Philosophy of Education for the Public Good: Five challenges and an agenda

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‘Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?’ (Jean-François Lyotard, 1984 [1979])

Introduction
In his 1917 essay ‘The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy’ John Dewey wrote that ‘(p)hilosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men’ (Dewey 1978/1917; MW10:42). This, so I believe, is as much true for philosophy as it is for philosophy of education. Philosophy of education that wants to be philosophy for education rather than just philosophy about education cannot be too self-absorbed or self-referential but needs to engage with educational matters and things that matter educationally, rather than just philosophically. There is, therefore, a distinctive responsibility for philosophy of education to contribute to the public good that education is—or perhaps we should say, in a time in which education is constantly being pushed towards the private good and the economic good: the public good that education ought to be. Philosophy of education can, of course, not do everything. It has a distinctive contribution to make, one that makes use of the ‘tools’ of philosophy to engage with issues that are distinctively educational. I don’t think of philosophy of education, therefore, as a form of applied philosophy, one that raises philosophical questions about education, but as a ‘device’ cultivated by engagement with philosophy and philosophising for dealing with the problems of education as educational rather than as philosophical problems.

In this article I want to outline five educational issues to which I think philosophy of education has a contribution to make. My aim is partly to identify these issues—which is why I refer to them as ‘challenges’—and partly to give an indication of the kind of philosophical ‘work’ that might be done and needs to be done in relation to these challenges—which, in a sense, constitutes the ‘agenda’ for further work that I am referring to in the title of this article. I will refer to these five challenges as ‘basic questions’—not because they are basic in the sense of being fundamental or constant, but in order to indicate that this is not an arbitrary selection of issues where work might be needed, but that these are issues that go to the very heart of what I think education is about and ought to be about. In this sense the issues I will discuss in this article also serve as a reminder of something that we—we as philosophers of education, we as education-
alists, we as those with an interest in education—may have forgotten, or may have let slip a little, and therefore need to reclaim, but need to reclaim in a very specific way. I am not arguing, therefore, for a simple return to something, but perhaps more for a recovery of what should matter educationally. For this I will be talking about five issues: education, weakness, existence, soul and truth.

**Basic Questions in Education**

The idea that there are ‘basic questions’ in education suggests a sense of constancy and continuity. It suggests, perhaps, that there are aspects of the ‘reality’ of education that remain the same across space and time, so that a reflection on these aspects can bring us closer to the ‘essence’ of education. This, in turn, would allow us to speak with a degree of certainty about and also for education. This is a challenging line of thought, particularly in a time—a time that we might loosely refer to as ‘postmodern’—in which there seems to be a general suspicion about our ability to identify what is real and essential and about our ability to speak about or in the name of it. When Jean-François Lyotard characterised the postmodern condition as ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ (Lyotard, 1984, p. xxiv), many took him to make an epistemological point. Thus postmodernism became identified with epistemological and ethical relativism—the idea that ‘anything goes’—and with anti-realism—the idea that reality puts no boundaries on what we can know. This has been a rather unfortunate outcome of Lyotard’s intervention; an outcome, moreover, which has resulted in a large amount of rather confusing and to a certain extent even irrelevant discussions, either aimed at defending relativism and anti-realism or refuting it.1

My reading of postmodernism—a reading strongly inspired by Richard Bernstein’s book *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Bernstein, 1983) and Michel Foucault’s essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’ (Foucault, 1984)—has always been to see postmodernism as a critique of the epistemological worldview, that is, a critique of the idea that our most basic, fundamental and original relationship with the world is a knowledge relationship and that everything else—including ethics and politics—is derived from and based upon it (see particularly Biesta, 2005). I see postmodernism as being about a foregrounding of ethics and politics in their own right, without any foundations, so to speak. After all, postmodernism comes with an explicit ethico-political imperative which could be summarised as ‘Thou shalt not totalise’. This imperative is neither about relativism, nor does it express an absolute or a truth. It rather summarises a lesson learned. It rather tries to say that not to totalise, not to look for an all-encompassing point of view but to leave room for what Ilan Gur Ze’ev (1998; 2003) has referred to as ‘transcendence’, might, in some cases, be the more desirable option. The postmodern imperative can thus be read as an evocation to live with change, diversity and uncertainty, to quote Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman, 1998), and with the difficult responsibility to judge after the event rather than before (see Biesta, 2006). Its call, therefore, is existential, not epistemological or ontological.

With this in mind, what then might be some of the ‘basic questions’ of education? What might be some of the issues that educational thought and practice today would need to take into consideration? What might be some of the questions that educators need to
remind themselves of? What might be some of the insights that educators may need to be reminded about? And what might be the particular ‘work’ that philosophers of education can do in relation to these issues? I wish to offer five observations that may serve as reminders of forgotten or perhaps of as-yet-unthought aspects of education. They are not meant to be comprehensive or conclusive but represent a point of view and, more specifically, they represent my point of view.

**Education, not Learning**

The first thing to remind ourselves of is that education is about education, not about learning. At first sight it may seem odd to make this point—and perhaps also to formulate it in this way—as many would argue that learning is the core ‘business’ of education. There is, however, an important difference between learning and education just as there is a crucial distinction between the discourse of learning and the discourse of education. To remind ourselves of these differences is particularly important in light of a phenomenon to which I have referred as the ‘learnification’ of education (see Biesta, 2009a; 2010b). This denotes the fairly recent tendency to refer to anything educational in terms of a language of learning. Thus teachers have become known as facilitators of learning, teaching has been redefined as the creation of learning opportunities, schools are seen as learning environments, students are called learners, adult education has been rebranded as lifelong learning, and the process of education is described as that of teaching-and-learning.

While I do not have a problem with the language of learning as such—albeit that further questions can be raised about the concept of learning itself (see Biesta, 2010c)—the fundamental difference between learning and education means that the language of learning cannot simply replace the language of education. A main reason for this lies in the fact that education is a teleological practice, that is a practice framed and constituted by purposes (see, for example, Carr, 1987; Carr, 2003). The educational demand is not that students learn, but that they learn something and that they do so for particular reasons, that is, with reference to particular intended ‘outcomes’ (by which I do not mean to suggest that such outcomes can be easily specified or achieved). This means that the discourse of learning only becomes an educational discourse when we ask questions about the content and purpose of learning—the learning ‘of what’ and ‘for what’—and also when we ask questions about the relationships at stake in education, which is the question of the learning ‘from whom’ (see Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004). The discourse of learning only becomes an educational discourse when we ask questions about the ends of learning.

Education can, of course, have many ends, which means that there is always a need for judgement about what is educationally desirable. Who should be involved in such judgements is an entirely open matter—that is to say, it is a matter that in itself requires educational judgement—although it could be argued that one of the ultimate aims of education lies in the ability for oneself to make a distinction between what is desired and what is desirable and thus to judge what is desirable. It is also important to acknowledge that education can be informed by different ends that influence the process and its direction at the very same time. Elsewhere (Biesta, 2009a) I have suggested that educa-
tional ends fall into three broad categories: the domain of qualification, the domain of socialisation and the domain of subjectification. Whilst qualification is about the acquisition of knowledge and skills and, to a certain extent also values and dispositions, and whilst socialisation refers to the ways in which, through education, we become part of existing traditions and practices, subjectification is about the ways in which education contribution to the formation of certain ‘qualities’ of the person that are not about socialisation but about the person as individual. Here we can locate more ‘traditional’ or modern educational aims such as autonomy and criticality, but also more postmodern understandings of subjectivity, such as in terms of responsibility or uniqueness (see, for example, Biesta, 2009b).

To say, then, that education is about education, not learning, is to remind ourselves of the fact that education is in some way always ‘framed’ and perhaps we could even say constituted by ends, and that this is one of the key ways in which education is different from learning, in that learning can occur without (the specification of) any ends. The problem with the discourse of learning—for example in such statements as that teachers should promote students’ learning—is that it lacks an explicit engagement with the question of ends. This does not mean that educational practices framed in terms of the language of learning are without ends; it just means that they lack reflection and judgement about ends, and thus tend to be directed by so-called common sense or even populist ends. The language of learning thus makes it difficult if not impossible to take responsibility for the direction of education, and that is why we need to keep reminding ourselves that education is about education. This requires that we keep working on the question as to what is distinctively educational about education and that we resist the learnification of educational discourse and practice wherever and whenever it arises.

Weakness, not Strength

With the fact that education is framed by ends and judgements about what is educationally desirable comes the fact that education as an activity is characterised by notions such as influence, interaction and intervention. Education, we might say, is a relational term as it refers to how human beings aim to influence each other intentionally, which is another way in which (the discourse of) education is different from (the discourse of) learning. With the notion of influence comes a range of other educational concepts, such as authority, power, emancipation and freedom, which all try to express something about the ‘quality’ of educational interaction and about principles that should inform and bound this interaction.

The idea that education is about interaction is acknowledged by many. But there are significant differences in the understanding and, more importantly, the appreciation of the nature of educational interaction. The predicament of educational interaction has perhaps been expressed most poignantly by Sigmund Freud when he included education in his list of three ‘impossible professions’—the other two being government and psychoanalysis—‘in which one can be sure beforehand of achieving unsatisfying results’ (Freud, 1968, p. 248). The reason for calling education an impossible profession has to do with the fact that educational interaction is not a process of physical ‘push and pull’ subject to the causal laws of nature, but proceeds in a hermeneutic way, that is by means of
interpretation. If teaching is going to have any impact on students, it is because of the fact that students interpret and make sense of what they are being taught, not because the teaching would simply flow into their minds and bodies. Yet the art of interpretation is a fundamentally open art which lodges an element of unpredictability at the very heart of education. To say that one can be sure beforehand of achieving unsatisfying results is therefore not to disqualify such results but to highlight the fact that education does not work as a technology and therefore generates results that are unsatisfying if one starts at the other end, that is, from the assumption that there should be a perfect match between educational ‘input’ and educational ‘output’. While part of the discussion centres around the question whether it would be possible to achieve such a match, the question that is equally important is whether it would be desirable to achieve such a perfect match. In response to this one could argue that technological expectations about education are misplaced because education always entails an orientation towards the independence of those being educated. It is never the ambition of teachers that their students remain dependent on them. At some point teachers want their students to be able to think and act for themselves. In this regard education always anticipates the freedom of those being educated, which is an important reason for not wanting to treat students simply as material to be moulded or as objects to be trained.

The issue at stake here is whether the weakness of education should be seen as a problem, as something that should be overcome and ultimately ‘solved’, or as something that is inherent of education so that as soon as one were to eradicate the weakness of education one would, in one and the same stroke, have eradicated education itself. The answer to this question partly depends on one’s appreciation of the different dimensions of education and their relative importance. If one were to argue that the only thing that matters education-wise is qualification—and to take this position would turn education into training—then the weakness of education becomes a problem that needs to be ‘solved’. Similarly if one were to argue that the only thing that matters in education is socialisation—and to take this position would turn education into indoctrination or brain-washing—then again the weakness of education appears as a problem that needs to be solved. Yet as long as one always (also) keeps an orientation towards subjectification, that is, towards the promotion of qualities of the person that are neither covered by the acquisition of knowledge, skills and dispositions, nor by the insertion of ‘newcomers’ into existing social, cultural or political ‘orders’, then the weakness of education matters.

The reason for reminding ourselves of the weakness of education and of its importance lies in the sharp rise of ‘strong language’ in education, that is, language which depicts education as something that ought to be strong, safe and secure. We can find this in the idea of educational effectiveness in which the more effective school—or, for that matter, the more effective teacher—is the one that manages to achieve the most secure connection between educational ‘inputs’ and educational ‘outcomes’. We can also find it in the ambition to turn education into an evidence-based profession founded on scientific knowledge about ‘what works’. We can find it in the suggestion that a good school is one that is able to produce high exam scores, or in the idea that good teachers are those who are in control of all aspects of the educational process—a line of thinking which has even led to a situation in which teachers’ salaries are actually being based on the extent to which they are able to increase the exam performance of their students. We can also find
it in the increasing medicalisation of education which tries to limit the range of ‘acceptable’ behaviours in education through the use of drugs. The prevalence of strong language exemplifies an expectation that education can be ‘fixed’ so that, at some point, it can come to resemble a smoothly functioning production line or a perfect machine. Such expectations operate at all levels of education—from the level of individual students and schools up to that of entire national education systems—and with regard to a wide spectrum of different educational ‘outcomes’, ranging from a focus on the traditional three Rs, through to seeing education as the producer of good citizens or confident or resilient individuals.

By acknowledging the fundamental weakness of education and by seeing it as something that is educationally desirable—as something that is proper to education rather than as something that threatens education—it is possible to expose and counter attempts that see this weakness as a problem that just needs to be solved. By linking the question of weakness to the different dimensions of education it also becomes possible to be more precise about the extent to which and the way in which the weakness of education matters, that is, first and foremost with regard to the interest of education in what I have referred to as subjectification. But rather than to see this as a separate dimension, I wish to argue that the interest in subjectification permeates the other dimensions as well. Educational activity with reference to qualification does, after all, also impact on the qualities of the human being, just as is the case with educational activity with reference to socialisation. The challenge, therefore, is to think the weakness of education, the fact that education always entails risk, as something positive and proper, so that the ontological weakness of education can be seen as its existential strength.

Existence, not Essence

Education in its educational ‘guise’, so to speak, expresses an interest in the human being. Or to be more precise: it expresses an interest in the human being as subject, not as object. One of the things it requires at a practical level is that we aim to make a proper distinction between education and training, and reserve the first for an orientation towards the human being as subject. But while the distinction between the human being as subject and the human being as object is easily made, and while at a superficial level we may have a sense of where education ends and training begins, it is far more difficult to figure out what the distinction actually means and how it might be made in a way that is theoretically defensible and educationally sound.

I am, of course, not the first to raise these questions. Many of the major contributions to educational thought—dating back, within the Western traditions, to the Greek and Roman philosophers and continuing in the writings of such thinkers as Erasmus, Rousseau, Goethe, Kant, Schiller, and Schleiermacher, and taken up again by 20th and 21st century educational theory—have centred explicitly on the question of the human being as a subject of action, thought and initiative and on the question as to what education has to do with subjectivity and subjectification. Many authors have hinted at the paradoxical character of education’s concern with subjectivity (see, for example, Gössling, 1993), an issue perhaps best captured in Kant’s question ‘How do I cultivate freedom through coercion?’ (Kant, 1982, p. 711).
If we take the postmodern imperative seriously, however, then it means that one way to engage with the question of the human subject in education is no longer open to us, and this is an approach which aims and claims to be able to know what the essence of the human being is. Such a strategy, known in the philosophical literature as humanism, has not only proven to be impossible, for example in the writings of Foucault and Derrida (see, for example, Foucault, 1970; Derrida, 1982), but more importantly has also been identified as utterly undesirable, particularly in the work of Heidegger and Levinas, who both have argued that humanism has to be denounced ‘because it is not sufficiently human’ (Levinas, 1981, p.128; see also Heidegger, 1993). To think of the postmodern imperative as a lesson learned goes right back to the insight that any attempt to define the essence of the human being—any attempt to define what a real, proper, healthy, pure human being is—does so by drawing a line between those who are able to live up to this definition and those who do not and thus leads to the exclusion and ultimately the annihilation of those who happen to fall outside of the scope of a particular definition. While for Levinas the ‘crisis of humanism in our society’ is manifest in the ‘inhuman events of recent history’ (Levinas, 1990, p.279), he locates this crisis not just in these inhumanities as such, but first of all in humanism’s inability to effectively counter such inhumanities and also in the fact that many of the inhumanities of the 20th century—‘[t]he 1914 War, the Russian Revolution refuting itself in Stalinism, fascism, Hitlerism, the 1939–45 War, atomic bombings, genocide and uninterrupted war’ (ibid.)—were actually based upon and motivated by particular definitions of what it means to be human.

From an educational point of view the problem with humanism is that it specifies a norm of what it means to be human before the actual manifestation of ‘instances’ of humanity. It specifies what the child, student or newcomer must become before giving them an opportunity to show who they are and who they will be. This form of humanism thus seems to be unable to be open to the possibility that newcomers might radically alter our understandings of what it means to be human. The upshot of this is that the subjectification dimension of education becomes itself a form of socialisation, as within this particular framing each ‘newcomer’ can only be seen as a more or less ‘successful’ instance of an essence that has already been specified and that is already known or characterised in advance.

To take the postmodern imperative seriously thus requires that we articulate a different way to ‘access’ the question of subjectivity, both philosophically and educationally. One concept that has potential in this regard is the notion of ‘uniqueness’ as it represents the very opposite of any attempt to totalise the question of the human being and any attempt to give a total, all-encompassing and complete definition of what it means to be human. It is, however, of crucial importance to be aware of the different ways in which the idea of uniqueness can be articulated. In my own work (see particularly Biesta, 2010b, chapter 4) I have made a distinction between two different readings of uniqueness: uniqueness as difference and uniqueness as irreplaceability. The first notion of uniqueness locates the question of uniqueness in the realm of being in that it understands (my) uniqueness in terms of the way in which I am in some respects uniquely different from everyone else. It thus locates my uniqueness in my own singular unique essence, so we might say. While this is a possible way to understand uniqueness, there are several
problems with this way to access the question of the uniqueness of the subject. One is that it is a notion of uniqueness that relies on an instrumental relationship with the other. We could say that I only need others in order to articulate how I am different from them. I need them, in other words, to express my uniqueness, but that is all that my relationship with others extends to, at least, that is, with regard to my uniqueness. A second problem is that the question of uniqueness in the idea of uniqueness as difference is answered in cognitive terms and from a third-person perspective. Uniqueness here is about what can be known about me. Thirdly—and perhaps this is the most serious point—the idea of uniqueness as difference is indifferent about the particular ‘elements’ or ‘instances’ of uniqueness. It goes no further than to acknowledge that all human beings are in some respect different from each other, but is not able to value the existence of each unique ‘unit’.

The idea of uniqueness as irreplaceability engages with the question of uniqueness in an entirely different way. Here the question is not about what makes me unique. The question rather is: ‘When does it matter that I am unique, that I am I and not somebody else?’ And the answer to this question—an answer that is both simple and profound (see Levinas, 1981)—is that it matters in those situations in which I am called by the other, where the other calls for me, and where it is for me to respond to this call (which I have the freedom to do or no to do, of course). This is what Zygmunt Bauman, following Levinas, has so beautifully phrased as the idea of responsibility as ‘the first reality of the self’ (Bauman, 1993, p.13). Uniqueness as irreplaceability is not essential—it is not about what I have; it is not about some unique essence—but is existential. It doesn’t ask ‘What?’ but it asks ‘When?’—and it puts the question in relational terms. While there is a risk of anthropocentrism, particularly in the way in which Levinas has engaged with the question of uniqueness and responsibility, this is not necessarily so. I can be called in many ways. What is clear, though, is that uniqueness as irreplaceability is not about recognition. It is not that I assert my uniqueness by recognising the other, nor that I assert the uniqueness of the other through an act or gesture of recognition. Recognition operates on the basis of intentionality, that is, from a position where I feel safe and secure enough so as to be able to recognise the other. Uniqueness as irreproachable rather is about an interruption of this position because, as Levinas has put it, it is only in ‘the very crisis of the being of a being’ (Levinas, 1989, p. 85), in the interruption of its being, that the uniqueness of the subject ‘first acquires a meaning’ (Levinas, 1981, p. 13).

The idea of ‘interruption’ is one way in which the notion of uniqueness as irreplaceability may gain educational import. If education entails a concern for ‘the first person singular’ (Lingis, 2007), but if this singularity can only be accessed in existential terms rather than as an essence or a being—if, to put it differently, the question of the subject is located in a ‘domain’ that is ‘otherwise than being’ and ‘beyond essence’ (Levinas, 1981)—then the relationship between education and subjectivity is not one that can be understood in terms of the production of subjectivity, something which Bollnow (1959, p.17) refers to as the mechanical or craftsman-like approach to education, nor in terms of the promotion of subjectivity along the lines of what Bollnow refers to as the organic conception of education (see ibid.). Education can at most aim to create openings for subjectivity to emerge—openings that always manifest themselves as interruptions of the
‘normal’ state of affairs. But even a pedagogy of interruption cannot operate as a programme; it can only exist as a form of weak education. The challenge, therefore, is not only to develop ways of thinking that ‘access’ the question of human subjectivity in existential rather than essential terms, but also to work on the development of forms of pedagogy that themselves can operate in the domain of the existential rather than the domain of essence.

Soul, not the Brain

One question this raises is how we shall refer to that which is at stake in an education that is weak, existential and concerned about uniqueness. While the language of subjectivity is one way to express and articulate these concerns—and it is the language I have been using in my writings fairly consistently over the years—subjectivity is a notion that is very much ‘out there’, linked to action and being-in-the world. What it perhaps may be lacking is an appreciation of a sense of interiority, or, in Arendtian terms, the dimension of the life of the mind (Arendt, 1978). There are many concepts that may have meaning in relation to this, such as ‘mind’, ‘psyche’, ‘thinking’, or Kant's notion of ‘Verstand’ as distinguished from ‘Vernunft’. The one notion that does not capture any of this at all is that of the brain. Yet it is the brain, and particularly the way in which the brain functions as being mapped out by contemporary neuroscience, that is emerging as a new holy grail for education. One reason for caution is that much neuroscientific research operates from the outside in, so to say. It starts with social phenomena, that is, with phenomena that exist in the social or intersubjective world and that for their reality depend on being named and identified by human beings in a particular language, and then looks for its neurological correlate in the workings of the brain. This already raises questions about how ‘hard’ the evidence from neuroscience actually is, if the phenomena it is interested in are basically social phenomena. But the much more important point is that the language of the brain does not capture the very things that matter educationally in the way outlined above, as these ‘things’—which are not things in the material sense of the world—are events on an existential plane.

Not wanting to invoke the old and in many ways fruitless discussion about mind-body dualism (see, for example, Dewey, 1980; Rorty, 1980), there may be value in the exploration of another concept, the idea of ‘soul’, as a way to reinvent and reinvigorate a language that can capture a sense of existential uniqueness that is as much about action as it is about interiority. The idea of ‘soul’ has, of course, been tainted by a complex web of theological and philosophical thinking and has, perhaps, become mainly discredited as a result of its connection with immortality, immaterial existence, and a life beyond death. That, however is just one cluster of interpretations and rather than to talk about soul as the soul thus running the risk of making ‘soul’ into a substance itself, we should perhaps begin to think of ‘soul’ as denoting a quality of existence or an existential quality, as in music with ‘soul’ or a book with ‘soul’. At the very least we need to remind ourselves—and this is a further challenge for philosophy of education—that education needs a language that can provide a viable alternative for brain language, not because it aims to be better at what neuroscience does, but because it aims to do something that is entirely and fundamentally different from it.
Truth, not Perspectives

There is one more reminder. I started this article by arguing that the point of postmodernism is not an epistemological one—that is to say it is not a point made within epistemology, not a particular position taken on the spectrum of epistemologies—and that those who have taken postmodernism to be a plea for relativism and anti-realism may therefore have missed its point. Postmodernism, so I have suggested, should rather be understood as a critique of an epistemological worldview, a critique of the primacy of knowledge as the way to engage with and live in the world. While this repositions knowledge in relation to life, it does not do away with knowledge. Nor does it do away with the question of truth.

The question of truth is, of course, an enormously complicated one, partly because of its long history and partly because of its political significance. After all, a lot of political ‘work’ is done with truth, particularly by those who claim to be in the possession of ‘the truth’ and who, by implication, position those outside of ‘the truth’ as having a problem. (My language is deliberately vague, as the political work done with or in the name of ‘the truth’ covers a wide spectrum, including both religious truth and scientific truth.) Those who read postmodernism in epistemological terms have tried to resolve this problem by shifting from ‘truth’ to ‘perspective’. This allows them to argue that we can have different perspectives on the same issue, depending on our point of view, our historical or social position, our culture, our religion, our gender, and so on. I am inclined to argue, however, that the postmodern imperative should not be read as an injunction to dissolve truth and end up with multiple perspectives. The imperative not to totalise the truth rather means that we need to take truth more seriously—and do so in the plural, that is, in terms of truths. What I have in mind here—and within the confines of this article I can only provide a brief indication of a longer argument which has partly been developed in Biesta, 2010a—is that we find ourselves as truth-speakers encountering other truth-speakers. To label this as an exchange of perspectives would be to totalise the very encounter and thus to close off its future before it can even begin. To see it, on the other hand, as an encounter of truth-speakers, an encounter where we offer our truths to each other in the literal sense of the word ‘offer’, that is, as presenting our truths for acceptance or rejection, for transformation or even for destruction, is to take the encounter serious and not to try rising above it.

Postmodernism therefore doesn’t require us to do away with truth but rather to take it more seriously. This is also because truth can play an important role in furthering the ethico-political imperative of postmodernism. While I have rejected the idea that morality needs a cognitive foundation or can even exist on a cognitive foundation, we should at least reminder ourselves of the moral and political work that truth might be able to perform, such as for example in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa. Of course, the TRC does not prove anything about morality, justice and truth. But it does stand out as an example—and a reminder—that truth and truth-speaking may have a role to play in the approximation of morality and justice. The challenge, therefore, is to re-engage with the question of truth in education in a way that does neither reduce truth to perspectives, nor suggests that truth can only exist in the singular.
Conclusions

So where does this leave us? In this article I have identified five issues where I think that there is work to be done for philosophers of education. I have argued that there is a need to focus on education, not learning, in order to be able to account for the teleological character of education; I have argued that there is a need to focus on weakness, not strength, in order to capture the open nature of educational processes; I have argued that there is a need to focus on existence, not essence, in order to give place to the singularity of the human subject; I have suggested to engage with the idea of soul, not the brain, in order to account for interiority and intersubjectivity; and I have argued for a focus on truth, not perspectives, in order not to totalise communication and interaction. While these issues can be read as interesting intellectual challenges there is, in my view, more at stake, as in each case there is the risk that we lose sight of the very dimensions that matter educationally. In each case there is the risk, therefore, that we lose education itself. This happens when education is replaced by learning; when we try to take the weakness out of educational processes; when we try to pin down the essence of the human subject; when we think that social interaction—including educational interaction—can be reduced to and explained by the workings of the brain; or when we interpret (and thus totalise) truths as perspectives. The philosophical work that needs to be done in relation to each of these domains thus derives its urgency from the very fact that the possibility of education itself is at stake and it is in this sense that the philosophical work outlined in this article has a direct connection with education as a public good.

To see that the work outlined in this article is not only of intellectual but also of political significance suggests that there are not only questions about argumentation but also about strategy. One strategy which, in my view, is not viable is an oppositional strategy, for example one where conservative educational agendas are countered by progressive agendas. One reason why I have doubts about the viability of such an oppositional strategy is that some of the ideas that have been pursued in the name of progressive thinking—such as, for example, the shift from teaching to learning, the case for an orientation towards a very specific subjectivity (such as a critical subjectivity), the rise of perspectivism—have actually turned out to be counter-productive vis-à-vis what matters educationally. What is needed, therefore, is a more careful way to proceed, one where we do not immediately claim to know where the division between conservative and progressive ideas lies, but where in each case we carefully examine what is at stake.

My final point has to do with the direction in which the work I have been doing in relation to these challenges is going. What holds many of the ideas presented in this article together is that they pursue existential ways of thinking, for example by seeing uniqueness in existential terms, that is as a way of ‘being-in-relation’ and ‘being-in-question’, not as an expression of essence or possession, by emphasising the ontological weakness of education and the fundamental openness of educational processes and practice, or by seeing soul as an existential quality, not a substance or essence. Pursuing this existential approach calls for forms of philosophising that take a first person perspective rather than a third person perspective; it calls for forms of philosophising that do not try to theorise from the outside—thus running the risk of overriding the existential, first person perspective—but rather do so from the inside, so to speak, that is, in a way
that does not override and replace what occurs on the existential plane. I even wish to suggest that to take a first person perspective is taking the educational perspective as it tries to take the encounter with the other seriously, rather than running the risk of explaining this encounter away. The shift towards the existential is also an attempt to take life itself seriously, rather than to put an explanation of life in place of it (on this see also Bingham & Biesta, 2010). It means, in sum, to say yes to the risk involved in all education; it means to say yes to the beautiful risk of education (Biesta, forthcoming).^5

Notes

1. It is tempting to draw up a list of unhelpful contributions, but I will resist the temptation. Perhaps one of the most interesting exceptions to the relativistic reading of postmodernism was Bruno Latour’s We Have Never Been Modern (Latour, 1993), as it aimed to understand and reformulate the problem rather than immediately jumping to an answer.  
2. There are also issues that have to do with translation and definition, particularly given that the word ‘education’ cannot be translated unambiguously with another word in, say, German or Dutch. In those languages there are conceptual distinctions—such as, in German, between Erziehung, Unterricht and Bildung or, in Dutch, between opvoeding, onderwijs en vorming—that cannot be easily translated into English.  
3. For more on the idea of a ‘pedagogy of interruption’, see Biesta, 2006; 2009b; 2010b. On the ‘creative’ moment in a pedagogy of interruption see also Biesta, 2009c.  
4. I would like to thank Donna Kerr for giving me this question.  
5. An earlier version of this text was presented as the Invited Distinguished Lecture of the Philosophical Studies in Education Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association, at the Annual Conference in New Orleans, April 2011.

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