Philosophical Inquiry in Education

Pandemic Parenting & Philosophy in Crisis

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Pandemic Parenting &Philosophy in Crisis

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These are strange times, a crisis unlike anything in living memory for most of us, at least those of us in the privileged Western world who are middle-class and accustomed to freedom of movement, reliable institutions, and the luxury of touching our face.

As I transitioned my philosophy of education course online last winter I was struck by the way in which our class discussions quickly became very personal, not only because we could see inside everyone's homes but because students couldn't help but speak about the personal dimensions to this pandemic— from canceled wedding plans to financial troubles to questions about graduation— often with links to the philosophy of education readings. Inspired by my students, I couldn't help but meld the personal and philosophical, and see the personal as a way into philosophy.

What impacted me most when the pandemic hit wasn't the transition to teaching online, but that suddenly my wife and I had to completely reconfigure our domestic layout and office space in our small home, because my 5 and 9-year-old kids were now home all day every day. As anyone with young kids knows, "working from home" during a pandemic is a real misnomer, particularly when multiple young children are involved. It felt a bit more like "living at work" (DrFields, 2020), or, for parents, "working at school." It wasn't just the added responsibility of homeschooling; it was the relentlessness of it all. It was like trying to fly an airplane while doing your laundry and your taxes. While I could Zoom or answer emails when the kids were around, I could not read or write or think about anything substantial. Parenting under normal circumstances functions precisely because of some measure of predictability, and this period of thorough unpredictability requires us to turn to philosophy to think through the parenting and education that we normally do more or less unreflectively.

My wife was working from home as well, and she is at high risk because of a compromised immune system. Far more important than professional productivity was my kids' well-being and ensuring that daily domestic life went as smoothly as possible: it was imperative to start the kids off right every morning rather than to pick up the pieces later in the day when the kids started to fall apart and the parenting train went off the tracks. We would plan the kids' day out intelligently so as to minimize conflict and keep spirits up, and then schedule my work around it. My kids joined my Zoom meetings and were often in the room while I was teaching.

My youngest son's teacher planned well-meaning but time-consuming activities that required lots of parental involvement and preparation: "Ask your parents to cut the letters of the alphabet out of paper." But I could either feed and bathe my children, or cut paper for them. As a result, homeschooling didn't always follow the curriculum. Sometimes just getting the kids to cook with us and help with chores was the major learning for the day. Other times we found ourselves staying up late working with our eldest on homework when what we likely all needed was some quality time together and sleep. The most precious item our family owned was a swing set in the backyard; for 2 or 3 hours even in cold March temperatures our boys (with the promise of Pokemon cards) would swing away their endless energy.

It quickly became apparent that the only way I was going to get any reading or writing done was in my car. Every afternoon starting in mid-March, following a few hours of parenting and homeschooling while my wife worked online, I would grab my laptop and backpack and a snack, drive around the empty streets of Toronto until the car was warmed up, and seek out a place in the sun where I could work for 3 or 4 quiet hours. Because the car had a black interior it would warm up quickly on sunny days. On cloudy days I would wrap up in a blanket and thick hoodie and work until the temperature dropped and became unmanageable. My favorite spot was my kids' school parking lot behind a school bus. Eventually, as the months passed and spring arrived in Toronto, I would seek out shade instead of sun. And try to see if philosophy could help make any sense of this, my first pandemic.

On the one hand, in the face of crisis we tend to seize up, shut down, and go into survival mode. When we struggle to get our heads around events that seem to change every day, we easily lose sight of the longer horizon. It's hard to *do* philosophy in the midst of disruption and change and uncertainty, which makes philosophical thought seem not only indulgent but even unhelpful. A pandemic is no time for philosophy; philosophers aren't essential workers as much as they are *existential* workers.

But perhaps only when a civilization is in crisis does the importance and urgency of philosophy become fully apparent. We need philosophy more than ever in a pandemic. Philosophy tries to make sense of the world we live in, seeking order and meaning in the face of chaos and despair, questioning what we previously took for granted, opening new horizons of meaning and understanding, and illuminating possible responses to crisis by outlining principles which might help us forge ahead.

Perhaps philosophy itself is like the pandemic: though philosophy takes many forms, it generally tends to unmoor, damage, disrupt or even destroy our deepest and most settled truths, habits and beliefs. But, unlike the pandemic, philosophy can help bring calm, tranquility, reverence, and reasoned thought to our plight.

How could I possibly gather any thoughts on this pandemic when it was so immediate? The Owl of Minerva only flies at dusk. Does philosophy face backward and interpret the past, as Hegel suggests and intellectual historians attempt, comprehending an era's meaning only once it is in the past? Or can it help us anticipate possibilities and move wisely forward?

I sit there in my car thinking about history, wondering how we will look back on this moment, knowing also that I only have twenty minutes until it is my turn to watch the kids. Something you learn about time as a parent is that it can be fractured infinitely by every urgent and important interruption from your child. Every task, conversation, or attempt at sleep is broken into fragments by the questions, frustrations, injuries, hunger, loneliness, delights or injustices experienced by your child, some of the key things that philosophy inquires into. And while you are constantly pulled into the present by their immediate sense of urgency and curiosity, you also frequently imagine their future: who they will become, what world they will inhabit. It's hard to write and read about philosophy when childhood is exploding all around you in its most disruptive, messy, loud and enchanting manner. As a parent you need to attend to the constant flow of needs and discoveries, interrupting every task you try. Yet it also prompts you to imagine life after you are gone and the world you want to help create.

Philosophers try to deal with timeless questions; a parent must tend to the endless questions— all equally urgent— and the unsettling fragmentation of time. Most philosophers whose names we know did not juggle childcare with their writing. Those who did tend to children did not have the freedom and time to practice philosophy or the platform to share their wisdom and insights. One of the most important philosophical questions is how to raise our young— and yet the actual task of raising them

seems quite incongruent. Although it's a struggle, there is much to be gained by occupying both worlds. It is in tending to both that we're simultaneously grounded in the concrete and abstract, the immediate and timeless, the very messy present of parenthood filled with the potential of the universal.

After all, what greater philosophical problem could we ponder than how to raise our young? In times of peace and prosperity it's easy to think of parenting and education as a means of keeping children away from productive workers, while preparing children to become workers themselves. Yet it is the work of parents and educators that prepare us for pandemics, for the problems and possibilities of unknown futures. How do you raise a child to become an adult who can face unknown challenges, who can make choices that serve not only them but the society they inhabit, who can navigate the ethical, democratic, existential struggles that life will surely provide? Lofty questions about the next generation's unknown future vie with very the immediate questions of what's for lunch and how to get finger paint off and how to keep my kids' spirits up in a pandemic.

Practicing philosophy while pandemic parenting is a tough fit. While few of the philosophers I've studied spoke directly about parenting, I've been surprised to see just how many have endured plagues and pandemics, showing the ways that philosophy can help in times of great struggle, but also how those great struggles provoke philosophers to think more deeply. Is there something about philosophy that lends itself to be born from times of upheaval? Those philosophical insights and inquiries that can help us navigate disruptive moments of history before enough time has passed to make them historic. New York Times writer Jennifer Szalai notes that in 1922, "as Germany was convulsed by food shortages and soaring inflation," (Szalai, 2020), Heidegger was writing his wife about how to get potatoes for his mother. "But even as Heidegger was worried about the potatoes, he believed that a crisis could also offer a radical break from the dispensation that produced it, a moment of genuine openness, a chance to rethink everything anew" (Szalai, 2020).

Ancient Athens was unsettled by political turmoil within and beyond its borders, and its flourishing didn't last long. These were not quiet times. The cosmopolitan character of Athens not only drew great thinkers and made it a vibrant city for arts and education, it also brought plague (Littman, 2009). Thucydides provides a horrific account of how Athenians were impacted:

> The disease began with a strong fever in the head and reddening and burning in the eyes; the first internal symptoms were that the throat and tongue became bloody and the breath unnatural and malodorous. This was followed by sneezing and hoarseness, and in a short time the affliction descended to the chest, producing violent coughing. When it became established in the heart, it convulsed that and produced every kind of evacuation of bile known to the doctors, accompanied by great discomfort. Most victims then suffered from empty retching, which induced violent convulsion: they abated after this for some sufferers, but only much later for others.[1]

Socrates survived the Plague of Athens, which took the Athenian leader Pericles along with a quarter of the population, leading to the fall of Athens and eventual trial and death of Socrates.

Centuries later, the beginnings of Enlightenment saw a parallel plague. Both Hobbes and Locke lived through the Great Plague of London. Some argue that Hobbes's *Leviathan,* written just 15 years before

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[1] A vivid and unsettling description of the Plague of Athens is available at:
https://www.ancient.eu/article/1535/thucydides-on-the-plague-of-athens-text--commentar/#:~:text=If%20anyone%20survived%20the%20worst,while%20others%20lost%20their%20eyes.

the plague rose to a fevered pitch in London, was as much about protection against plague as fear inspired by the ever threatening "State of Warre." Poole (2020) notes that the city streets on the famous cover art of *Leviathan* are almost vacant, except for two figures: "Their clothes identify them as plague doctors, with their characteristic beaked masks, containing herbs or sponges soaked in vinegar to filter the air" (Poole, 2020). Locke, just a few years later, became involved in medicine while at Oxford, moving to London to work as a doctor just as the Plague ended (Uzgalis, 2020).

But turmoil continued even as pandemics waned, as the Enlightenment and accompanying medical knowledge expanded and held out the promise of greater control and even cures for diseases. The French Revolution and the Wars of the Twentieth Century provoked powerful and profound philosophical thought, as well as new philosophical movements: Romanticism, Burkean conservativism; critical theory; existentialism. Some of their leading exponents themselves even wrote about plagues (see Camus), albeit fictionally (or allegorically).

Foucault (1975) began *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* by drawing parallels between the systematic and often drastic measures taken against the Seventeenth Century plague–the ways that people and bodies were contained, controlled and governed as a means of preventing the spread of disease–and the birth of penal systems during the modern age. His exploration of the Panopticon has become a frequently referenced model with parallels to big data, surveillance culture, and the use of Covid-19 tracking apps that will both inevitably save lives and further entrench and normalize the surrender of ourselves in the form of data to the corporate state. What is clear is that plagues and pandemics destroy and disrupt, and these radical transformations inspire and require philosophical inquiry. What new philosophical era might emerge from Covid-19? What philosophical movements could follow postmodernism? (Peters, Tesar, Jackson, & Besley 2020). Even if philosophy doesn't lead the way forward, it might be refreshed and enlivened by this crisis.

The fate of education is too at stake. Will conventional in-person classes be replaced by online learning? Why pay teachers and build schools when kids can learn online with applications like the Khan Academy and Codecademy? This pandemic makes the *custodial* function of teaching become perhaps the most important. There is cause for concern when even someone as skeptical about online learning such as myself is so easily seduced by the ease and convenience of Khan Academy. In Canada, post-secondary education is publicly funded, with the result that education must compete against health care for public dollars. As education becomes subjected to data harvesting demands (Zuboff, 2019), philosophy must bring ethical concerns, political theory, and even ontology to bear, in addition to the ongoing challenge of distributive justice. Perhaps the subjection of education to data harvesting spells the end of education as we know it, replaced by 'learnification' (Biesta, 2005) and resulting loss of subjectivity (Biesta, 2020). Anecdotally I know that my students much prefer learning in person. Before the pandemic, several willingly drove three hours once a week to attend an in-person version of a course that was also available online. Perhaps 'better' online pedagogy will change that, or costs will make face-to-face learning prohibitive. Will we even have educational institutions (schools, colleges, universities) after COVID? Or will education just be a minor branch of "Big Tech"? (Galloway, 2020; Klein, 2020; Zuboff, 2019). It's noteworthy that not long before COVID spread to North America, presidential candidates were discussing breaking up "Big Tech" (Kolhatkar, 2019), yet one of the more lasting effects of COVID might be to bring "Google University" one step closer to reality. Their capacity to gather students' meta-data is extraordinary: "Google also collects data on the search terms children use, how they move their cursors across or interact with pages, the devices they use, their locations, and who their classmates and

teachers are" (Okihiro, 2020). Naomi Klein notes that even before COVID, students' data was, by some measure, even more valuable than oil, and tech companies "had every intention of leveraging the crisis for a permanent transformation" (Klein, 2020).

The experience of reflecting philosophically on how society and education are changing while in the throes of transformation is like watching my kids grow up in the moment. The notches on the wall that track their growth show their progress quantitatively, but I can't see it happening in real time, I can't see their identity form and transform. I look at old pictures of them at a younger age and, while familiar, they are also strangers from the present children that I am most firmly bonded to.

Is this a polarizing moment? Is this a transformative moment? Or will we have crisis fatigue? When the inequalities of society are so clearly reflected in the spread of the virus, and the severity of the economic and labour impacts reflect these same inequalities, philosophy can give a framework and a call to action.

At a moment when our certainty has become unmoored, when our imagination is kick-started in the task of reimagining possible outcomes to our new scenario, philosophical ways of thinking and processing experience can come alive. Will we respond differently now that we've seen how easily our "normal" can be robbed from us by global calamities? Philosophy of education can play a role as we emerge from COVID, perhaps finding new ways to defend face-to-face education, teachers, and educational institutions, and emphasize the importance of education for democracy, reimagining education as more than glorified child-care and career preparation, but the very glue that can hold us together and help us heal when remarkable forces have pulled us apart. After all, education is what helps us deal with the unknown in a way that exceeds our own self-interest, and might be what will help us get through this pandemic. And perhaps there will be new philosophy and philosophers and philosophies of education to help with this task.

But for this author, much will depend on when it is safe enough for our kids to return to school, which in Toronto is not the 2020-21 school year. What is being asked of parents—to continue working while kids are home all day—is quite unreasonable. When opening bars and restaurants and gyms is seen as more urgent than preparing safe schools, I wonder: can parents go 'on strike' and withhold their labour as a collective? While quite unfeasible, would the threat of parents withholding their labour pressure governments to take more drastic and dramatic steps? (Ricci, 2020; Rushowy, 2020, Subramanian, 2020) Parents, kids, and schools, are surely worth it. Parents of the world unite! You have nothing to lose but your sanity.

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