

Country Report: The stricter the rules, the freer the thinking? The dissertation in philosophy teaching – three teaching examples from France

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The so called *dissertation* is an indispensable part of philosophy teaching in France. Already in the first lessons the teacher presents the rules of the method: How do I formulate a thesis? A counter thesis? How do I distinguish between a question and a problem? How should a text be analyzed? How to formulate an argument? What can the outline look like? How is the introduction structured? In each teaching unit different problems are addressed and solutions are discussed by the teacher.¹ For this purpose, texts by authors can be used. The only thing that doesn't change is the task for the students: *dissertation* or *explication de texte* (text explanation). Up to the written final examinations of high school (the *baccalauréat*) in the subject philosophy the students have one year time to acquire the rules of the *dissertation*. There is no evasion from it. Philosophy lessons are still compulsory for all high school students.²

Apart from the *dissertation* and the *explication de texte* no other form of task is provided for in the curriculum: "The written forms of expression that are best suited for the assessment of students' performance in the subject philosophy are the dissertation and the text explanation."³ They enable the student to "apply" the knowledge of notions and works acquired during the lessons and to translate it independently into his or her own "living and personal philosophical work." And: "By building his lecture accordingly, the teacher gives an example of these procedures, an example that inspires the student in the trains of thought to be developed by him, and in the approaching of the texts to be explained."⁴ The *dissertation* is more than just a form of examination. It lays down the rules for teaching philosophy and expresses how it is thought and is performed.

How is the *dissertation* used in the classroom in every day teaching? Three examples may give a first impression, but certainly not a complete answer.

Example 1

Penser par soi-même est-ce penser seul? – "Is thinking for yourself thinking alone?" Or, translated differently: "Can we only think for ourselves if we do it alone ?" This is the

¹ The French curriculum is formulated along central philosophical notions.

² The number of lessons depends on the branches chosen by the students: *série technologique* (STG, technological branch), 2 hours a week, *série scientifique* (S, scientific branch), 3 hours a week, *série économique et sociale* (ES, economic and social branch), 4 hours a week, *série littéraire* (L, literary branch), 8 hours a week.

³ "Les formes de discours écrit les plus appropriées pour évaluer le travail des élèves en philosophie sont la dissertation et l'explication de texte." in: programme de philosophie en classe terminale des séries générales, 2003, bulletin officiel.

⁴ "Le professeur doit lui-même donner dans l'agencement de son cours l'exemple de ces diverses démarches, exemple dont l'élève pourra s'inspirer dans les développements qu'il aura à construire et dans l'approche des textes qu'il aura à expliquer."

question students will encounter in the first few lessons after the start of the school year. Apart from one text (Plato, *Apology of Socrates*) which is read and explained together in class, they have no prior knowledge that they could bring in here. This first example shows that students are able to structure their thoughts even without knowledge and to argue conclusively.

The lesson starts with a discussion of the question. Some students like to warn against negative influences of society and against manipulation. Others point out that it is important to deal with fellow human beings and their opinions – for only in this way can one question preconceived opinions and form one's own opinion. Now, how does the discussion become a dissertation?

(a) The thesis and the counter thesis are juxtaposed: *Self-thinking is thinking alone / Self-thinking is not thinking alone*. The contradiction between both statements leads to the problem that needs to be formulated in the introduction of the dissertation: "What role do others (family, friends, society) play? Are they a danger for free thinking or rather a prerequisite without which freedom of thought does not exist at all? Is the freedom of thinking natural? And does it follow from this that the withdrawal from society is the only way to preserve it? Or does this withdrawal include the danger of staying with the prejudices we have? Freedom of thinking would then not be natural, but rather a goal, which can only be achieved in the exchange with others." It is not enough to simply repeat the question posed in the introduction, rephrase it, or, in the worst case, replace it with another question (e.g. what is thinking?), which is off-topic (*hors-sujet*). The students should be able to see the difference between a question that can be answered without detours and a problem to which a solution must be worked out. This is done in the main part of the *dissertation*, divided into two, three or four parts.

(b) What does an outline (*le plan*) look like? A model outline (plan type), which one could take over blindly does not exist. It is important that each part makes a statement that relates directly to the question and gives a possible answer. Here is a possible outline: Part I: One can only think for oneself alone. Part II: Self-thinking is not thinking alone. Thinking is always an inner or outer dialogue. A third part can complement and deepen what has already been said. Part III: The presence of another is not enough. Self-thinking is not thinking alone but thinking with (many) others. Dialogue with others opens up the way to culture.

(c) At the end of the dissertation there is an ending (*conclusion*) in which the student answers the question and takes a stand: "Self-thinking is not a thinking alone. Self-thinking is not thinking without others, against others, but with others. The answer could have been different." Not the content, what the student thinks, is important but only the form, how the student thinks, whether he is ordering his thoughts in a logical way and argues conclusively.

Example 2

What is the role of the knowledge that students acquire during the year in class? How do they deal with it in a dissertation? The following example was part of a teaching unit on culture. During the autumn holidays the students read a text by Claude Lévi-Strauss (*Race and History*) in which he pays tribute to the diversity of cultures and criticises various forms of 'ethnocentrism'. In class the students watched the film *The Wild Child (L'enfant sauvage)* by François Truffaut, in which one of the topics is the role of human education. Subsequently, the

class discussed the design of a 'state of nature', and why such a design is necessary for a critique of society. For this purpose, the *Discourse on Inequality* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau was presented. In the test the students should comment on the following question: "Can you rightly speak of a cultureless person ?" (*Peut-on parler à bon droit d'un homme sans culture?*)

(a) In the introduction the problem is formulated without any reference to knowledge. For example: "The 'cultureless' human being is a contradiction in itself. With what 'right' is he mentioned again and again even though he does not exist? Shall we stop mentioning because he does not exist? Or is it because he does not exist that we have to invent him, a kind of thought experiment by which we can measure man in society, helping us to better understand the culture in which we live?"

(b) The main part too should not start with a quote from a text. Every thought, every argument should first be formulated by the student. For example: "It happens again and again that someone speaks about 'wild people' or 'barbarians' ... Thus the impression is created that culture is only a matter for a few people, other people still live in nature ... In the treatise *Race and History*, Claude Lévi-Strauss introduces the term 'ethnocentrism' for this thought." Only those who have really understood a text or an example will be able to introduce it meaningfully into the context. So it can't be a matter of memorizing a text or of unreflected reproducing teaching material. Is the wild child a cultureless person? A better way to use this example would be: "Is a cultureless person not a contradiction in terms? A child that grows up in nature behaves like an animal, it can neither think nor speak, it does not lead a real 'human' life. A cultureless 'human being' is at best a child who has the innate abilities to think and speak but who cannot apply them as long as it survives isolated from other people in the forest. To educate these abilities is the role of culture.... "

(c) The structure of the dissertation should therefore continue to stand on its own feet. The acquired knowledge does not change this. It can be used to deepen a thought, which can then be questioned again. The authors are companions whom the student encounters in thought without having to continue following them. To determine the way by himself is the task of the student which he cannot pass on to any other philosopher.

Example 3

A third example is the following question: "Is there a right to disobedience?" (*Y a-t-il un droit de désobéissance?*) In order to prepare for the written final examinations, most schools organize a trial run (*bac blanc*). The students have four hours time.

(a) A possible outline looks like this: (Part I) Disobedience is not a right but a crime. (Part II) In some cases, disobedience is not only a right but a duty. (Part III) The contradiction between legality and legitimacy founds the tragedy of human happenings. Disobedience is right and wrong at the same time.

(b) In the transition from one part of the *dissertation* to the other it must be said very clearly why it is necessary to question the guiding idea. Under no circumstances should the impression be created that the various parts are in a random order and could possibly be exchanged. A possible transition from part I to part II could be: "Disobedience is not a right. Who violates the law, claims to be able to make an exception which is denied to other people. One violates the principle that all persons are equal before the law. What happens when the

law itself violates this principle and some people are deprived of their rights? Is disobedience then not only a right but also a duty?" The second main part should focus on this question.

(c) It is advisable to focus on a few examples, not to change them arbitrarily, but rather in order to deepen the analysis. A good example can also be cited several times if it becomes clear how the answer to the question has been further developed. Thus Antigone can be quoted in part II to show that there is a right to disobedience: "Antigone is acting against Creon's ban and buries her brother Polynices, who died in the battle against the city of Thebes. She invokes an unwritten and eternal right of the Gods, which contradicts the laws of Creon. From this conflict of rights follows a right to disobedience." In the following part of the main body of the dissertation one can expand: "Every right to disobedience is right and wrong at the same time. Antigone is not a heroine who fights against a tyrant. With the ban on burying Polynices, Creon distinguishes between enemy and friend and stands for a right which holds together the political community. As a king's daughter and fiancée of Haimon, Antigone knows about this right. But Creon, her uncle, should be equally sensitive to the commandment of the gods and the right of the family, for which Antigone stands, because it is according to this right that he succeeded Laios and ascended the throne of Thebes. It is tragic that both Antigone and Creon are blind to the right of the other. Which state can insist on a right that is against the moral and religious beliefs of its citizens? This tension between legality and legitimacy has not yet been resolved by any society."

The *dissertation* still being the main task for students, there has also been criticism: (1) Does the *dissertation* in fact train free thinking, as stated in the curriculum, or is it drying it up? (2) Is it a guarantee for the equal treatment of all students or, on the contrary, a tool of social reproduction? (3) How should the results of the final examinations in philosophy, which are always below average, be interpreted? Do they show that the dissertation is "outdated" or that it is needed more than ever? In 2021, the *baccalauréat* will be reformed. The discussion about the dissertation continues.

How to cite this article

Martin, Christine (2018), "The stricter the rules, the freer the thinking? The dissertation in philosophy teaching – three teaching examples from France", *Journal of Didactics of Philosophy* 2, Nr. 2, 52-55. DOI: 10.46586/JDPh.2018.9546.