

La Balme, Denis (2018): Le Cours de Philosophie. Conseils de méthode, Limoges: Lambert-Lucas.

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There is a new book series in the didactics of philosophy, *didac-philo*.¹ It is in French and edited by the publishing house *Les Editions Lambert-Lucas*.² In 2018 they started the book series *didac-philo* dedicated to the theoretical and practical aspects of teaching philosophy. Its target audience is, on the one hand, students and teachers who should find both useful tools for their teaching practice as well as syntheses on philosophy education, and on the other hand, the general public interested in theoretical and historical aspects of philosophy education. The book series is explicitly pluralist, allowing for a diversity of philosophical viewpoints among its authors.³ It is edited by Frédéric Cossutta, a trained philosopher and linguist, *agrégé* in 1975, former high school teacher in philosophy (1976-2010) and since 1993 research director of a group investigating the analysis of philosophical discourse.⁴ *Le cours de philosophie. Conseils de méthode*, published in September 2018, is the first book of the series. It is this book that will be reviewed now.

As the title indicates, *Le cours de philosophie. Conseils de méthode*, is primarily aimed at beginning teachers to provide them with advice. However, the introduction does not start with some of the main challenges a beginner might face but rather with a quite dogmatic exposition of the nature and the aims of the teaching of philosophy. There is no overview or background information provided, no description of what to expect in the book or why we should follow its assumptions. But there is a table of contents at the end of the book, which informs about its structure in three parts (after the introduction): part one on how to conceive a course of philosophy, part two on the *dissertation* and the *explication de texte* – the only two forms of philosophical examination allowed in the French school system, both being very tightly regimented –, and part three on how to give a course in philosophy. One will search in vain for an index of topics or authors or a bibliography of works cited. The book is obviously not meant to be used as a tool and work of reference but rather as an initiation to the profession. There is no reference to any didactical literature, neither general nor about the subject philosophy, neither in French nor in any other language. It is rather to be seen as a direct instruction based on personal knowledge. So, let's follow the author, Denis La Balme, of whom we learn on the book's cover that he has taught for twenty-five years.

The introduction about the nature and aims of philosophy education starts with an exposition of the philosophical curriculum in France (*programme de philosophie en classe terminale*). The

¹ See URL: <http://www.didac-philo.com/> (26.02.2020)

² Lambert-Lucas was created in 2004 by Geneviève Lucas et Marc Lambert-Arabyan with the aim of publishing academic work especially in the field of linguistics and in the humanities in general. See URL: <http://www.lambert-lucas.com/a-propos/> (26.02.2020)

³ See URL: <http://www.didac-philo.com/collection/didac-philo/> (26.02.2020)

⁴ See URL: <https://gradphi.hypotheses.org/frederic-cossutta> (26.02.2020)

author claims that the curriculum has always been generally the same and changes were only “marginal,” whether or not it was in the 1960s, the 1980s, after 2003 or after 2019, the year in which a new reform was planned (p. 7). But is this true? Can it be true that there was no change at all? The author argues for his claim about the contents by comparing the former curriculum, – which followed the Aristotelian classification of philosophy: logic, metaphysics, natural philosophy, moral and political philosophy, – with the contents of the 2003 curriculum: the self, culture, reason and reality, politics and morals. He claims that these are basically the same because the contents of “the self” are finally logic, metaphysics and natural philosophy, and the content of “reason and reality” is logic. Now, I am not in a position to assess whether the author’s claim is in fact true, but at least on the face of it, “the self” and “reason and reality” are different from logic (unless, of course, one identifies “logic” with “philosophy,” which for example Aristotle does not). But let’s assume that the vague general claim is true; in general, the contents of the curriculum in philosophy in France have stayed more or less the same over the past sixty years. The next question one then would expect is the following: Are there *good* reasons that there was no change in the contents of the curriculum? Possible criteria to answer this question would be: Are the contents such that they a) include important philosophical topics, b) are of interest to the adolescent high school students, c) reflect important scientific, social and cultural challenges of our times, and d) reflect the variety of gender and cultures of the world? But these criteria or others are not considered by the author. He seems to take the curriculum as given, and as being unquestionably good like it is – and always was. But a look at the selection of the authors in the 2003 curriculum published in the book (p. 9) reveals that it is heavily Eurocentric – starting with Plato and not mentioning one single non-European philosopher! – and heavily gender biased – mentioning only one woman, Hannah Arendt – and including no living philosopher (ending the list with Foucault)! But wait, if we take a look at reality outside the book, we actually see changes happening in France! The new curriculum for 2020 includes Zhuang Zhou, Nagarjuna, and Maimonides, Simone de Beauvoir, Simone Weil, Jeanne Hersch, Elizabeth Anscombe, and Iris Murdoch, and it ends with Hilary Putnam (deceased 2016).⁵

The second part of the introduction explains the aims of philosophy education (according to the view of the author). These are, according to the author, three: first, the autonomy of thinking, i.e. the ability to think critically and independently; secondly, contemporaneity; and thirdly, politeness. While the latter two may strike us as rather unusual – the author argues for them with the help of Giorgio Agamben and Henry Bergson – the first aim is well known and uncontroversial. However, the author goes on to discuss the pedagogical methods of reaching this goal. Based on Hannah Arendt’s comments about the role of the schools as facilitating the transition from the family to the world, La Balme identifies two errors that keep schools from playing this role. The first consists in keeping the child a child. La Balme calls it “pedagogism.” The second consists in making school the world and therefore of forcing the child to be successful in the world. La Balme calls it “pragmatism.” The first, pedagogism, means according to the author to “adapt oneself to

⁵ See URL: https://cache.media.education.gouv.fr/file/SPE8_MENJ_25_7_2019/15/9/spe238_annexe1_1159159.pdf (20.02.2020)

the level of the student, to render the student active, producing knowledge by himself.” This involves, according to the author, two absurdities: first, knowledge by definition is never at the level of the student who “learns what he did not know before,” while teaching means “wanting to pull the students up”; secondly, knowledge is not the fruit of the students’ invention but rather something “given,” something they have “neither invented nor constructed,” and the students are to “receive what has been done without them” (p. 15-16). Reading these arguments, one wonders: why knowledge cannot be an invention, construction or discovery or a least something similar? Claiming otherwise is to contradict common sense as well as psychological theories at least since those of Jean Piaget. Reading the arguments, one is also shocked at what kind of image of his students this teacher must have (and other teachers may have): the students are to passively receive what the teacher offers to them. This does not show any respect for the autonomous person the adolescent student is. And one wonders how autonomous thinking – the first aim of philosophy education (see above) – can be achieved without respecting and encouraging the autonomy of the person.

That there is little respect for the students in the view proposed can also be seen in some remarks later in the book, in part 3, in a paragraph about student participation (6.2). La Balme starts by saying that most school inspectors insist on the importance of student participation. He states this without considering the reasons for the importance, and almost as if he did not agree with it when he makes a proposal for how to reconcile the “necessary and often stimulating” student participation with the “transmission of a real content by the professor” (p. 173). If this means that the contents of the students’ remarks are in fact not “real contents” it surely is not what could ground a relationship of mutual respect between students and professor. La Balme sees the best place for student intervention at the start of a new chapter. Here students may be asked for example in the topic on freedom whether they feel to be free, at what moments and whether they like to be free. If this is all that students are supposed to say, it is clear that they are not asked to philosophize! The other place of student participation is in asking the professor questions about his lecture. However, the author readily warns us of getting distracted by such questions, and he suggests that the students wait with their questions until the professor has finished his argumentation. The author understands that the students like to be “heard, encouraged and respected” (p. 174), and yet it leads him only to the claim that one should refrain from negative comments. Where is the place for real philosophical dialogue between student and teacher in this format of a course?

The teacher is seen by La Balme as the holder of truth and wisdom. He writes: The teachers’ “mission is that his students look up to the wisdom that he incarnates” (p. 175). This is an almost theological legitimation of the teacher’s authority over the student.

For the most part the book is a presentation and detailed description of ways to develop a lecture (according to the model of a *dissertation*) about a particular topic from the curriculum (part 1, about 70 pages) and about how to write a *dissertation* and a *explication de texte* (part 2, about 60 pages). At the end of the chapter about the *dissertation* and the *explication de texte*, the question is raised about how to make corrections in class. The author states the ideal of involving a maximum of students (p. 133 and 156). But this contradicts the aim of addressing the thoughts each student has developed individually in his or her text. The method proposed by La Balme seems to lead to a one-way-communication between the professor and the students in which the

professor takes up some selected ideas of the students and develops them further. It seems to be a highly demanding method which does not resolve the contradiction just mentioned between involving a maximum of students and addressing each individual student's thought.

At the end of part 2, the pedagogical question is raised about how to evaluate texts by students (p. 163-165). La Balme leaves the reader here with obvious assertions, such as that one should avoid "humiliating" low grades (p. 164). But he also makes surprising claims such as that professors should start their written comments to the students with the weaknesses of the text and should end with the strengths in order to give "encouragement" to the student (p. 164). One wonders how an evaluation may be perceived as encouraging when the first thing that is mentioned is what the student has done badly. The natural psychological reaction is to feel disappointed, not encouraged. When one then reads about the good points, one will perceive this as a kind of consolation that the weaknesses are not so bad after all. Therefore, it will have precisely the opposite effect of motivating students to make changes. Instead of serving as a motivating tool, the method proposed by La Balme seems rather to be an instrument of fostering the authority and control of the teacher over the students.

This book does not offer good advice for the beginning teachers at all. Rather, it is a historical document of how the teaching of philosophy was once done by some, and a vivid example of how it should *not* be done.