

## CHAPTER 3

# Practical Wisdom and Spiritual Exercises in Teacher Education

## What Does 'Being Taught' by the Ancients Mean?

Paul Otto Brunstad<sup>1\*</sup>, Stefano Oliverio<sup>2\*\*</sup>

### ABSTRACT

How can teacher educators contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of wisdom and knowledge in the life and practice of a new generation of teacher students? How can we counteract educational programs that too easily pursue a formal and theoretical knowledge abstracted from the contextualized constellations of practice? This chapter endeavors to show that to achieve this goal is not primarily a question of more knowledge, but rather of helping the individual to enhance her awareness of how she responds and acts when gaining new knowledge and encountering the complexity of real life. In this perspective, by endorsing the contemporary vindication of *phronesis* (practical wisdom) as an essential component for navigating the contexts of professional practice and after developing an inquiry into key notions like Donald Schön's "reflective practitioner" and Gert Biesta's "virtuosity" of the teacher, this contribution proposes the Greek tradition of spiritual exercises as a way to cultivate a "*phronimos*" attitude and to promote professional subjectification. This is much needed in order for teachers not to capitulate to the stranglehold of discourses dominated by a too narrow-minded technical rationality and to re(dis)cover, instead, their professional practice as primarily a kind of art and an exercise of judgement and wisdom, sustained as they should be by sound scientific knowledge.

1 \* NLA University College, Norway. Email: PaulOtto.Brunstad@NLA.no.

2 \*\* University of Naples Federico II. Email: stefano.oliverio@unina.it.

## INTRODUCTION

The reflections presented in this chapter aspire to contribute to the ongoing debate about how to counter the predominant trend in contemporary teacher education that so easily slips into the endeavor to provide a generation of new teachers merely with epistemologically robust knowledge and competences – in a feverish search for certainty – and with a rationality that pursues a formal and theoretical knowledge abstracted from the contextualized constellations of practice.

Two questions underlie this contribution: how can we, as teachers, become educationally wise people, that is, professionals who show *phronesis* when engaging with practice? How can teacher educators contribute to the formation of the whole person as a reflective and *phronimos* practitioner?

In foregrounding the theme of *phronesis* we join Gert Biesta's (2014) notions of "virtuosity" and "professional subjectification," which in § 1 we will read in connection with the influential idea of the "reflective practitioner." The latter represents – we will argue – a major problematization of the modern search for certainty and, in this respect, it maintains its topicality, although it needs to be re-appropriated within a broader horizon.

In this sense, in § 2 the modern flight from the rough ground of practice will be approached through some tenets of the British philosopher Stephen Toulmin, who construed the passage from the vocabulary of art and skill to that of technique, as it occurred in the domain of the "clinical arts" (that is, in the activities which operate with specific, context-sensitive and unique situations) as a consequence of the Cartesian revolution. We will interpret this shift in terms of a *methodological-mathematical subjectification*, which in modernity has presided over the technical understanding of professional practice, including teaching, by sidelining any reference to *phronesis*. However, we will part company with Toulmin on a crucial point: we detect in the Cartesian device not only the source of the modern mathematical-technical project but also the echo of the ancient tradition of spiritual exercises.

It is precisely the latter that will represent the pivot on which the "constructive part" of our chapter turns. Indeed, in § 3 we will focus on the circuit between *phronesis*/practical wisdom and spiritual exercises/*askesis* as a resource to cultivate the teacher's professional subjectification (as distinct from and even opposed to the methodological-mathematical one). Spiritual exercises represent

a formative force changing the way in which the subject exists in the world and makes experience out of it.

Thus, through our interpretation of the Cartesian device, we will not confine ourselves to suggesting the substitution of *askesis* for the cult of the scientific method, but we will insinuate that the scientific attitude itself ultimately relies upon the endeavor of the care of the self, at which spiritual exercises aim. In this way, to put it in a formula, through the reading here advanced of the Cartesian gesture, Biesta's virtuosity will be read not as an alternative to reflectivity but as the ground in which the latter should ultimately be rooted.

### **Reflectivity and/or 'virtuosity' of the teacher**

Stephen Toulmin, one of the protagonists of the post-positivist epistemological debate, concludes his last volume with a revealing prognostication, which is also a sort of appeal to a reconstruction of our understanding of the scientific undertaking:

Our first intellectual obligation is to abandon the Myth of Stability that played so large a part in the Modern age: only thus can we heal the wounds inflicted on the Reason by the seventeenth-century obsession with Rationality [...] The future belongs not so much to the pure thinkers [...] it is a province, rather, for reflective practitioners [...]. (Toulmin 2001: 214)

The phrase "reflective practitioner" has been a catchword in the educational discourse over the last three decades, specifically when teacher education has been in the spotlight. The notion has paradoxically paid the price of its success and has transmogrified into a fashionable slogan and/or undergone a process of operationalization, so that, as has been sagaciously noted,

if teachers are of an instrumental bent [...] they respond to reflection in the only way that exists in their conception of teaching and learning, that is, they adopt an entirely operational approach. They therefore constructed the strange practice of reflection by checklists, akin to "painting by numbers." They took the language of reflection – elements, stages, whatever – and turned these into procedures, which they could identify as either being completed or not, as if we can ever tell when another person has reflected enough. An elusive and generative idea [that of "reflective practice" *POB & SO*] had been made functional. (Boud, 2010, p. 28)

This is the reason why Thomas Popkewitz has considered the notion of the “reflective teacher” merely as a facet of the cultural thesis of lifelong learning and he has described it in this way:

The teacher is also classified as a lifelong learner. The teacher is self-actualized by remaking his or her biography. The “reflective teacher” researches himself or herself through action research that brings a form of problem solving into the planning of his or her career. [...] Reflection is not merely about thinking. Reflection entails particular expertise in calculating and ordering thought as a problem-solving action. (Popkewitz, 2008, p. 123)

There is a noteworthy distance between Toulmin’s view of reflectivity and Popkewitz’s: in the latter the stance of the reflective practitioner and the calculating mindset coalesce, whereas in the former they represent two diametrically distinct ways of “inhabiting” science as a rational enterprise. Moreover, clustering together the idea of problem solving and that of reflectivity, Popkewitz shows that a major semantic drift has occurred in comparison with the original meaning in Donald Schön (1983, 1987, 1991), when the reflective rationality was construed as a perspective countering the positivist understanding of professionalism (reducing this to problem solving) and a merely instrumental-technical rationality.

We are not interested here in discussing whether and to what extent Popkewitz’s interpretations are fair with the paradigm of the reflective practice (as aforementioned this has experienced such an evolution that many contemporary versions of it deserve Popkewitz’s misgivings). We have introduced them because *a contrario* they allow what is at stake in the Toulminian challenge to stand out: it consists fundamentally in thinking of modes of connection between the scientific attitude (and the related issues of research, validity, rigor etc.: see also Oliverio, 2019) and the professional practice that do not yield to the excesses of the modern concept of rationality. According to Toulmin, indeed, the main wound that Reason has incurred at the dawn of modernity is a “loss of balance,” as a consequence of which the search for certainty has become the polar star of Reason turned into Rationality that pursues a formal and theoretical knowledge, by abstraction from the contextualized constellation of the practice. When one of the advocates of evidence-based education, Robert Slavin, invoked the need for “a scientific revolution that has the potential to profoundly transform policy,

practice, and research” (Slavin, 2002, p. 15) within education and lamented that this realm had remained backward-looking in comparison with other areas of practice, he *de facto* called for a re-alignment of the field of education to the standards of the Toulminian Myth of Stability (this being the fatal conceit that it is possible to achieve absolutely sound and universal knowledge on the basis of which to operate in practice).

Against this backdrop, the ‘Toulminian’ reflective practitioner is the embodiment of a specific view of the relation practice-theory, which endeavors to redress the balance of reason and to contain the excesses of the modern-Cartesian rationality (whereas, we can say, the ‘Popkewitzian’ reflective teacher is the suggestion that the ‘project’ of reflectivity has finally been appropriated by the calculating mindset typical of the Myth of Stability).

In this chapter, we do not aim at relaunching an alleged ‘original’ version of the idea of the reflective teacher. We situate ourselves in-between the Toulmin and Popkewitz stances: from the former we take the vindication of the pivotal role of *phronesis* in order for a reasonable dealing with the contexts of practice to occur; alerted by the qualms of the latter, we will re-signify the Toulminian endeavor through a different set of interpretive tools.

In this undertaking we meet some of Gert Biesta’s concerns and embrace some of his theoretical innovations. In particular, in his decade-long problematization of the: “what works” approach to education, Biesta has been adamant in contrasting the idea of professional practice emerging therein, insofar as it “conceives of professional action as intervention, and asks from research that it provide evidence about the effectiveness of interventions” (Biesta, 2010, p. 33). This line of criticism has culminated in a recovery of the Aristotelian idea of *phronesis* as the most suitable “framework” to counter a merely technical idea of teaching:

[...] the model of professional action implied in evidence-based practice – i.e. the idea of education as a treatment or intervention that is a causal means to bring about particular, pre-given ends – is not appropriate for the field of education. What is needed for education is a model of professional action that is able to acknowledge the noncausal nature of educational interaction and the fact that the means and ends of education are internally rather than externally related. What is needed, in other words, is an acknowledgment of the fact that *education is a moral practice, rather than a technical or technological one – a distinction that*

goes back to Aristotle's distinction between *phronesis* (practical wisdom) and *techne* (instrumental knowledge). (Ibid., p. 36. Emphasis added)

This argumentative trajectory has led Biesta to introduce the interesting – albeit not uncontroversial for some scholars – notion of “virtuosity” (Biesta, 2014). Indeed, if we substitute professional judgment for the evidence-based conceit to provide effective responses to technical problems and we invoke *phronesis*, we are not allowed to ask “how to learn *phronesis*” as if the latter were one more competence, unless we want to relapse into the very framework we endeavor to evade. As Biesta appropriately highlights, the question is rather “[h]ow can we become a *phronimos*? How can we become a practically wise person? And, more specifically, the question is, How can we become an *educationally wise person*?” (Ibid., p. 134). This entails shifting the focus of teacher education, which should not confine itself to the providing of epistemologically robust knowledge, skills and competences but “should be concerned with the *formation of the whole person* (not, so I wish to emphasize, as a private individual but as a professional)” (Ibid., p. 135). Moreover, this kind of formation cannot be construed only in terms of socialization but is a form of “professional subjectification,” that is, “the formation and transformation of the person” (*Ibidem*). It is precisely this broader understanding of the mode of being a teacher and of her education that Biesta suggests capturing through the notion of virtuosity.

There is a sense in which it is possible to read Toulmin and Biesta as allies in a common undertaking (see Oliverio, 2019), in particular in the re-habilitation of *phronesis*. While placing ourselves in their wake, we complement them with an additional element, namely the tradition of spiritual exercises, which may represent a resource to cultivate the teacher's professional subjectification. Spiritual exercises and the care of the self do not belong to the rich panoply of conceptual tools that Biesta marshals and referring to them is also un-Toulminian, as the British philosopher has remarked that in the approach he endorses “the discipline of Philosophy becomes less a *way of life* in Pierre Hadot's sense [...] than a *calling* to put reflective analysis to work as an instrument in handling moral, medical and political issues” (Toulmin, 2001, p. 214). Instead, in our view a re-appropriation of the tradition of the care of the self can be a privileged way of fostering the teacher's virtuosity, which preserves the value of the Toulminian reflectivity without incurring the drawbacks of its calculating ‘proceduralization,’ denounced by Popkewitz.

There is one more horizon within which we meet Biesta's theorizing: by construing Popkewitz's statements in a possibly idiosyncratic manner, we could say that the reflective turn goes astray to the extent that it is unable to disengage itself from the cultural thesis of lifelong learning. In this perspective, espousing a Toulminian viewpoint towards the professionalism of the teacher implies also loosening the grip of learnification (Biesta, 2006, 2010). It is this circuit between virtuosity, *phronesis*, a different stance towards the question of research and science, and the tradition of the care of the self and its mobilization within teacher education and professional development that is at the center of the present chapter.

Against this backdrop, our argumentation will unfold as follows: first, after outlining the main features of Toulmin's views on the need for a recovery of *phronesis* against the excesses of modern rationality, rooted in the fundamental gesture of Descartes, we will elaborate on an insightful remark of Foucault and we will argue that two regimes of discourse co-exist in the Cartesian undertaking: on the one hand, the emergence of the new conception of theory – finally resulting in the invention of disciplines, in a subordination of practice to theory and in an erosion of practical knowledge – and, on the other, the reference to the ancient tradition of spiritual exercises. It is on this tradition that we will, secondly, insist as a source from which to draw insights for the professional subjectification of teachers, thereby reconnecting ourselves to Biesta's tenets.

### **From skill to technique: the methodological-mathematical subjectification**

The appeal to the reflective practitioner is, in Toulmin's device, the culmination of a grand narrative about the birth, crisis and future of modernity (Toulmin, 1991). The main thrust of his reconstruction is a charge against the Cartesian substitution of rationality (as aspiring to an absolutely solid knowledge and, then, committed to a search for certainty) and for the Renaissance reasonableness, that is, a view of reason which does not recoil from contingency, situatedness, and the recognition of human precariousness. As elsewhere (see Oliverio, 2019) Toulmin's reading of the modern project and its impact on a 'theoreticist' and formalist understanding of science (related to an emphasis upon "rigor [as] exactness, precision and predictability" [Toulmin, 2001, p. 37]) has already been highlighted (as well as the elective affinity between this understanding and the contemporary discourse about evidence-based education), here we will focus

on a specific facet of Toulmin's argument, namely the fact that the Cartesian rationality gave rise to the invention of disciplines.

This represented a change that "involved both intellectual and institutional factors" (Ibid., p. 29). As for the former, this was essentially the consequence of the prestige of the mathematical methods as advocated by Galileo and Descartes. In this perspective, modern disciplines are logically organized bodies of knowledge, which are valid as they are ultimately understood as a structured set of formal arguments rigorously deduced from certain starting points (whether the certainty is that of empirical evidence or of theoretical assumptions). Accordingly, the modern conception of disciplines emerged from an epoch-making exchange: the rigor and validity of theory atoned for its distance from everyday practice and the certainty of results (the modern ideal of predictability) atoned for the lack of focus on the specificities of the contextual constellations that are to be acted upon and known. This is the remote source of the technical reason in the Schönian (1983, 1987) acceptance of the word.

No less important are the institutional aspects of the invention of disciplines as Toulmin portrays it. In particular, he takes his cue from the military meaning of the word 'discipline'. Elaborating on some remarks of the Greek historian Polybius, he distinguishes between Roman and Greek military discipline:

The disciplined nature of [Roman] procedures was well shown [...] by the way Roman Legions set up their camps. Once the decision to camp had been taken, a position for the consul's tent was chosen. Everything else followed in a rule-governed way: the same design, pattern, and layout were followed exactly, whatever the natural features of the territory were. [...] For the Greeks [instead] the 'rationality' of a camp layout was not enough by itself: everything depended on how it could be best adapted to a particular location. A Greek military camp could be better or worse, more or less successful in execution, but there was nothing precisely 'right' or 'wrong' about it. For the Greeks, the requirements of *rigor* – exactness, precision, and predictability – were always weighed against other priorities. (Toulmin, 2001, pp. 36-37)

We want to use the Greek-Roman difference as an illustration of what is at stake: on the one hand, an insistence on a fixed method (or pattern or design), irrespective of any attention to the situation, so that no room is left for flexibility or interplay with the surroundings; on the other, the framing of a plan



according to the specificity of the context. Or to put it bluntly: on the one hand, the predominance of a technique, a method, a set of formal rules that are valid always and everywhere, precisely because they prescind the ‘where and when’ of experience; on the other, a prudent judgement, *phronesis*, that takes the specificities into account. In this reading, as modern disciplines tend to espouse the ‘Roman’ rule-governed mode of proceeding, they have represented a dismissal of practical wisdom, sacrificed on the altar of the certainty and validity of formal knowledge.

This shift has been all the more calamitous in those domains of practice which address contextualized issues – and require, therefore, a timely, ‘kairotic,’ action and not merely the application of general, a-temporal rules. Also, in these realms modern discipline-oriented rationalism has substituted “a theoretician’s rational computations” for “a practitioner’s reasonable judgments” and her “clinical’ knowledge” (Ibid., p. 111). Toulmin has captured this “disciplinization” of the domain of practice in an amazingly concise formula: “Skill gave way to Technique, Artisanry to Artisanship” (Ibid., p. 32). An interpretation of this phrase will allow us to take a step further in our argument.

We will adapt some insights of Dewey, by extrapolating them from an essay, “Individuality and Experience”,<sup>3</sup> that engages with a partly different topic. Therein Dewey tackled the question of “the relation of individuality and its adequate development to the work and responsibilities of the teacher, representing accumulated experience of the past” (Dewey, 1985, p. 55) and he deployed the idea of an introduction of a novice into a tradition of practice, as is exemplified in artisanry:

No one would seriously propose that all future carpenters should be trained by actually starting with a clean sheet, wiping out everything that the past has discovered about mechanics, about tools and their uses and so on. It would not be thought likely that this knowledge would “cramp their style,” limit their individuality, etc. But neither, on the other hand, have carpenters been formed by the methods often used in manual training shops where dinky tasks of a minute and technical nature are set, wholly independent of really making anything, having

3 Incidentally, as a sort of ‘philological’ curiosity, it is to note, that without explicitly quoting its title, it is precisely from this essay that Schön (1987) takes some tenets for the education of the reflective practitioner. However, we will make a different use of Dewey’s ideas.

only specialized skill as their aim. As a rule, carpenters are educated in their calling by working with others who have experience and skill, sharing in the simpler portions of the real undertakings, assisting in ways which enable them to observe methods and to see what results they are adapted to accomplish. (Ibid., p. 56)

In this view, the cultivation of skills is dependent upon the participation in joint, real activities and not upon the acquisition of specialized techniques through the repetition of pre-determined moves. In order for this participation to be educational – and not merely a form of drill – the introduction into a tradition should not be the passive submission to pre-given patterns of action, methods and customs because “the urge or need of an individual to join in an undertaking is a necessary prerequisite of the tradition’s being a factor in his personal growth in power and freedom; and also that he has to see on his own behalf and in his own way the relations between means and methods employed” (Ibid., p. 57).

Toulmin would be ready to advocate this Deweyan approach to counter the replacement of skill with technique as a consequence of the invention of disciplines and the subordination of professional practice to the disciplinary model. Despite the fact that this kind of apprenticeship clearly represents a formation of the person and that an emphasis is laid upon individuality, we cannot speak properly of it as an instance of professional subjectification: indeed, it is rather a form of *professional socialization*, to stick to Biesta’s terminology. What could, then, professional subjectification look like?

To answer this question, we have first to clarify the second part of Toulmin’s formula, when he mentions artisanship. Dewey invites us to imagine the case in which a pupil works for a master carpenter who prefers one and only one model of house, to which the novice has to conform if s/he wants to learn the job. That model is a standard to appropriate and, thus, no power of observation, imagination, creativity and judgement is required. Dewey comments:

The imaginary case illustrates what often happens when we pass from the education of artisans to that of artists. As a rule, a carpenter has to keep more or less open; he is exposed to many demands and must be flexible enough to meet them. He is in no position to set up a final authority about ends and models and standards, no matter how expert he may be in methods and means. But *an architect in distinction from a builder* is likely to be an “authority”; he can dictate and lay down what is right and wrong, and thus prescribe certain ends and proscribe others.

Here is a case where tradition is not enhancing and liberating, but is restrictive and enslaving. If he has pupils, he is a “master” and not an advanced fellow worker; his students are disciples rather than learners. (Ibid., pp. 57-58. Emphasis added)

The architect is a character appearing also in the text, which inaugurates the modern Myth of Stability, that is, Descartes’s (1908a) *Discours de la Méthode*: immediately after discovering the unreliability of the teachings received in the best school in Europe and, therefore, the need for a re-building of knowledge as a whole from scratch, Descartes withdrew into a room in Germany and one of the very first thoughts that occurred to him was that

there is seldom so much perfection in works composed of many separate parts, upon which different hands have been employed, as in those completed by a single master. Thus, it is observable that *the buildings which a single architect has planned and executed*, are generally more elegant and commodious than those on which several have attempted to improve, by making old walls serve purposes for which they were not originally built. (Ibid., p. 11. Emphasis added)<sup>4</sup>

The analogy with the question of our knowledge is explicitly established:

In the same way I thought that the sciences contained in books, (such of them at least as are made up of probable reasonings, without demonstrations), composed as they are of the opinions of many different individuals massed together, are farther removed from truth than the simple inferences which a man of good sense using his natural and unprejudiced judgment draws respecting the matters of his experience. (Ibid., p. 12)

In this perspective, the work of the architect, planning a completely new city, becomes the model to which (the re-building of) knowledge should conform and, implicitly, it is the anticipated paradigm of what the *cogito* should do – after the radical process of doubt has demolished and removed all the old knowledge encumbering science with uncertain and unreliable notions. As these notions

4 The page numbers refer to the French edition. For the English translation we have drawn upon the version appearing in The Harvard Classic and retrievable at <https://www.bartleby.com/34/1/2.html>. Access on June 9<sup>th</sup> 2019.

come to the individual primarily from school, we can consider the process of the attainment of the *cogito-qua-an-architect* as a sort of process of de-schooling, of removing the “accumulated experience of the past” (to mention again the Dewey of “Individuality and Experience”) of which the teacher is the representative and the purveyor.

The persistence of the architect-metaphor (and the evolution of its meaning in the passage from Descartes to Dewey) is telling: Dewey, in agreement with Toulmin’s complaint about the substitution of artisanship for artisanry, invoked the artisan’s introduction into a tradition of practice as an illustration of a balanced relation between individuality and past experience in education and as a model for the reconstruction of educational relations and, contextually, he warned against the unilaterality of the architect-mode that, in Toulminian terms, is the manifestation of a loss of balance of reason and of a rationalistic lapse, of which the rise of disciplines has been the most accomplished outcome; the Cartesian architect, instead, whose image sets the standard for the *cogito*, is the embodiment of the Myth of Stability and of that disciplinary transformation of knowledge which undermines the epistemic legitimacy of practice.

If, as aforementioned, Dewey’s vindication of the example of the artisan can be deployed as a form of professional socialization, Descartes’ process culminating in the *cogito-architect* refers to what we will call a *mathematical-methodological subjectification*. By this phrase we understand two dimensions of the process that Descartes portrays: first, the attainment of the *cogito* is the constitution of a subjectivity that can represent a rock on which to build a knowledge not infected by imprecise and obscure notions, secondly, this subject finds in the mathematical method a way of proceeding that preserves one from the imperfections of knowledge. The *cogito-qua-an-architect* is a subject that substitutes the rule-governed procedure of a method (which is ultimately a technique) for the cultivation of skills enabling one to exist in a dialogue with the world without any warranty or certainty.

However, there is one more reason why we suggest speaking of a “mathematical” subjectification. The goal that Descartes pursues is the *mathesis pura* and this expression is illuminating in two respects. On the one hand, we should remember that Toulmin, in the quotation from which we have taken our cue in this chapter, speaks of “pure thinkers” – the source of the search for the purity of knowledge and thought, that is, for knowledge not contaminated by the uncertainties of experience, lies in the Cartesian project of science as an ultimately

formal-theoretical undertaking that should abandon the rough ground of practice. On the other hand, the word *mathesis* is revealing since, according to Greek etymology, it refers to the horizon of learning. It is noteworthy that, in the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Descartes, 1908b), after having – as in the *Discourse* – rehearsed the reasons for rejecting the knowledge acquired in the school (that is, any knowledge received through teaching) and having attained a certainty guaranteed by God via the *cogito*, Descartes, in the Sixth and last Meditation, re-introduces the language of teaching and speaks of a nature that teaches us. However, as nature’s teachings are trustworthy only after being passed through the discovery of *cogito*, the textual fabric suggests that teaching is made conditional upon learning and learning occurs by suspending any real experience of teaching. Here we find the *locus originis* of learnification. Or to put it more cautiously: learnification as an educational phenomenon, that is, an emphasis on learning, ultimately linked with a project of a scientific treatment of education, is the manifestation – within the field of education – of a shift connected to the Cartesian gesture, which institutes a “mathematic” subject, a subject thriving on the rejection of any teaching and on the withdrawal from any educational relationship, by replacing it with the discovery of the method as a strict set of rules.

Our reading has thus far remained fairly Toulminian in the identification of Descartes as the starting point of the modern discourse, resulting in a cancellation of practical wisdom in favor of a theoretical stance. However, things are much more complicated and nuanced and, through Descartes, we can reach a point from which to reconstruct the very project that Toulmin denounces. Indeed, as Foucault (1972, pp. 1125 ff.) has brilliantly argued, two discursive devices co-exist within the Cartesian *Meditations*: the demonstrative and the ascetic. The former is interested in establishing cogent chains of reasoning according to absolutely methodical rules and it is the kind of discourse which belongs to what we have called the methodological-mathematical subjectification. The latter – manifesting itself in the exercise (*askesis*) of “meditation”, that is, of a practice of formation of the subject not as a pure thinking machine but as a self, shaped by her own discourse – rejuvenates the tradition of spiritual exercises. In this tradition, as Hadot (2001, 2002) has shown, theory is not a deployment of purely cognitive powers but a kind of practice aimed at changing the way in which the subject exists in the world and makes experience of it. Thus, the real greatness of Descartes is that he represents the tipping point

from one epistemic horizon to another, from the ancient theory as a practice of the care of the self (which, however, still echoes in the format of “meditations” that Descartes chose) to the modern theory as a mathematical search for exactness and rigor.

We want to advance, however, a more radical hypothesis: as the *cogito* – the architect of the new understanding of knowledge founded upon the Myth of Stability – is attained through the ascetic movement of meditation, we could argue that, instead of a substitution of a modern for an ancient status of theory, we should think of a rootedness of the former in the latter. In other words, we should endeavor to think of how the scientific attitude is ultimately grounded in a practice of the care of the self. The mathematical-methodological subjectification is not the final foundation, but it is sustained by an existential subjectification, a cultivation of virtuosity through spiritual exercises, which complements the aforementioned professional socialization.

In reference to the educational domain (and to teacher education), this does not cast into doubt the role that education sciences and research can have for teaching and teacher education but it re-comprehends them within a different horizon, which re-establishes the balance of reason, recovers a different status of theory and recognizes the rights of practical wisdom. It is to this circuit between professional subjectification so understood, *phronesis* and spiritual exercise that we have to turn as the final step of our argumentation.

### **Spiritual exercises and the cultivation of a phronimos attitude in teacher education**

In this section we will take a closer look at the connection between *spiritual exercises* and the cultivation of *phronesis*, or more precisely a *phronimos attitude*. We will argue that these two threads of thinking can open up a deeper understanding of the role of wisdom and knowledge in the life and practice of a new generation of teacher students. Spiritual exercises, in accordance with Hadot’s understanding and elaboration of this concept, are a set of philosophical practices, like meditation, dialogue etc., by virtue of which the subject transforms her perspectives and attitudes towards herself and the world. They should not be understood as an activity that generates inactivity or isolated individuals (a mistake that could be induced by the adjective “spiritual”). Indeed, quite the reverse holds, since especially in times marked by a self-centered individualism seeking to develop the self by releasing or realizing one’s own potentiality in

fundamentally egotistic terms, they can be deployed in order to counter this narcissistic drift (see Oliverio, 2014). In the ancient view, the awareness of oneself predicates upon the awareness of being a part of a larger whole and the single individual must cultivate the consciousness of her connection to the human community. In the engaging formula of Jan Patočka (2002, p. 121), one of the revivers of this ancient tradition, “[b]ecause care of the soul is possible, the state is possible, and the community is possible.” In this perspective, *askesis* as a practice of care enables a self-transformative process, which is made possible by a more attentive interaction with the surroundings. Accordingly, spiritual exercises are to be understood as a dialogical project directed both inwards and outwards, aiming at the realization of those moral qualities necessary for a reasonable, wise engagement with existential (and professional) situations, especially when conflicting wills and values are encountered.

As hinted at in the previous section, the tradition of spiritual exercises represents an alternative perspective in comparison with the modern invention of disciplines, insofar as in the former both living and knowing concern the subject in the subject’s own being (Catlaw, Rawlings & Callen, 2014, p. 201). From an educational viewpoint this means that the question is not primarily one of more knowledge, but that of helping the individual to enhance her awareness of how she responds and acts when gaining new knowledge and encountering the complexity of real life. What interrupts our earlier experience and knowledge gives us the opportunity to re-evaluate and re-negotiate our relationship both with ourselves and the world around us. Spiritual exercises allow us to re-examine, but also to relativize, what is given, helping us to see that neither emotions/impulses nor traditions necessarily have the upper hand. Encountering interrupting situations, without recoiling from them or recklessly addressing them, represents a potentiality for self-transformation, not in the sense that our emotions must be tamed or suppressed, but rather that they might be directed in a way that supports and sustains ourselves as well as the community in which we live. The same holds for the traditions of which we are a part; they are not to be abandoned or eliminated, but rather re-interpreted in accordance with our governing values and goals.

We would suggest that the kind of work on oneself that spiritual exercises imply cannot be construed in terms of learning but is better understood with reference to the horizon of teaching. As Biesta insightfully argued, the latter entails an encounter with a resistance.

From the perspective of the student teaching thus brings something that is strange, something that is not a projection of the student's own mind, but something that is radically and fundamentally other. The encounter with something that is other and strange — that is not of one's own making — is an encounter with something that offers resistance (and we could even say that it is an encounter with the very experience of resistance). Such an encounter, so I wish to suggest, is of crucial educational significance if it is granted that education is not a process of development of what is already 'inside' nor a process of adaptation to what comes from the 'outside,' but is an ongoing dialogue between 'self' and 'other' (in the widest sense of the word 'other') in which both are formed and transformed — a process through which we come 'into the world' [...] and the world comes into us. I use 'dialogue' here not in the sense of a verbal exchange, but to denote a process in which there are interacting parties and where what is 'at stake' is for all parties to 'appear' [...] (Biesta, 2012, pp. 42-43).

Spiritual exercises help us to be aware of this resistance, of what is strange and unknown and of what we cannot control or easily align with earlier knowledge or insight. It is no surprise, therefore, that meditation has been a part of the repertoire belonging to the field of spiritual exercises (and it represents even the pivot of Descartes's undertaking, despite the fact that he inflects it towards outcomes ultimately irreconcilable with the ancient view). Meditation, from the Greek *melete* via the Latin *meditation*, describes a kind of 'activity' similar to that of an actor memorizing lines or a soldier undergoing military exercises and, as a demanding practice, helps us to broaden the scope of our attention and cognition. Meditation can be regarded as a form of tarrying or hesitating (Brunstad & Oliverio, 2019) that opens up a room for reflection that can unveil the depth of being when "swimming against the natural current and against all general tendencies of our mind" (Patočka, 2002, p. 125).

In what way does the notion of *phronesis* or being a *phronimos* person relate to these reflections and how is it possible to cultivate a 'phronetic' attitude or way of being within teacher education? To answer these questions, it is important to highlight some central aspects concerning the philosophical understanding of *phronesis* and the nature of the *phronimos* person. According to Aristotle, the *phronimos* is a person who knows and exercises appropriate knowledge and also deliberates well both technically and thematically (Eikeland, 2008, p. 101). A *phronimos*, a prudent person, can anticipate the consequences of actions before



they are performed. *Phronesis* is non-instrumental in its character. The *phronimos* knows the rules and is trained in the craft but she is at the same time open to the unexpected. Deliberation demands participation in and proximity to the situation at hand as well as theoretical and practical knowledge. The *phronimos* is the bridge between abstract and universal knowledge and the actual situation. This position requires some of the same qualities fostered through spiritual exercises. Curiosity, awareness, willingness to listen and to be addressed by the situation etc. are all requirements in the life of a *phronimos*. To be clever at reproducing abstract and theoretical knowledge can be important but is never sufficient to be *phronimos*. Judging and deliberation are asked for and needed within a context of uncertainty and complexity, whereas we do not need to deliberate about things that cannot be otherwise – such as eternal or unchanging things or things that change according to natural or regular laws, processes or procedures.

Professional skills can be learned through study, training and repetition, but the art of knowing which skills are most useful – and when and how best to use them – can only be gained through an active, sensitive interaction with our environment. The art of practical wisdom as it builds on Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* consists in fusing situational awareness with an awareness of more theoretical and universal knowledge, and in using improvisation to find good solutions, even when the framing conditions are far from being optimal.

A person displaying practical wisdom is called a *phronimos* and this term characterizes a person who displays 'foresight' in the sense of having good insight, a broad perspective and good discretionary judgement. A *phronimos* can think ahead and foresee the consequences of prospective actions but this should not be construed in the sense of the ideal of predictability typical of the Myth of Stability but rather in that of "prudence," a word whose Latin etymology falls within the scope of fore-sight, a seeing-in-advance which does not aspire to any certainty but provides a space of maneuver for the addressing of the unanticipated, which is not subordinated to a pre-established procedure but encountered as a resistance that invokes a fine-tuning or revision of one's operations. Practical wisdom helps the *phronimos* to understand better the situation at hand and its possible developments. In addition to knowing the rules and having the necessary skills, the *phronimos* is also prepared for unexpected eventualities, and spiritual exercises can cultivate in the practitioner the ability to stay in a situation of suspension and hesitation. In a complex world, the inter-workings of human multiplicity are not a hindrance but a necessary

precondition for being able to solve life's many problems. In this confusing, complex interaction, the *phronimos* sees the value of other people and other forms of knowledge and the non-narcissistic care of the self can help one to be open to these 'alien' contributions.

Practical wisdom is the sum of everything we learn and know how to do in the course of our professional career, brought to bear in new and unexpected situations. Practical wisdom acts as a mediator between an ideal imperative, universal knowledge and concrete actions. Its rightful place is in the gap between generality and particularity. A *phronimos* turns good theory into practical action. Having good theories and principles does not help if we are incapable of translating them into practical social life. Prudent action makes the other virtues visible. With an anchor point in the past, prudence makes relevant evaluations in the present, and these evaluations lay the foundation for making the right decisions for the future.

The future is not entirely in our hands (*pace* the Toulminian pure thinkers and the advocates of predictability in professional practice), and we are only fooling ourselves if we think it is. Systems, arrangements and solutions that human reason concocts are always finite. Regardless of how far human thinking progresses, or how good control routines become, there will always be some insight lacking, something thwarting our plans, something against which we cannot protect ourselves. We cannot understand how we ended up in a particular situation or how to get out of it. We must do something, but what? We are in a grey area, a threshold where our technical expertise and theories prove to be insufficient. Practical wisdom has inherent uncertainty as part of its precondition. It kicks into action whenever the systematized world's technical insights, rules and procedures come up short, and whenever prior experience is of little use. In each and every encounter or interaction with the environment, a new reality is created that cannot be completely predicted.

This is why the notion of reflective practice must be complemented with the idea of virtuosity, of a professional subjectification via spiritual exercises. Indeed, while the former comes to terms with the recognition that we as teachers (and, more generally, as practitioners) operate in indeterminate situations, it risks missing the need to cultivate some 'moral' characteristics. In this view, we do not confine ourselves to merely gainsaying the Cartesian gesture (as Toulmin does) but we inhabit it in a different way: while Descartes had marshaled the spiritual exercise of meditation to evade uncertainty and achieve the firm ground

of a method guaranteeing absolutely sound knowledge – thus realizing the path that we have called mathematical-methodological subjectification – we suggest replacing his alliance of meditation and the Myth of Stability with that of meditation (and, more generally, spiritual exercises) and reflective practice in order to promote the ability to swim against the current and to remain in a state of dialogue with oneself and the world even when one's most cherished perspectives must be in abeyance.

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