

Reading Task : Philosophy and Educational research

Standish, Paul. "Data return: The sense of the given in educational research. "Journal of philosophy of education 35.3 (2001): 497-518.

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This is a relatively difficult article- it also excellent. Reading it all the way through would, I think, give you a good notion of the place of philosophical thought in educational research today, as well as an example of philosophical writing about education which you could think about when writing your essays.

For your short assignments, it may be helpful to focus on one section in the article, and try to think about its significance for your area of interest. Don't try to cover the entire article in one assignment, rather try to take in the tone and the general point Standish is making about educational research today.

Standish begins his article by questioning, through a series of examples, the way data collection and analysis is perceived in educational research. The examples all point to the ways in which the nature of data collection, storage and analysis reflect already present assumptions about education made by the researchers. The examples all portray a certain understanding of educational research that Standish calls "what works". He also differentiates between "logical givens" and "prescriptive givens". The logical givens are those that define the general field in which the research is conducted and are the preconditions for any research. The prescriptive givens are those that are conditioned by the social and political norms that we accept as natural and lay beyond questioning when research is conducted. Logical givens are therefore always present in research- prescriptive givens, however, should be examined carefully and not overlooked when we research a social practice such as education. The kind of prescriptive givens we are dealing with here, according to Standish, are rooted in the idea of a "knowledge economy", in which education is perceived as a good which could be traded in almost like a commodity (coffee or sugar).

In educational research, this attitude is described as "positivistic empiricism"- a way of describing this ordered view of social reality- it assumes that we can accumulate, through our senses, an understanding of the way things actually are without depending on any previous knowledge of the world. In this knowledge economy, "knowledge has become synonymous with information, which itself has become a technical expression." (502). This statement is then developed using Heidegger's conceptualization of the relationship between humans and technology (which we have discussed in class!), arriving to the conclusion that it all too easy to let the language of technology, of "effectivity", control research in education. Standish quotes Heidegger's warning of slipping into this way of thinking that: "carries an air of harmlessness and ease, which causes us to pass lightly over what really matters." (Heidegger, 1968, 154, quoted in Standish, 502). The kind of data that is preferred under these conditions of thought is one that complies with and compiled through the technological language, and therefore is seen as "natural" and "unquestioned", leading us to accept positivistic empiricism as our research paradigm, with actually giving it much thought.

In his reference to Wittgenstein, Standish makes a somewhat pessimistic point about our possibility to understand social practices in full. It does not seem possible to overcome the power “prescriptive givens” have over the things we try to understand- with the “what works” mindset this means that it is very hard to escape a sense of nihilism (the notion that values don’t matter- what matters is fact and figures) in which all things are a part of a technological order.

But if we cannot escape the presuppositions that govern our understanding of the world, what point is there in research? To research, for Standish is precisely to “pay our debt”, or to allow the revealing of the background that is a “given”, in the way we perceive and research our relation to the world and to other people.

Researchers working in the current academic and political climate feel that they must bow to the dominant understanding of what research is and how it ought to be carried out. An alternative way of researching would “wait” on the meaning of what is there to be researched: for Standish this means that we should not assume what the conclusions might be when we observe the object of research. To do this, we must move beyond the safety of using a language of research which does not question its own sense of “given”. The methods we employ in research are not neutral- they always convey meaning that is sometimes hidden even from us. In trying to shake these assumptions, we must reconsider the most fundamental notions of what it is to research, making our most basic ideas about education “strange” to us, playing with their meaning so we can rethink the very things that create certainty in today’s educational research:

“To understand better, it seems, you must hold in abeyance what you already know because there are preconceptions here that will otherwise stand in your way. The skills of enquiry, the methods of approach that you possess are in some respects like technical instruments with their characteristic tendency to amplify certain aspects of your perception at the expense of others. Fine tune these skills, develop them further, and you will aggravate this disparity of attention: more will be hidden. And perhaps that larger view that might be available requires you to give up something of the way you have come to see yourself as a researcher in education, to give up something of what you are.” (505 emphasis added)

By “the myth of data”, Standish proposes we reconsider the way we perceive data in educational research, which he calls the “positivist-empiricist” way of seeing the accumulation of data. It is the same understanding of data which ignores the background of our thinking about education that Standish refers to in the first part of the article. Furthermore, when we think in the “positivist-empiricist” way we tend to “naturalize” (to think that something is not reliant on circumstance; that it is as it always is naturally) the situations we see in front of us and focus only the scope of the “research question”. For Standish, this is the blinding effect of the “what works” way of doing educational research because we see social and political norms as “the way things are naturally”, rather than problematize the common thinking about such issues. Standish claims that educational researchers should reconsider the things we take for granted in the preliminary thought about our research: “...it is often what is given as the starting point of enquiry that needs most to be examined.” (507)

Standish then expands on an important comparison made earlier in the article, which suggests that we consider the givenness of data in view of the very act of giving. Relying on Zygmunt Bauman and

Jacques Derrida's exploration of what a gift actually is, Standish comes to the conclusion that "We can draw a distinction between two kinds of giving, one that finds its place comfortably in a circle of exchange, in a self-establishing economy, and the other alien to exchange, in an economy that preserves the pure gift as a giving without return or recompense or recognition." (508) When we say that something is "a given thing", what gives this something to us is actually the background to everything we are or could be.

By reading Emmanuel Levinas's essay, Standish then proposes two ways we can think of our journey through life- the first sees life as a practice that has to do with engaging the world around us as if it is completely "other" to us, as if we can know nothing about it and everything about it is infinitely new to us and is also infinitely diverse. The second way we can see life is that it is a way of placing things into categories that we already have and know, that we are already familiar with the things around. This second way of seeing the world is associated with the "economic giving" mentioned earlier- everything must remain the same, in equilibrium, therefore everything must return to its place. This two ways of looking at life reflect Standish's criticism of the way educational research is conducted- most of educational research could be associated with the second way of seeing life: it is just a safe way to survey the ways of the world without these ways ever really getting "too strange" or the research dangerous in its questioning.

The current regime of emphasis on collection and analysis of "pure data" from the "field", which corresponds with "what works", is borne out of our suspicion towards language itself- we do not trust it to convey the precise meaning, so we place the perceived effectiveness and relevance of data above the playful and artistic uses language suggests to us. However, Levinas presents us with an argument that it is precisely the playful and artistic uses of language that allow us to even begin any scientific enquiry, because they create meaning, story, in which the scientific research takes place. Data could not be understood with the use of metaphor, which is actually poetic language.

By referring to the Same as opposed to the Other, Standish reframes the collection of data as educational research. It should not be (as most research would like us to think) a circular process of obtaining facts and figures from the world, which are then analyzed and returned to "the world" in the form of a conclusion (a policy, a method). By constructing an economy in our knowledge about the world, Standish asks that we do not look for the sameness, for the reducible, familiar features in whatever it is we observe, but rather that we engage with the infinite otherness suggested to us by the language around such things- by the metaphors we (always must) utilize to understand it and place in our known world.

The final part of the article presents an example of how such an understanding of language might reflect on current educational research (top of page 514) – in his analysis Standish does not take for granted the use of language devices such as metaphors and inverted commas in the description of "effective" educational research. By showing us the limited scope of current educational research, Standish wishes to put in question its: "preoccupation with efficiency and effectiveness, with performativity..." In other words, researchers are looking for answers rather than questions in education- therefore, the answers they present all neatly "fit in" to the preconceived notion of what education is. This preconceived notion is often coincidental, or even reflective of deep problems in our world, but because of their trust in the totality of data which is circular and "economic", the researchers could not penetrate deeper meanings and questions.

Questions:

1. Explain in your own words, and using examples from educational research you are familiar with, what two of the following terms mean in the article: “what works”, “logical givens” and “prescriptive givens”, “knowledge economy”, “naturalized data”.
2. Relate Standish’s account of language to the way Lambeir describes language- what are the similarities? Standish makes a point about the limited way in which Heidegger perceives language- how is that reflected in the comparison between the two articles?
3. Following on the short examples Standish presents in the beginning of the article, describe a research project you are familiar with (perhaps yours) using similar philosophical scrutiny