

Always Already Political

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Always Already Political

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Professor Dieter Misgeld taught philosophy of education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto for over thirty years. As editors of a *Festschrift* to mark his retirement (Mesbahian & Norris, 2017), and as former students, Hossein Mesbahian and I were drawn to try to understand Misgeld's views and what led him to change so dramatically, wondering why someone educated in one of the most exciting intellectual environments of the 20th century—Heidelberg and Frankfurt in the 1960s—would slowly turn away from philosophy.¹ We interviewed Misgeld shortly after he retired, asking 75 questions covering topics ranging from his youth in Germany, studies in Heidelberg with Gadamer, experience teaching in Canada, political activism in Latin America, and larger reflections on philosophy. The interviews were transcribed and published with notes, an introduction and appendix in book form by Sense Publishers in 2017 as *Dieter Misgeld: A Philosopher's Journey from Hermeneutics to Emancipatory Politics*. While some of Misgeld's views have changed in the last decade, he continues to hold deep respect towards philosophers like Habermas, Adorno, and Gadamer for their formative role in his own intellectual development.

In this brief response, I comment on the book itself as well as the response of another former Misgeld student, Stella Gaon, first presented during the launch of the book at the annual meeting of the Canadian Philosophy of Education Society in Toronto in May 2017. Her response was later published in this journal (volume 24, number 4) as “Question 94: On Philosophy as Subversion, in Response to Dieter Misgeld.” In the following comments, I note that I remain unconvinced by Misgeld's suggestions that we can disentangle politics from theory and that theory is no longer helpful today.

As he completed his doctorate, Misgeld became increasingly enamored with the social theory emerging from the Frankfurt school, and the work of Habermas and Adorno in particular, which led to a pronounced shift away from Gadamer. Was Misgeld's shift away from philosophy while at OISE a continuation of this earlier shift? Or was it a more radical and complete rupture? How could someone who studied with some of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century develop such a critical and sometimes even hostile attitude towards what both philosophy and social theory might offer?

Misgeld began to study philosophy in the context of a sense of profound civilizational collapse and efforts at reconstruction. Philosophy at that time was not construed as a mere textual or intellectual undertaking, but one required to wrestle with certain immediate social and political realities that were inseparable from larger epistemological, metaphysical, and ontological questions—including the very viability of philosophy itself. This led to a sense of urgency to revisit the foundations of Western thought

¹ A version of the introduction that overviewed Misgeld's career was published in a special issue of *Paidensis* dedicated to biographies of Canadian philosophers of education (Norris & Mesbahian, 2010).

insofar as they had, in part, led to this crisis but could not lead us out of it. The 2017 book shows that, for Misgeld, philosophy is no longer useful in the crisis our civilization now faces.

Disentangle Philosophy?

I tend to agree with Gaon about the continued importance of philosophy, despite Misgeld's assertions to the contrary. Is it possible to disentangle philosophy from the political? I would argue that philosophy is always already political. By investigating the hidden underlying foundation of actions and values, philosophy allows us to gain a deeper understanding of what is assumed, of what is behind what "appears," of what "is," and even what is behind what appears as an "is." As a process of illumination, philosophy reveals what is otherwise hidden and unquestioned. "What is" is a manifestation of that which philosophy investigates. If we want to understand—much less change—"what is," then we must start with philosophy. I believe Misgeld is right to suggest that there are significant limitations to philosophy, and for that reason it is often wise to turn elsewhere. But when we turn elsewhere, we do not turn away from philosophy; we keep doing philosophy even when we turn away from it.

In her review, Gaon comes down clearly in favor of theory in the form of *critical* theory, and, like Misgeld, rejects philosophy when construed as "pure philosophy." Is philosophy always conciliatory, or can it be critical or even radical? For example, was Marx himself not a philosopher even if he was so deeply critical of philosophy itself?

Misgeld argues that "there is nothing inherent in philosophy that makes it either subversive or conformist" (Mesbahian & Norris, 2017, p. 227) and that "much of philosophy is very much establishment philosophy" (p. 230). While philosophy can sometimes be rather benign and technical, at times it has also had a dark and troubling underbelly. Misgeld argues that, while much philosophy has been state-sustaining and empire-building, he agrees that philosophy can be critical, though only in a very restricted sense—and certainly not critical enough for what our times and our world demand. Perhaps the use of philosophy to justify and legitimize power and oppression is why it is so important that we advance a more critical application of philosophy. I agree that philosophy is not inherently "critical." Rather, it is up to philosophers to take a critical orientation.

Regarding the cause of social change other than philosophy, Misgeld does speak of movements, actions and events that were not dependent on philosophy, that did not arise out of or because of philosophy, movements that may even have been overlooked by philosophers—though I confess as a philosopher that it is difficult to imagine social moments that have no link to philosophy! For Misgeld, these events, actions and movements may have been even more significant drivers of history than philosophy. However, it is hard to be convinced that philosophy has not been a driving force in world history.

Suggesting that philosophy has the capacity to challenge doctrine, dogma, convention is not to say it is exclusively corrosive or oppositional. Philosophy can instead be positive and affirmative and advocate for alternatives. I would argue, contra Misgeld, that there is still an urgent need for philosophical investigations into the world, that we should not abandon philosophy to those who would derail it and harness it for dangerous ends, and that actions, movements and values are stronger, more robust, and more resilient when given a philosophical grounding.

We need defenders of philosophy to show what it can offer at a time, for example, when the academy is under attack by inflammatory speakers who hide behind “free speech.” The influence of thinkers such as Jordan Peterson, known to many today for his resistance to special pronoun usage in the classroom but more widely influential for promoting highly problematic ideas about gender and free speech (see Bartlett, 2018), demonstrates not only a deep yearning among young people for “philosophical” explanations of the world and our times but also the risk of abandoning the realm of ideas to such dangerous people. While there may be more overt speakers of hate in Canada and beyond who have more direct access to political power and popular media, what is particularly dangerous about figures like Peterson is that they give intellectual legitimacy to problematic ideas and mislead people regarding what philosophers have said. We must not abandon the realm of ideas to dangerous people like that.

Conclusion: Perplexed and Unconvinced

Thinking back on Misgeld’s significant intellectual transformations, from his years in Heidelberg to his retirement from OISE, Marx’s Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach comes to mind: “Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it” (1888/1978, p. 145). Certainly, Misgeld has come to see his vocation as oriented towards change more than interpretation. That said, the kind of advocacy he is involved with takes one away from philosophizing, but may not signal an end to philosophy itself. It is more of a career change, from professor to activist. Misgeld has just stopped talking about philosophy as his central concern, instead making his preoccupation the pursuit of freedoms and acknowledgment of tyrannies. In learning Spanish to do his work in South America, perhaps Misgeld sees himself as fusing cultural horizons much as Gadamer would have construed it, still seeing his project under a theoretical lens.

In Misgeld’s own response to Gaon’s review (2018), he emphasizes the importance of responding to suffering and concedes a role for theory in a certain sense: he emphasizes Freire’s “problematization” because it forefronts emancipation as a starting point, as an objective and guiding principle.

I do not deny that, for the sake of emancipatory politics, some kind of reflection or analysis is needed ... what Freire might call “problematization” ... oriented to specific circumstances and situations, thus making good, at times, on the promise of emancipation whenever and wherever it can. (p. 97)

On the final page of the book, Misgeld says: “I believe all we can do is work situation to situation without assuming a full transparency of the future or of human history” (Mesbahian & Norris, 2017, p. 231). This is perhaps his most philosophical statement in the book, and perhaps its greatest defence.

As a former student of Misgeld, I remain as perplexed, as unconvinced, and as captivated as ever—but wishing I could count Misgeld as a more convinced fellow traveler in the world of ideas. The book encourages a healthy dose of caution and skepticism, not only because I find it remarkable that someone who studied with such extraordinary thinkers would change so dramatically, but also because the reader must provide a (philosophical?) defence of philosophy if they remain unconvinced by Misgeld’s argument. Perhaps, like philosophy itself, much of Misgeld will remain unknown and unresolved, an *aporia* of return and wondering.

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