vulnerability and so on. Our response to each dilemma will be individual, but if we act freely and morally, struggling with the good, then it will also be universally applicable. The maxim ‘[Always act so that] your will could always hold at the same time as a principle establishing universal law’ (Kant, 1956, p. 30) does not solve moral dilemmas: it succinctly describes them. Indeed, it is not a recipe for the
character of the happy English gentleman, nor even the happy phronimos
of the philosophy of education. It is, however, a thesis on the education of
philosophical character in the political struggle that is the truth of the
modern relation of theory and practice.

This leads to the final and perhaps most important comparison between
Kant and Dunne. In seeking to preserve individual creativity in practice
through an embodied notion of theory, he is in danger of casting
philosophy aside altogether. We have already seen that, for Dunne,
philosophy, although realising the divine in man, nevertheless should offer
no ‘refuge’ (NE 1105b12) from the work of ordering life on which
thinking itself must be dependent. Such philosophers may become experts
in their subject, but their knowledge ‘brings no profit’ (NE, 1095a10;
Dunne, 1993, p. 289). Character formation, dealing with what can be
otherwise, is open and changeable, whilst philosophy, dealing with what
cannot be otherwise, is fixed and closed.

In contrast, Kant castigates any such clear delineation between theory
and practice. On the one hand, experience requires theory in order to know
the good in itself. On the other hand, practice is this experience. In
Dunne’s circle of virtue and phronetic action, avoiding the tertium quid
between them avoids philosophy altogether, for philosophy is the
conscious relation of thought to itself as an object. Avoiding the third
way is to impose upon the middle ground from without and against the
experience of the middle ground as aporia and moral dilemma. In
philosophy the relation wherein the middle ground is known negatively is
the same relation in which freedom and duty are (known as) their own
object. This tertium quid is not the kind that Dunne describes as a ‘god’s
eye view of the human condition’ (p. 374). On the contrary, it is
philosophy itself: an imminent relation, in experience, of consciousness to
itself wherein it has itself as its own object. It is separated from itself, for
otherwise there would be no self-consciousness. But its abstraction is
compromised by the relation that is its own condition of possibility. If
philosophy never becomes its own object then by definition there is no
philosophy, no thinking of thinking. Equally, if there is no philosophy,
then there can be no understanding of freedom and duty as aporetic yet
universal ends-in-themselves. When theory and philosophy are designated
as ‘difficult, and divine, but useless’ (NE, 1141b6; Dunne, 1993, p. 238) in
relation to practice, judgement is robbed of its significance in terms of
freedom and morality. As Kant says,

the maxim of absolute obedience to a categorically binding law of the free
will (i.e., of duty) without reference to any ulterior end, is essentially
different (i.e., different in kind) from the maxim of pursuing, as a motive
for certain ways of acting, the end which nature itself has imposed upon
us and which is generally known as happiness. For the first maxim is good
in itself, but the second is not. The second may, if it conflicts with duty, be
thoroughly evil (Kant, 1991, p. 67).

If it comes to a moral choice between the character of the happy
phronimos and the broken, melancholic yet spirited ‘man of affairs’ who

understands what is at stake in the dilemma of duty, then it is our duty to (struggle to) choose the latter.

HEGEL

If Kant can be employed against the suppression of philosophy within phronetic techne, Hegel can be called on to critique the structure of phronetic techne. I will use Hegel now to show how the very idea of phronetic techne rests on a misconceived notion of experience, and then to reveal the implications of this for any presupposition of the concept of openness. Lastly, I will argue that in misrecognising experience Dunne has reduced the significance of philosophy per se as character formation.

First, then, to Dunne’s notion of experience and its centrality to his thesis. A key question for Dunne is how to understand the circular nature of the relationship between virtue and knowledge. Aristotle argues that phronesis requires moral excellence and in turn that moral excellence requires phronesis. Facing the aporia of this tautology Dunne states that ‘if we want to find a synthetic unity beyond the negations of the dialectic of knowledge and virtue, then it is to the notion of experience that we should turn’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 280), where, he says, we will find something akin to the primordial knowing (p. 279) that Heidegger speaks of in Being and Time. Techne can be based on experience, for it can turn particular events into a knowledge of universals. Thus techne can explain universal events. But no amount of universal knowledge can determine how one should act in any particular situation: ‘The reason is that experience is knowledge of individuals, techne of universals, and actions and productions are all concerned with the individual’ (Metaphysics, 981a15-17). Thus, says Dunne, ‘what makes knowledge theoretically powerful does not coincide with what makes it practically effective’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 282). The problem here, as Dunne acknowledges, is that Aristotle threatens to leave us with a ‘theoretical techne and a mindless manipulation of actual material’ (p. 285). This is of little help in trying to discern a masterful or knowing practice. However, a more helpful link is established between them by the term ‘character’. It is in experience that character is formed, and it is as an experienced person that one becomes excellent in practical judgements. Here the circle of knowledge and virtue can be seen to have a positive determination in and through character formation, or experience. When experience ‘becomes aware of itself’ (p. 289) as this character formation then this is a ‘knowledge’ of moral excellence, but a knowledge of excellence as doing, not as being known. Thus it is part of our moral excellence to know that ‘being phronetic is itself part of what it means to be of good character’ (p. 290). The experience that teaches us moral excellence ‘becomes itself a motivating source of good acts’ (p. 291). As such, phronesis can never become detached from experience, as theory does, because phronesis is always in experience. Experience, as such, is a ‘non-suppressive universal’ (p. 293). This, as we will see in a moment, is not the case.
Dunne’s conception of experience leans heavily on Gadamer’s analysis of experience in _Truth and Method_. Gadamer argues for retaining Hegel’s insight into the dialectical nature of experience because it has the educational value of changing both our knowledge and the object. But he criticises Hegel for closing down this essentially ‘open’ element of experience. _Contra_ the idea that new experience will always replace old experiences, Gadamer argues that Hegel’s dialectic of experience ends ‘with the overcoming of all experience . . . attained in absolute knowledge’ (Gadamer, 1979, p. 319) where the mind ‘no longer has anything different or alien to itself’ (p. 318). Dunne picks up this element of openness from Gadamer and applies it to his own reconfiguration of experience in Aristotle. The _phronimos_ can gain practical knowledge and practical excellence from experience because (each) experience educates the last experience and is always itself open to further refinement. The teleology of experience here is that being open to new experiences and refining previous experiences is both knowledge and virtue, or phronetic _techne_. Dunne quotes Gadamer’s words: ‘experience itself can never be science. It is in absolute antithesis to knowledge and to that kind of instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 306; Gadamer, 1979, p. 319). Its own character is ‘radically undogmatic’ (Gadamer, 1979, p. 319) and always open to new experience or re-education. Thus, ‘the dialectic of experience has its own fulfilment not in definitive knowledge, but in that openness to experience that is encouraged by experience itself’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 306; Gadamer, 1979, p. 319).

Let us rehearse the Hegelian notion of experience in contradistinction to its misrecognition in Gadamer. Gadamer agrees with Hegel regarding determinate negation, or that the circle of knowledge and experience produces and reproduces an experience about itself. Dunne requires some kind of notion of determinate negation if his idea that experience ‘becomes aware of itself’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 289) is to have any substance. This means that, again with Hegel, the natural consciousness that has resulted from previous experience is negated by a new experience. The question at the heart of this process now comes down to this. How are we to understand the ‘new’ consciousness that results from what Gadamer calls ‘the experience that consciousness has of itself’ (Gadamer, 1979, p. 318) and from what Dunne describes when experience ‘becomes aware of itself’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 289)? For Gadamer and Dunne somehow this experience produces a consciousness that knows that it is open to further refinement from future experiences. This consciousness has openness as its character and understands that being closed to future learning—for example, making universal claims for what is only a temporary and partial state—is contrary to its character. It is from within these presuppositions of the new consciousness that the character of openness becomes virtue.

For Hegel, however, something very different is being learned. The new consciousness that results from experience is not at all what it seems. In experience, the ‘new’ consciousness has the old consciousness for its object. The former is aware of its difference, now, from the latter.
But—and here is the crux—the new consciousness, in order to be known in this way, must also be an object for another ‘new’ consciousness. This is the structure of Hegelian phenomenology. Any consciousness, to be known, has to be experienced as known. No consciousness can survive unscathed, especially the philosophical consciousness that is the result of the experience ‘that consciousness has of itself’. Hegel describes this circle in the introduction to the *Phenomenology*. He says, ‘consciousness suffers this violence at its own hands: it spoils its own limited satisfaction. When consciousness feels this violence, its anxiety may well make it retreat from the truth and strive to hold onto what it is in danger of losing. But it can find no peace’ (Hegel, 1977, p. 51). The idea of consciousness as openness, or as virtuous action, is just such a retreat. Indeed, such a notion of openness is not itself open to further (negative) experience. Its dogma, therefore, lies in the fear of another experience with its consequent negation of openness. This dogma and this fear are the Hegelian explanation for the popularity of non-foundational thinking. It avoids the negative implications of experience and thinking by seeming to embody them. To be truly open to the concept of openness requires openness to become an object for us—an experience of openness—and requires us to see again its inability to ‘find peace’. Only in the loss of openness is experience truly open.

In relation to Hegel, as to Kant earlier, in refusing the *tertium quid* of a middle ground between theory and practice, or between experience and virtue, Dunne has—ironically—occupied the middle ground. The presupposition of openness as virtue is a posited *tertium quid*, that is, a posited ‘alternative’ to the dialectic of enlightenment that engulfs all thinking. Hegel’s science of the middle is much more logically and politically acute than either Dunne’s or Gadamer’s versions of the experience of experience. The circle of experience in Hegel is not only the science of experience as universal; it is also our education about what ‘universal’ means. Just as for Kant philosophy is moral dilemma, so for Hegel philosophy is the aporia of the universal. The middle ground here is not something to be posited as either knowable (the popular critique of Hegel) or unknowable (the claim of non-foundational theory). It is the thought of negation that cannot survive itself, yet in not surviving itself is formative of itself. The middle ground is this negative necessity that is always already the condition of the possibility of anything at all being known. It both collapses and is known. The idea that experience cannot understand the structure, the architectonic, the logic, the doctrine and the *logos* of this self-determination is the greatest prejudice against and barrier to the ‘openness’ of experience that currently characterises not only much philosophy of education, but also much philosophy in general.

**PHILOSOPHICAL CHARACTER**

Dunne’s introduction to *Back to the Rough Ground* tells how he came to write the book. In a college of education he and his colleagues were introduced to the behaviouralist model of education as a blueprint for
successful teaching. If specific goals were set, this model promised ‘spectacular improvements in the quality of … students’ teaching’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 1) as well as efficiency and accountability. However, Dunne notes that the good practice he had seen ‘did not seem to work in this way’ (p. 3). Furthermore, the model did not seem to concern itself with how judgements regarding objectives were to be arrived at. He concludes that the model, in giving priority to outcomes, neglected teaching ‘as an engagement or a process’ (p. 5). In addition, it ignored the contexts and traditions of education as well as ‘the urgencies and contingencies of the classroom’ (ibid.). It was to philosophy, then, that he turned to help him articulate an alternative discourse for practice.

However, as I have tried to show, the form of philosophical thinking that Dunne employs misrecognises not just the political determination of the relation of theory and practice, but also the very character of philosophy itself. I have criticised Dunne’s notion of phronetic *techne* on two grounds. First, his critique of instrumentalism in Part II of *Back to the Rough Ground* is slowly transformed into a critique of theory as abstraction and of philosophy ‘itself’ as *techne*, with all the attendant problems for agency that this presumes. The result is a concept of virtue shorn of any relation to freedom through the power of the will and the representation of this power in and as philosophy. Second, in citing the learning experience of *phronesis* in a pre-conception of ‘openness’, Dunne closes down the openness of philosophical experience to itself. The eschewal of the promise of universal politics, my first criticism, is its weakness politically; the refusal of the necessity of universal thinking is, in addition, and my second criticism, its weakness of *character*. It is the very difficulty and ambivalence of this political education that demands philosophical character.

Politically, theory and practice are, in Adorno’s famous formulation, ‘torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up’ (Adorno, 1999; p. 130). For Adorno, resignation belongs to those who sacrifice the negations of the political aporia of theory and practice in a desire to overcome their perceived impotence within it. ‘The leap into praxis will not cure thought from resignation as long as it is paid for with the secret knowledge that this course is simply not the right one’ (Adorno, 1991, p. 173). This admonition from Adorno is not aimed so much at the choices that the *phronimos* deliberates upon. It is rather aimed at the resignation involved in believing one to have become a *phronimos*. Working for the universal interest in a society dominated by particular interests is not simply a matter of virtue but rather of the negation of virtue in and by the broken totality. It is this brokenness that is itself the political precondition of modern philosophy and its dualisms, including that of theory and practice.

The stakes here are very high indeed. The *phronimos*, as implied in our representation of MacIntyre above, has granted to himself knowledge of the relation of the particular to the whole. He knows that philosophy lacks the contexts ‘needed to make sense’ (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 1) of what it is doing. He knows also that academic disciplines are denied by the catastrophe precisely those ideas that can restore their links to ‘the real
world’ (p. 4). The *phronimos* fails, however, to recognise Benjamin’s ‘angel of history’ (Benjamin, 1992, p. 249), who sees ‘wreckage upon wreckage’ (ibid.) piled up at his feet and who is unable to close his wings against the storm. He would ‘like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed’ (ibid.). But this he cannot do, for he too is not only caught in the storm: his yearning for restoration is part of the storm. Even in critique he can only add to the debris that piles up before him. His lamentation is the wind by which he is propelled.

Herein lies the central problem with Dunne’s thesis. The *phronimos* fails to risk his own representation, or his own power, within philosophy and thereby fails to recognise the universal significance of philosophy as that representation of and as power. In turn, he fails to understand the Janus face of this representation of power, namely that it—i.e. philosophy, or the relation of theory and practice—is both possibility and impossibility, abstraction and negation.\(^1\) Lacking—rejecting—this aporetic relation to the universal, the *phronimos* is ‘open’ to becoming will without mediation, or to practices without theory, without philosophy. No matter how generous or benevolent the *phronimos* is—and Dunne’s work is both of these—without the recognition of power in its philosophical forms, the will of the *phronimos* is as ‘open’ to democratic practices as to tyrannical practices. It will not be news to post-Holocaust generations that practices that rise above their determination within modern bourgeois social relations, and theories that refuse their collaboration in representing those relations and practices, leave themselves ‘open’ to becoming all-powerful. Tyrannies are not resisted by denying philosophy as power. On the contrary, resistance is actual in the recognition of its collaboration, for this, despite its difficulty, is its broken but recognised relation to the universal. Where philosophy extinguishes mediation in experience with some kind of posited yet resigned unity, be it primordial knowing (Dunne, 1993, p. 279) or indeed praxis and *phronesis*, there, whether for virtue or tyranny, the risk of the universal is effaced in favour of the interests and the perspectives of the particular. What such a refusal of risk is no longer open to is the truth of the broken middle of theory and practice and its representation in and as philosophy. This is not to say that *phronesis* and tyranny (liberal democracy and fascism) share the same content; clearly they do not. But it is to warn that, in effacing the relation of their respective contents to the (broken) universality of their forms, they share a weakness of philosophical character, a character that our political education demands.\(^12\)

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**NOTES**

1. Readers may not be familiar with this quotation from Benjamin’s _Theses on the Philosophy of History_. In full, the ninth thesis reads as follows:
A Klee painting named ‘Angelus Novus’ shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

2. ‘Back to the rough ground’ is a phrase taken from Wittgenstein. See Dunne, 1993, p. 377.
3. See Nicomachean Ethics, 1144b30-32 and 1178a16-19.
4. See De Anima, 1.3 407b18.
5. Leaving techne untranslated here as Dunne does.
7. Of course the chief good for Aristotle is happiness (NE, 1097b21). Dunne admits that Aristotle’s conception of the voluntary subject ‘falls far short of the modern conception of the free subject’ (Dunne, 1993, p. 374). This latter leads the ‘broken’ (ibid.) life between a subjective notion of eudaimonia and the objective eleutheronomy with the latter being the happiness gained from the freedom of internal law-giving (see Caygill, 1995, p. 222). Kant himself writes that ‘my theory is that the creator’s unique intention is neither human morality in itself nor happiness in itself, but the highest good possible on earth, the union and harmony of them both’ (Kant, 1991, p. 65).
8. Although he goes on to argue that only one of us can be the head of state whilst internationally it is nature that effects change towards highest wisdom.
9. Here Kant argues that the schema enables judgement to synthesise the otherwise heterogeneous elements of intuition and concept through ‘rules of synthesis of the imagination’ (Kant, 1968, A141/B180). These kinds of subsumptive judgements lead to a domination of nature and the imagination and in this sense might fall into Dunne’s critique of the merely technical.
10. Again, leaving techne untranslated.
11. I have tried to explore the way ‘and’ carries the broken middle of social relations in Tubbs, 2004.
12. One final comment here. Part of the reason behind writing this article is that at the same time that I received the copy of the Journal of Philosophy of Education on practice, someone very close to me was dying of cancer. He was lying in hospital with only a few days before the cancer in his lungs and kidneys overcame his will to live and breathe. I was struck by a question: if, when I visited him, I did so as (in Dunne’s terms) the philosopher who takes refuge in theory and in a palliative logos of universal explanation, would this mean that I was unable to respond to this most unique and urgent of situations with the sensitivity of the phronimos who is open to the uniqueness of each particularity? I think not. The logos accompanies me as the companion to suffering, not seeking to replace my immediate and unconditional relationship to this dying man but to enhance it. How? By keeping me in the relation of curiosity, attentiveness and acceptance that provides the reminder of the health of this healthy relationship. Is it disrespectful to speak of a healthy relationship to a dying man? On the contrary, it is the one relationship that openly and continually repeats his own self-production, his own broken middle, even at those moments when the results are so very painful to watch. I do not see phronesis as able to practise this understanding, this logos, or truly to know this dying man, at the same time as it rejects philosophy, that is, rejects the representation of the universal. It is not philosophy that needs lessons in theory and practice, for philosophy is already the dilemma of theory and practice known and realised. It is phronesis that separates itself from philosophy and, as such, it is phronesis that misrecognises the meaning of the universal and the particular in the singular. (Curiosity, attentiveness and acceptance are the three characteristics cited by Gillian Rose as necessary for a philosopher. See Rose, 1999, p. 42, where she also argues for philosophical character formation as autopoiesis (p. 45).)

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