
Democracy & Education

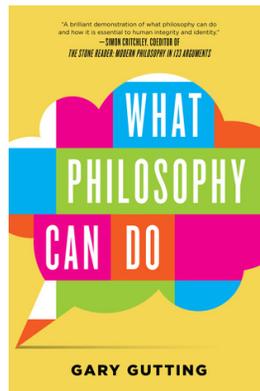
Intellectual Maintenance and Misguided Educational Reform A Book Review of *What Philosophy Can Do*

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IT'S BECOMING ALMOST a cliché to say the humanities are under siege. Perhaps more than other disciplines, philosophy seems threatened. Philosophy is seen as too abstract, distant from the concerns of the everyday person. My general contention, however, is that most people outside of the humanities do not know what philosophy—as a field—does at all. The majority of students who sign up for my introduction to philosophy class do so because it fulfills a general education requirement and because it fits their schedule. It's not that they are uninterested in philosophy. It is just they have no idea what philosophy does, guided as they are by incessant messages about the economic utility of higher education and emerging from a K–12 school system that's come to be dominated by standardized testing.

What Philosophy Can Do (2015) by Gary Gutting stands as both an informative look at the current state of philosophy and an argument about the value the humanities in higher education. It also makes a significant proposal for educational reform, one that places the humanities at the center of resisting consumer capitalism. I agree both with the need for this resistance and with the necessity of the humanities to it. Unfortunately, Gutting's proposal is deeply undemocratic.

Gutting (2015) does demystify the activity of contemporary philosophy, arguing that the key value of philosophy is in “intellectual maintenance”—the continual reexamination of beliefs. At a general level, this is an argument about the humanities or even a broad liberal arts education. We ought to engage in this sort of education in order to continually form and refine a self, testing our beliefs against evidence and logic. Beliefs ought to have some sort of foundation; one ought to be consistently engaged in the process of interrogating those beliefs in light of new arguments, experiences, and data. In this, Gutting echoes 3,000 years of Western philosophical history. Gutting is optimistic about this project:



“Most people are interested in better understanding their cherished beliefs, deriving logical consequences of these beliefs, and . . . answering challenges from those who disagree” (Gutting, 2015, p. 248), though given the rhetoric in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, I am not so sure. Regardless, intellectual maintenance is thus about this traditional function of education. It involves being clear about what our convictions mean. It also involves responding to challenges to those commitments in a reasoned and honest way.

In the initial chapters, Gutting (2015) demonstrates intellectual maintenance at work, illustrating principles and methods fundamental to philosophical activity. He then brings those principles and methods to bear on contemporary issues. The politics chapter, for instance, primarily becomes a vehicle for discussing effective argumentation. It discusses the difference between inductive and deductive reasoning and illustrates argumentative principles. Later chapters on science, religion, and art expand this ground. Philosophy has rich conceptual tools and historical resources for intellectual maintenance. But this is indeed *maintenance*—tinkering, refining, repairing. Philosophy is not, as much as Descartes would have it otherwise, the source of unshakable beliefs. As Gutting himself puts it, “Philosophy is a major *resource* for but not a *source* [emphasis in original] of our convictions.” (Gutting, 2015, p. 140). Again, it's not a huge leap to extend this approach to liberal arts education more broadly conceived.

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The work is not, however, just an attempt to convince particular individuals of the value of philosophy. Philosophy and the humanities exist in an educational and economic system. While the majority of chapters in the book serve as an example of intellectual maintenance and provide tools for such activity, two chapters, titled “Happiness, Work, and Capitalism” and “Education in a Capitalist Society,” serve a different purpose. Here, Gutting moves from a focus on individual intellectual cultivation to larger social, political, and economic circumstances that are obstacles to such cultivation. Consumer capitalism, with its unrelenting focus on constructing a self through consumption of goods, stands as the principal obstacle to an intellectual life. Schooling is the best way to cultivate resistance to these capitalist tendencies. Unfortunately, it is here—in the recommendations for educational reform—that Gutting goes significantly awry.

While Gutting (2015) believes that education is the primary way individuals can build up a resistance to the demands of capitalism, he also recognizes that capitalism isn’t going away soon. Education thus serves two purposes: first, to prepare students to participate in the economy and, second, to engage in the world of ideas. Not everyone wants or needs the second. K–12 education is where education for economic participation ought to occur. This education consists of basic literacy, numeracy, writing skills, and basic foreign language competence. Such an instrumental education would then lay the foundation for employment and, if necessary, specialized higher education. “From the standpoint of employment, high school graduates with such training would not need a college degree unless they wanted to be accountants or engineers, pursue pre-professional programs . . . or train for doctoral work . . . Apart from this, the primary reason for going to college is its intellectual culture” (Gutting, 2015, p. 176). College is for the cultivation of this “intellectual culture”—a broad education in the liberal arts and sciences for the curious and motivated. This culture is one of ideas, advanced by research faculty. One ought to go to college only if one wants to participate in these conversations of ideas with faculty who have made the pursuit of ideas their life’s work. Instrumental training is better accomplished by those teachers who aren’t so interested in ideas, and given to those students who are simply looking for the skills necessary to secure jobs.

There is something insidious and self-serving in the book’s educational proposals. First, there is an ignorant misdiagnosis of the problems of K–12 education. According to Gutting (2015), teachers are to blame for the flaccid, empty curriculum of K–12 education. Teachers come from the lower strata of college students and are not intellectually curious. They are the reason students don’t arrive at college prepared to engage in intellectual work. They are the reason high school graduates are not instrumentally prepared for good jobs. This is so simplistic as to be laughable to anyone who seriously engages with K–12 schooling on a scholarly basis. *What Philosophy Can Do* displays little understanding of the social and economic conditions of schooling itself, despite holding the idea of educational reform as the way to counter the economic effects of capitalism. There is exactly one sentence about students in poverty, for example. This, however, is

presented as an obstacle to be overcome in order to attract better teachers. This lack of attention to economic forces and the impact they have on K–12 education is odd, considering the entire purpose of higher education is to move one away from being constrained by consumerism.

Which brings me to the second point. There is a neglect of the democratic purposes of education, likely stemming from the book’s insistence on an Aristotelian dualism to explain the ideal differences between K–12 education and college. Instrumental education is contrasted to intellectual culture, with little room left for the democratic point that the two may significantly overlap. Do accountants need to think deeply about ideas? Do carpenters need to critically examine their own moral commitments? The text never explicitly says no, but it’s hard to see how people in those vocations might participate in the sort of intellectual culture the book promotes if they aren’t engaged in higher education. Nor is there room for the possibility that those who work with their hands might have things to contribute to intellectual culture that arise from the sort of manual work that defines their lives. In short, there is a deep division between thinkers and doers, between liberal and instrumental education, that is embedded within the book’s proposed educational system.

Overcoming this Aristotelian division is one of the explicit purposes of Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*, yet *What Philosophy Can Do* only briefly mentions Dewey in the chapter on philosophy of science. Given that Gutting’s book makes a substantive educational proposal, it ought to engage with the intersection between political systems, economic systems, schooling, and the ideal of an educated person—in short, philosophy of education. It does not. Philosophy of education is not simply ignored; it is outright dismissed: “Recently, philosophy of education has not been an especially fruitful field” (Gutting, 2015, p. 273). Perhaps *Democracy and Education* isn’t recent. But work on the professionalization of teaching (something Gutting supports) is certainly prominent within the field, as is significant work on capitalism and schooling. This is a pity, because much could be found in philosophy of education that would contribute to the work.

What Philosophy Can Do is an ambitious book, in that it attempts to explain and justify an entire field of academic study to those outside the discipline. What it is really doing, however, is articulating the value of a fairly traditional liberal arts education—with philosophy at its core—in an era of global consumer capitalism. I am deeply sympathetic to his diagnosis of our social ills; I am less sanguine about his educational prescription for the remedy, given his misunderstanding of our educational situation and his failure to engage with educational literature. While *What Philosophy Can Do* serves as a useful map to the current terrain of philosophy, it falls short of being a helpful guide to how philosophy might help build the social and educational institutions that might promote intellectual maintenance.

References

Gutting, G. (2015). *What philosophy can do*. New York, NY: Norton.