

A History of Western Philosophy of Education in Antiquity, ed.
Avi I. Mintz, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021

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Review of

A History of Western Philosophy of Education in Antiquity

ed. Avi I. Mintz, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021

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The first installment of the five-volume *A History of Western Philosophy of Education* centres on the views of selected philosophers of education in antiquity. The book contains both a series introduction by Megan Jane Lavery and David T. Hansen, and a volume introduction by Avi I. Mintz, plus a collection of nine chapters organized by thinker or school of thinkers including the Sophists (M. R. Engler), Plato (Yoshiaki Nakazawa), Xenophon (William H. F. Altman), Isocrates (Bruce A. Kimball and Sarah M. Iler), Aristotle (Marianna Papastephanou), the Cynics (Ansgar Allen), Cicero (James R. Muir), the Stoics (Annie Larivée), and St. Augustine (Yun Lee Too).

The volume's primary appeal is as a resource for those interested in the views of the philosophers under discussion, or in the history of educational thought more broadly. Chapters focus on bringing coherence to the accounts of education of their featured philosophers, drawing across known works, attending appropriately to historical context, and highlighting the connections to some of the recurring themes in the history of the philosophy of education. Several of the chapters also raise the profile of featured thinkers within the history of philosophy of education by arguing for the underappreciated influence of their work on later thought. (This is especially noticeable in the chapters on Xenophon, Isocrates, and Cicero.) For the most part, chapters stick to descriptive accounts of arguments and do not engage those arguments on their merits; only the chapters on Plato and Aristotle devote significant time to considering the truth of the claims under consideration: Papastephanou pushes the worthiness of aspects of Aristotle's view, and Nakazawa's final pages defend the liveliness and promise of our learning through myth, as Plato suggested. The chapters are, to a one, well researched, effective in establishing the boundaries of individual philosophical accounts, and engagingly written – full of good stories of mentoring young political leaders, of Cynic antics and controversial Sophists, of the likeness between education and art or music or even horsemanship.

Chapter authors do an exemplary job advertising the disciplinary fluidity in how their featured thinkers do philosophy. As we know, contemporary analytic philosophy mostly happens in isolated lanes (epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and others, including the much less appreciated philosophy of education), and tends to be somewhat conservative in its recognition of what counts as doing philosophy. For the philosophers featured in this volume, however, questions about how to pursue knowledge, about what exists/is real, about the good, and also about how we learn are often treated together and best understood as mutually illuminating. Such questions are, moreover, often pursued in what we contemporary philosophers would tend to consider interdisciplinary or unconventional ways: in conversation with mathematics, art, music, literature, poetry, politics, religion, and more; and through typical philosophical methods like argument, but also via more indirect modes like dialogue, metaphor, and habituation. The essays of the volume move easily into, out of, and within philosophy so understood. Engler starts the first chapter by connecting the Sophists' educational project to an overarching cultural inquiry, including “nature and being ... politics, ethics, art, language, psychology,

and so on” (p. 31). The final chapter on St. Augustine ends by tying teaching to the divine (p. 247ff). In between, we encounter connections between education and many disciplines, as well as recurring questioning of/openness to what counts as learning or doing philosophy, for example, myth as argument, education as ongoing over whole human lives (both in and out of the classroom), and a repeated engagement with Hadot’s work on the ancients’ treatment of philosophy as a way of life. Social and political thought are at the core throughout: the featured philosophers have much to say about how education should or should not prepare us to live a life with others, and many attend to the ways that the practices and views of others can influence us for better or worse. Every chapter in the volume successfully makes its contribution by tracking the connections between what their featured philosopher says about education and that thinker’s broader philosophical thought, in ways open to all kinds of sources and methods of learning, and even to their sense of overall good human living.

For all the volume’s many strengths, it misses a couple of opportunities philosophically. First, the thematic multiplicity in each chapter, rich as it is, works against the sense a reader has that the book is adding up to something. The organization of the book contributes to this: because chapters centre philosophers instead of a focused (set of) theme(s), we meet the same themes as if anew in each chapter as localized concerns of particular philosophers. Of course no edited volume can serve all interests, but I did feel the loss of chapters that follow threads across thinkers – threads which allow individual themes to take on a more developed conceptual life across the historical period, to advertise points of agreement and disagreement between thinkers, themes which then serve as points of entry for our own lively engagement with the views. In other words, at times, it seems as if the book is telling each thinker’s story at the expense of the thought. Avi Mintz’s introduction goes a long way to serving as a remedy for this, and it is not to be missed. He confronts the thematic complexity and manages to bring considerable unity to the concerns of the volume. Second, and not unrelated, animating the volume is an approach to history that treats the views under discussion as a matter of the past – relevant to us just because they are interesting on their own, or perhaps via influence on later thought, or in order to highlight a difference from us, but not as otherwise pressing for us contemporaries. We get the impression that the questions of these philosophers are not, for the most part, alive for us. In the chapter on the Stoics, Larivée puts it this way: “these ancient themes are like old shells filled with new content” (p. 228), arguing we should resist reading these philosophers as similar to our contemporary philosophy of education. Without denying that much of value appears from this perspective, I think leaving the views of these philosophers in the past cuts us off from fully engaging with the substance of them. The last several decades of contemporary scholarship in ancient philosophy have surely convinced us that animating ancient accounts of what we are, where we fall short, and how we could be better can be incredibly fruitful for doing philosophy that is about us, particularly in matters of ethics, moral psychology, political theory, and of course, education.

A History of Western Philosophy of Education in Antiquity is a worthy read for anyone with interest in the subject material, and an excellent contribution to scholarship in the history of philosophy of education.

About the Author

Jennifer Rothschild is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Florida. Her primary area of research is Aristotelian virtue ethics.