What’s in a word: philosophy, theology and thinking?
Richard Davies

A critical Review of Hannam and Echeverria (2009)


Introduction
As an informal educator and one who has been practically involved in helping young people to think about what they ought to be doing with their lives, what is worth living for, and the need for public action, I found much in the book with which I can agree. The book is in three parts, the first two dealing with what might be best described as the ‘theoretical narrative’ of the practical implications given in part three. There is a clear interrelationship between these two sections, theory does not lead practice, or vice-versa; the theoretical narrative and the practical emerge from a shared engagement in both practices by both authors. In reviewing the book one is left asking what is the criteria for success? Perhaps, starting with ‘does it work’ or the slightly less demanding ‘is it helpful’? On this score one sees the experience of the authors shining through the text, the practical has been tested, and presumably works in certain circumstances with certain young people. It has the air of authentic education, which resonated with my own work both with young people and undergraduate students – I could imagine that it would work for me.

One could ask whether is its ‘really philosophy’? In part towards the end of this review I want to return to this question, but through a concern with whether it actually matters and to whom. The third question is specifically to ask what does the book set out to do, what does it add to the literature on engaging in this type of work with young people. Specifically, the book is about enabling young people to engage thoughtfully with globalisation and its consequences. What is more it does so from a particular conception of the good, and raises a range of issues and concerns which perhaps are conceptualised differently by those of different political commitments (for example, one might point to intimations about the climate agenda).

In response, I want to focus on three issues:

1. What does ‘philosophy’ add to what is practically happening?
2. How does one motivate action, not just thinking about action?
3. What does it mean to think and act globally?

What does ‘philosophy’ add to what is practically happening?
I can see the value for philosophy. As Macintyre (1987) points out philosophy as a specific subject area undergoes a transformation in the enlightenment, and not a positive one. Philosophy loses its focus on it
central task, that of the application of critical thinking and conceptual clarification to social problems. As a result of losing this focus it becomes concerned only with atemporal non-specific matters, especially the logic of language. As a doctoral student it was not unusual for us ‘applied philosophers’ to argue late into the night with the ‘pure philosophers’ whether this had been overcome, and philosophy once again become concerned with resolving social issues. Whilst one could point to a limited number of examples, Bertrand Russell was regularly exhumed, nevertheless it seemed to be the theologians who worried about the consequences of social injustices and the philosophers who worried about what was to count as a social injustice.

I can see the value for philosophers in having our subject aligned as useful to the education of young people and rational thought in general, as well as the populist philosophers of the ‘consolation’ movement. It is after all not bad publicity.

However, it is difficult to recapture this pre- and early enlightenment model of philosophy for a number of reasons. In a moment I want again to draw on MacIntyre’s idea of an educated public, but here a simple point needs to made that we live with a plurality of philosophical traditions. (We have been as much a part of our own ‘methodology wars’ as our empirical cousins.) Further, we are aware of a global world that has a number of different approaches to something identified as ‘philosophy’, for example that developed in the middle or far east. Whilst there have been attempts to harmonise east and west (see Campbell and Hwang, 1998; Kim, 2003), these have not, in my view, been that successful. Rather, there has been a concern to show similarities in the views. Given that this is often in the moral domain I would be surprised if this was not the case, there are commonalities in the ‘human condition’.

The risk, for Hannam and Echeverria then is of imperialism by evoking within a global agenda a particular view of philosophy and philosophical practice. Whilst a scan of the index is not a scientific study, it nevertheless reveals a lack of references to other traditions. Within religious discourse, whilst individual religions have their own positions, there has emerged a broader discourse of ‘faith’ that seeks to negotiate some of the more problematic aspects of different traditions and approaches to human agency. ‘Philosophy’ here does not operate like the term ‘faith’.

**How does one motivate action, not just thinking about action?**

Hannam and Echeverria are rightly concerned not only with enabling young people to think, but also to act and to act well.

This is in line with MacIntyre’s (1987) view of what philosophy ought to be. However, one might want to ask, if this – that is philosophy minded education – is the best way of achieving it. I want to raise three points in relation to this issue, Firstly, drawing from Hirst (1999) on the deficiencies of the forms of knowledge curriculum, secondly, from MacIntyre on the idea of an educated public, and thirdly, the role of ideals in motivating action.

Hirst (1999) places on record his (partial) rejection of many aspects of the forms of knowledge based curriculum that he had, 25 years earlier, done so much to promote. At the heart of his criticism was that FoK curricula had failed to appreciate the relationship between theoretical knowledge and practical wisdom. The assumption had been that theoretical knowledge once acquired would be sufficient for the
individual to act in practically wise ways. This is simply not realistic and seems empirically untrue. The development of practical wisdom seems to require a different type of educational experience (one that I have explored through a social practices based curriculum, see Davies, 2003).

Philosophy has always had a slightly ambiguous relationship with forms of knowledge, being both within and above. Perhaps rather than philosophy one might be better with critical citizenship, the thinking embedded in the content rather than standing outside.

I sought to see in the practical section of the book to what extent Hannam and Echeverria deal with this issue – where does the motivation and dispositions required to put what is known (both in the first sense of philosophical method and in the second of responding to global issues) into practice. This was difficult to get a sense of, though a number of potentially practical responses might be teased out.

The second point, from MacIntyre is different, but reflects the social conditions necessary for purposeful philosophical discussion and corporate practical activity based on those discussions. This is MacIntyre’s idea of the ‘educated public’, and its eventual collapse in 18th century Scotland. An educated public, Macintyre contends, requires several social conditions for its sustenance.

Some of these are part of the Hannam and Echeverria’s model: the honing of critical thinking skills by the student body as a whole (and ideally by all young people). However, very quickly a particular school community of similarly honed pupils will be spread throughout a diverse population. Thus, a population of young people skilled in critical thinking is this way would find it difficult to meet up with like-minded individual in the course of their day-to-day living. This is one requirement for an educated public.

Further, Macintyre talks of the need for some canonical texts, that is ones that are given special significance and whose ideas can only be challenged with strong arguments. These texts need to be shared by the community, and provide a set of foundations to get the argument off the ground. For Hannam and Echeverria, the process of critical engagement is what is significant, not the need forcanonical texts. What they provide is a particular conception of the good, one that is dominated by a left leaning liberal democracy, and the need for universal beneficence (see Taylor 1989 for a consideration of this conception of the good).

Thus, for Hannam and Echeverria, the argument on principles is already clear, what is needed is two-fold:

1. That young people need to learn (in an open-minded and reflective way) into what reason demands morally. Kant is king.
2. There is a need to be rational reflective on what follows from this.

However, Kant is not king, reason does not give a single conception of the good, though perhaps it might provide a bounded, but infinite possible conceptions of the good.

Thirdly, then there is the practical question of the role of ideals in motivating action, and the role of philosophy in the creation and sustenance of ideals. A number of years ago I remember having a philosopher being pointed out to me with the statement ‘he is the only thorough going Kantian’. The
implication was that philosophy is not particularly good at sustaining ideals, critical, open-minded, reflective thinking requires the possibility of error. The idealist believes themselves to be right. We might not want to support the idealist (or perhaps ‘fundamentalist’ to use a faith term). Yet it would seem that young people act on their ideals and at a psychological level is the introduction of philosophy actually detrimental to the way we have seen the young transform human societies?

What does it mean to think and act globally?

The aphorism has been ‘think globally, act locally’, but as Beck (19??) has pointed out there are a myriad of ideas that have hitched their wagon to the global, globalising and globalization agenda. The teasing out of these terms and the types of political and moral issues alluded to would have been helpful. In particular, it would have been good to have a sense of the moral and political assumptions the authors saw as underpinning the use of these terms.

The point perhaps returns to the largely unexplicated conception of the good that threads through the theoretical narrative and is reflected in the practical section. Conceptions of the good brings with it a particular way of talking about the global. Unpicking the meaning and use of the terms in different discourses does allow for the development of a more detailed educative programme. Perhaps?

Conclusion

Finally, I return to the question of ‘is this philosophy and does it matter’? The account of philosophy moves close here to a secularised theology engaging with a range of secularised religious practices. This follows the analysis given by Hick (2005). It has the form and force of religion, but without the deist overtones. I think this problematic for a number of reasons not least the real risk of an invocation of ‘myth’ in the negative sense. Basic propositions lie not only unquestioned, but ungrounded and hence unquestionable.

The educative agenda articulated by Hannam and Echeverria seems to need to do two things, which I express in rawlsian terms. These are: to enable young people to explore the moral responsibilities of their comprehensive doctrine, and to engage meaningfully in the overlapping consensus. This book does the first well, grounded as it is in the comprehensive doctrine of ethical liberalism. Like many ethical liberals the risk is that it is seen to be acceptable as a basis for the second, and this is perhaps dominant in schooling. For those of us not ethically liberal, but content with the pragmatic liberalism of the overlapping consensus this is problematic.

In a longer paper, I would want to argue for theology as a term for the first task (even a secularised theology attuned to the dangers of such) and philosophy for the second. The first holds on to the power if ideals, of the need for action, of the canonical texts and opportunities to meet together, and yet in combination with philosophy recognises the need for corporate action beyond one’s comprehensive doctrine and action permissible within public space. Such an account requires analysis of the variety of pluralism; their negotiation and reasonable resolution. It does require a shared understanding of public
debate, but such an shared arena is much narrower and tightly focused that the moral and political agenda which drives Hannam and Echeverria.

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