

Philosophy in German Secondary Schools

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Many educational authorities now suppose that the study of philosophy is merely an interesting luxury at best, or else a burdensome parasite on the educational economy. More and more, the magic motto of educational policy becomes "practice-orientation" or "orientation for life," by which is meant training in those skills by which practical results may be achieved, and that reflective thinking cannot give account of itself on this criterion and appears useless.

This attitude is having some devastating consequences everywhere, but of all countries it is perhaps Germany more than any other in which philosophy has enjoyed great respect as an independent field of study, indeed as an independent field of knowledge, and so it is all the more surprising that it should be faring badly in Germany itself. In most universities, the philosophy requirement for students training to be teachers in the higher grades, the so-called *Philosophicum*, has been abolished or made elective in favor of sociology. Budgets for Humanities have been drastically cut in the universities. The number of professorial chairs, as well as positions at a lower rank, has for practical purposes been frozen. In a paper released by the culture ministry of Baden-Württemberg, it was proposed that the universities of Stuttgart, Karlsruhe, and Mannheim (formerly technical institutes) lose their Humanities Faculties entirely. And now in some provinces, notably Hessen, efforts at introducing philosophy into the secondary schools are being discouraged.

The humanistic secondary schools (*humanistische Gymnasien*) had a well-deserved reputation for the thorough education they provided, particularly in the liberal arts. The study of philosophy had in these schools occupied a central place and played an important role in the curriculum, both as a pilot-discipline dealing with foundations and ends of knowledge, and as a general meta-discipline seeking comprehensive syntheses complementing the increasing differentiation and specialization taking place in the sciences.

Especially since World War II, these schools have drastically declined in number. Their place has been taken by others devoted to natural science and modern languages (*naturwissenschaftliche und neusprachliche Gymnasien*) where the arts and humanities have become minor subjects (*Nebenfächer*) and mathematics, the natural sciences and modern languages are the major subjects (*Hauptfächer*). The role of philosophy courses in this situation is not clear. It is not listed as a subject among the others in the curriculum or on the grade reports. Grades in philosophy are entered under religion, although they are

sometimes listed separately in the comprehensive examination reports after the thirteenth year (*Abitur*).

By a provision of the German constitutions, instruction in religion, Catholic and Protestant, must be offered in all schools as a regular course of study. In some provinces it has been made elective, but only with parental approval. In many schools philosophy is offered as an alternative to religion, so that those withdrawing from religious instruction will take philosophy. In the Rhineland-Palatinate, for example, it is in principle mandatory for every student to be enrolled either in philosophy or religion. The availability of instruction in philosophy depends on the availability of teachers competent in the field, and there are not many of these in the schools. In the absence of teachers who have passed a university examination in philosophy (the *Staatsexamen*), other teachers are often given philosophy courses to teach. These are for the most part teachers of German literature, history, or religion. Otherwise no philosophy is offered at all.

The various universities and state ministries of education are to some extent helping to solve the problem of finding a place for philosophy and defining its role in secondary education. Commissions are set up to study the matter and to publish guidelines for teachers in all disciplines. Conferences are organized to acquaint teachers with the guidelines and to provide an opportunity to exchange ideas and to discuss experiences. The sheer volume of paper containing guidelines, decrees, and instructions flowing in ever increasing quantity into the schools is overwhelming. Fortunately, philosophy has not (yet) reached this point.

A good indication of conditions prevailing in the schools in the Rhineland-Palatinate was given in a conference of philosophy teachers in Mainz. About thirty teachers attended, of whom only three had done a *Staatsexamen* in philosophy. The rest had qualifications in other fields. Interesting and informative lectures and seminar discussions were held, however. A representative of the pedagogical commission for philosophy instruction reported on the results of its work. These results were meager indeed. For one thing, the proposed guidelines were curiously similar to the guidelines for Catholic religious instruction. Part of the report had to do with hair-splitting distinctions as to labels. It had first been decided that the courses should not be labeled "philosophy" but "ethics." The reason for this distinction was that regular courses in philosophy were to be introduced into the curriculum of the higher grades (*Sekundarstufe II*), but these should be distinguished from ethics courses offered as alternatives to religion. These latter were not, however, to be regarded as offering instruction in philosophical ethics strictly, but in moral values and customs. Thus, a further distinction was made, this time between ethics (*Ethik*) and instruction in ethics (*Ethikunterricht*). Understandably, a lot of argumentation followed. To what extent, for instance, were normative considerations to be introduced into instruction in ethics conceived as the study of customs, especially in the light of the Kantian conception of ethics? This issue became especially crucial when a paper was read on the sociology of morals. Such problems seem to be peculiar

to the Rhineland-Palatinate, however, which is one of the most conservative provinces and which seems therefore to wish to maintain as close a connection as possible between ethics and religion. The Saarland calls its courses simply philosophy and Bavaria calls them simply ethics.

The conference showed the extent to which educators were still confused in their conceptions about the nature of philosophy instruction in the schools. The detailed guidelines, the topics of discussion at the conferences, and the recommendations as regards texts for the different grades are for the most part far removed from the actual practice of teachers and the problems they face in the classroom. For one thing, principals tend to leave course content to the discretion of the teacher. This allows the teacher maximum freedom for experimentation and wide latitude for adjusting the subject-matter to the interests and abilities of the students.

Ethics classes tend to be relatively small, since a student needs written permission from a parent to take the course in place of religion, and parents are reluctant to give this permission, especially in rural areas. Nevertheless, if they are excused from attending religion classes, and therefore must take the alternative course in ethics, the latter is seldom initially regarded by students as a relief from the unpleasant requirement of religious instruction, but rather as a burden to be suffered. The teacher is in a position of having to try to show that philosophy and ethics are not a waste of time. For some, who would rather teach other subjects and who perhaps have no background in the field, this can be a nightmare. Sitting in a pub in Mainz one evening after the day's conference sessions, one elderly teacher complained bitterly about his situation as a geographer who had to teach philosophy and was not able to control his classes.

The classroom atmosphere depends to a very great extent on the attitudes of the students, the more so since German students are inclined to be a rebellious and cantankerous lot, even in the secondary schools. This may seem incongruous to some, who think of Germans as an orderly people with an ingrained respect for authority. Yet, pranksterism and the like among German students has a long history, as illustrated in Heinrich Mann's *Professor Unrat* or Ludwig Thoma's *Lausbubengeschichten*, and the open protest and rebellion of university students has also seeped down into the secondary schools during the past seven or eight years. As a result, teachers often make it a practice in philosophy, as well as in other courses, to ask the students what topics they want to study. In philosophy this can be done because the subject matter to be dealt with is not prescribed, and because of its low position as an academic subject in the curriculum. The student knows very well, that under present circumstances philosophy/ethics is a minor subject among the minor subjects. Until recently, grades in this subject were not counted towards the matriculation grade (*Abitur*), and now only in those schools that have carried out a reform in the higher grades. Philosophy grades, for the 11th to the 13th grades, may be considered for university entrance purposes, but only if grades in the major subjects put admission in doubt.

It would seem to be necessary to improve this situation that the position of

philosophy in the curriculum be clarified and upgraded. Secondly, teachers need to be trained in a regular university course of study leading to a secondary teaching qualification in philosophy. Some universities have already begun to do this. Also, a systematic and orderly sequence of topics to be taught needs to be worked out in such a way that philosophy can be taught in progressive degrees of comprehensiveness and complexity. For the present, this can, and almost always is, left up to the individual teacher, since each school will for the foreseeable future have only one philosophy teacher and since the guidelines put out by educational commissions are not mandatory (and, in any case, entirely inadequate). There is no prospect that the old system of humanistic education will or can be re-established, or that it may be desirable under present social and cultural conditions to do so. But some such curricular reform in the interests of stronger philosophical instruction would seem to be necessary and desirable.

As a matter of fact, the much-heralded reform of the higher grades (*Oberstufenreform*) has by now been put into effect in most schools. This reform consists of the introduction of the course-system (*Kurssystem*) by which students in the grades eleven to thirteen are given a much greater degree of freedom to choose their own specialization and corresponding courses. These upper grades, loosely comparable to American Junior Colleges, are now no longer called "*Oberstufe*" but "*Studienstufe*" to indicate their university preparatory character. The student decides on a general field of emphasis, a major in a wide sense, and has within this framework a choice of required and elective courses (*Pflichtfächer* and *Wahlfächer*). The required courses are largely determined by the field of emphasis chosen, and the elective courses can be chosen from a more or less wide variety of subjects offered. The course system thus does away with the class unit. Heretofore all students in one class, say the 11th, would take the same courses with only slight variations in religion and ethics or under special circumstances.

In the *Studienstufe*, philosophy has become one of the elective courses, now independent of religion, and meets for three hours per week. Ethics remains the alternative to religion and meets twice a week. But only seldom and in very few schools is the *Wahlfach* philosophy offered. Very few students elect to take it and the education ministries require university qualification in philosophy as a condition for teaching it. The student in the *Studienstufe* is under much pressure to do well in the courses due to the *numerus clausus* system of university admissions. Over thirty hours per week of course work with really quite a lot of homework is required, and the student has little time and inclination left for elective courses in general, particularly for what are regarded as general interest courses like philosophy. Philosophy is not (yet) regarded as germane or in some sense essential to the major areas. Course content has been upgraded considerably under the new reforms and demands made upon students have increased very much indeed.

It seems all the more urgent to present the study of philosophy to students, and colleagues on the faculty as well, as a legitimate academic discipline. Once

they come around to regarding it as such, they will not only take it more seriously and be willing to work at it, but will take a greater interest and often find enjoyment in it. Those who do not may transfer to religion in any case.

Despite the existing built-in difficulties, philosophy courses can be and have in my experience turned out fruitful, stimulating and satisfying. In deciding on course content, I have found it necessary and useful to take two points into consideration. One is that to some extent the students' interests and needs must be taken into account. The other is that students in the upper grades are allowed to switch back and forth between philosophy and religion, making it difficult to maintain continuity from one semester to the next.

The attempt to consider the student will be appreciated and thus encourage lively discussion and a certain appropriation of the subject-matter into his or her life and thinking. When asked the question, what he thought the point of philosophy was, a student answered that he expected it to help him understand the nature and purpose of his own existence. Others spoke of world-views. Unless one meets these expectations rather than at the beginning forcing upon them technical, methodological matters (though such matters must come), one can have little hope of interesting students in philosophy, at least in a German teaching situation.

Most want to read and discuss Marxist writers and this may be done in philosophy as well as in social studies and religion. Those who elect to take philosophy/ethics instead of religion may have leftist leanings and many of them will be members of the Young Socialists (*Jusos*). (Otherwise they might likely have stayed in religion.) There are some now and then, especially among the more advanced and intelligent students, who express interest in logic, but logic would, in the estimation of most of them, require too much time and effort for a minor subject like philosophy. Unless one takes these things into account, one might not have any students.

On the other hand, the claims of philosophy itself must be considered apart from special preferences. It involves some training in clear thinking and in the ability to work with difficult and profound texts, as well as questions of ultimate principles. It can be interesting and educational for the teacher, and the student as well, to frame the issues and concepts involved in such a way that they become understandable to eleven to eighteen year old pupils, but without losing their content and maintaining some precision in their formulation. To bring students to the point of actually using concepts and appropriate modes of reasoning intelligently in argument or in the analysis of texts and theories will enable a student to see their relevance and even to recognize their importance.

Close textual analysis is perhaps a more commonly used approach in Germany than it is in English speaking countries. While our principal has given me a completely free hand in planning and teaching philosophy courses, one of the few suggestions he made was that analysis of texts should be more emphasized than the discussion of opinions about philosophical standpoints. Thus one may spend a great deal of time on a few lines, of, say, Kant or Nicolai Hartmann. The student is to be trained in this, especially in the *Studienstufe*, in order to

prepare him for university study. (Those without any intention of attending university will usually stop at the end of the tenth grade and enter a vocational or technical school.) In teaching philosophy in Germany, therefore, one generally has to take a textual approach. Free and easy expression of private opinion is by long tradition discouraged in favor of the discipline of interpretation. Whatever one might think of this approach, it guards against a deterioration of classes into mere “bull-sessions” and provides a definite point of departure and control. German students are familiar with it and accustomed to it.

A definite sequence of lecture and seminar courses is offered in the philosophy seminars (departments) in German universities: practice sessions (*Übungen*) usually in conjunction with a lecture course, proseminars, intermediate seminars, upperseminars (*Oberseminare*) and colloquia for doctoral candidates. While a strict system of course offerings on the model of mathematics would be impractical in the schools (and not possible or desirable in the field of philosophy), some such sequence is necessary in order to maintain a differentiation of content from one year or semester to the next and to avoid having a series of aimless classes. It is difficult to introduce a definite sequence because of the elective nature of philosophy courses and, in the case of ethics, their relation to the required instruction in religion. Thus a student might take philosophy in his eighth or ninth year, then attend religion for a number of years, and come back to philosophy in a later year. Any orderly sequence in philosophy must therefore progressively advance the degree of difficulty and complexity, not in relation to the student’s increasing knowledge in the field, but in relation to the progress of his general education as a whole.

As an example of such a sequence, the following gradually took shape in the Gymnasium Bad Bergzabern (Palatinate). We have had the advantage of being in a position to offer ethics (*cum* philosophy) from the fifth grade on to the thirteenth. It was planned to offer six courses in philosophy per term: 5th and 6th grades together, 7th and 8th grades, 9th and 10th grades, and a course for each of the three upper grades. The 5th and 6th grades form the orientation level (*Orientierungsstufe*), the seventh through the tenth constitute the first secondary level (*Sekundarstufe I*), and the 11th through the 13th the second secondary level (*Sekundarstufe II - Oberstufe - Studienstufe*). The thirteenth grade has only one semester followed by the comprehensive examinations (*Abitur*), so that there are in all five ethics courses on this level. It has worked out rather well, though some classes had to be combined sometimes because of low enrollment, and sometimes because of the seemingly chronic need for English teachers—this need was repeatedly filled at the expense of philosophy.

I do not suggest that the following sequence is the best, but it did seem to be suitable in the particular situation:

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Topics & Materials</i>
5th, 6th	Ethics as the study of customs; customs in the immediate environment.

<i>Grade</i>	<i>Topics & Materials (continued)</i>
	Rules of conduct making community life possible. Some articles from the order of the schools and some relevant ones from the German constitution.
7th, 8th	Customs in other cultures (with slides); basic social ethics: differentiating what is and what ought to be; differentiating law, custom, and morals. The Preamble of the German constitution; simple readings.
9th, 10th	Ethics as a universal human concern; introduction to world religions; world-views, their nature and purpose. Selected readings; selections from the Vedas, Koran, etc.
11th-I	Lives and ideas of some great modern philosophers. Text: Hübscher, from Hegel to Heidegger.
11th-II	Ethical theories. Selections from Hartmann, Kant, Mill, Garaudy, Aristotle, Plato, etc.
12th-I	Kant's <i>Metaphysic of Morals</i> , Parts I & II.
12th-II	A major figure, e.g., Descartes (<i>Meditations</i>), Sartre (<i>Existentialism as Humanism</i>), Camus (<i>Myth of Sisyphus</i>).
13th	Detailed study of Hinduism and Buddhism, with some excursions into Taoism, Confucianism, Islam.
Abitur	Oral and written examination. Examples: Marx's concept of alienation, Sartre's conception of human being, Hindi religious sources of India's caste system, Theravada social philosophy, Kant on the universality of moral principles.

These topics will be recognized as having to do primarily with ethics; they are alternative courses in ethics for those withdrawing from religion. As regards texts, several good books of selected readings are available in German for use in the schools at the various levels. Especially in the ninth and tenth grades there is a great interest in world religions. These are also taken up occasionally in religion courses with varying degrees of thoroughness. Along the way effort needs to be made at coordination with what is taught in religion and social studies. There seems to be some overlapping with German literature courses as well. A student asked me once why philosophy should be taught at all, since philosophical issues are and may as well be treated in courses in German. And a teacher of German once approached me with a question about Buddhism that had come up in one of her German courses. The difficulty is, of course, to try to make clear that there is a distinctively philosophical approach to issues having a generally human significance.

It will be recognized further, that the choice of the above topics is made to some extent against the background of German and French philosophical traditions. This is natural enough in a German school, but may also be justified by pointing out that, with all respect for the technical value of modern Anglo-

American achievements in the fields of logic, philosophy of science, and analysis of language, there lies a special danger in treating philosophy as technique in the schools. Dangers of course exist if any one conception of the task of philosophy is exaggerated to the exclusion of another. A colleague in mathematics, for example, once expressed his satisfaction with the availability of philosophy instruction in our school, for students should, he said, also concern themselves with "the Spirit in the World." Yet, too strong an aversion to notions like "World-Spirit," too great an antipathy against the thin air of metaphysical altitudes, and too much of an emphasis on methodology may lead, on the student's part, to a feeling of disappointment with philosophy itself or even numb the felt need for questions of "the meaning of things" (*Sinnfragen*) and for autonomous and responsible thought and decision about them.

Complementing the many special subjects that a student is expected to learn in the *Studienstufe*, it may be philosophy which is above all suited to serve a synthesizing and unifying function in the education of students. It may again be possible to regain an aspect of unity in knowledge and life, a need which the recent educational reforms in Germany have made all the more urgent. In a model plan drafted by the Conference of Culture Ministers, the conflict between professional and general education, between technical and liberal education is not resolved exclusively in favor of the former. There is an attempt at compromise and philosophy is expressly mentioned as a possible subject in both the required and the elective areas. Should a compromise, or better, a synthesis be reached, we may look forward to fruitful work and continuing progress in the teaching of philosophy in German secondary schools.

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