

Helge Kminek: Philosophie und Philosophieren im Unterricht. Empirische Erschließung einer widersprüchlichen Praxis, Opladen/Berlin/Toronto: Budrich 2018

Reviewed by Jürgen Braun, Universität Marburg, braunju@staff.uni-marburg.de

How is philosophy taught in school at the beginning of the 21st century? This question should attract the attention of two different disciplines: educational science and didactics of philosophy. In his latest work, Helge Kminek provides a study in which both theoretical perspectives are connected to give a profound answer to that topical question.

The results of Kminek's recent studies could furthermore help teachers in a constructive way to understand how philosophy can be taught in class (how to become familiar with philosophical contents as well as how to practice philosophizing), especially when they teach in the context of high school education. Although the majority of qualitative research on classroom teaching in Germany focuses on lessons in elementary and middle school, this study's nine cases throw light on the secondary school system (*gymnasiale Oberstufe*) with pupils at the age of sixteen to nineteen. This approach targets the still existing desideratum of qualitative empirical studies in the field of didactics of philosophy.

The reviewed book is a truncated version under the same title of the dissertation with which Kminek graduated from the University of Frankfurt/Main with a PhD in educational science. It formally contains seven chapters over almost three hundred pages in which nine case studies constitute the crucial core of the text (41–239).

In addition to expected chapters on empirical method in social science in general (state of research, positioning in a scientific field, question and subquestions, method and methodology, conclusion, outlook for possible further research), Kminek surprises his readership with wide and well-informed philosophical reflections that are loosely connected to the empirical reconstruction of social praxis. Even though his philosophical reflections are distributed over the whole work, one specific chapter can be read as a philosophical research on the question of what philosophy is (23–40). Kminek gives a broad overview of a variety of positions on the history of philosophy – e.g. the standpoints of nominalism and universalism – without giving a final assessment to the controversial issue. The purpose of this chapter mainly refers to two different arguments: On the one hand, the philosophical discussion about the status of the discipline of philosophy sharpens the peculiarity of the school subject. Kminek identifies a certain question in philosophy that differentiates it from all other subjects: the question about what the discipline of philosophy is. Kminek argues that the theoretical discussions about what it really is are never-ending and should ideally be based on a relentless strive for truth.

On the other hand, the chapter reveals the normative presumptions of the study. Kminek mentions explicitly "three dimensions of normativity in philosophy lessons" (39) to identify specific claims. First, he defines as a claim of the school subject that it must represent the controversial discussion in the scientific discipline about what philosophy is or should be. In

addition to that general claim regarding the self-image of philosophy, all philosophical topics raise claims based on the logic and the structure of their content. The third dimension can be found in the communication of the recorded lesson and more precise: in the teachers' speech acts which have the potential to form claims through their pragmatic and semantic structure.

The fundamentally important methodological point for the interpretation of social reality is based on exactly these claims which are now compared by Kminek to what is found in the data. The difference between what should be and what is found forms the main theoretical orientation for the interpretation. This approach outlines the subtitle of the book: "Empirical Study of a Contradictory Practice".

Every case study of Kminek begins with a philosophical analysis of the lesson's topic. The results of that study are independent from the didactical analysis done by the teacher before class. Their purpose is solely to identify the claims raised by the topic although it also has the side effect for the readership of the case studies to be informed and perhaps enlightened about the topic in question.

Interestingly enough, the claims of the teachers' speech acts are identified with the same method with which the social reality in the classroom is reconstructed, namely by what has been introduced by Ulrich Oevermann as "Objective Hermeneutics" (*Objektive Hermeneutik*) in the late 1970s. Kminek is aware of the tenacious discussions about the methodological problems of implicit and explicit normativity when he comprehensibly argues for a pedagogical adaption of the sociological method and openly discusses the terminology and the categories which he decided to use (11–14).

This critical perspective on social reality in classrooms was mainly developed by Andreas Gruschka. Kminek's results can be seen to confirm the findings of Gruschka, whose primary focus was on middle school. According to the study, it is very unlikely for communication in school lessons to be primarily about the topic of the lesson (256). However, every case in Kminek's study and almost every case in Gruschka's research in the past show that the dominance of communication in philosophy lessons is didactics or pedagogical education referring to the moral development of the children – even though Kminek analyzed high school lessons and the subject of philosophy which is generally said to be an important part of higher education. The sequential interpretations can show how motivated and curious speech acts of pupils provide an opportunity for learning through a deep discussion of the topic, and how the situations are missed by the teachers (90).

In this regard it's necessary to state that Kminek doesn't utilize his results for bashing or scolding the teachers. Quite the contrary: he uses the potential of the method to find possible alternatives for teachers' speech acts in certain situations.

Nevertheless, the interpretations of the nine cases (quite a large sampling compared to other studies that apply the same method) very clearly highlight one of the structural characteristics of the subject of philosophy for which every teacher must find a balanced handling: the difference between learning classical philosophical knowledge and philosophizing by oneself.

Kminek doesn't discuss his descriptions of the school subject in the light of other theoretical perspectives in school research, although other perspectives are mentioned (11). These other paradigms in the field of classroom research could aid a better understanding a) of the special normativity of sociological methods used for pedagogical subjects, b) of the peculiarity of the subject of philosophy compared to other subjects and c) why the results of Kminek's observations tend to show a deficient practice. In paradigms where the social theory is unrelated to Critical Theory, it can clearly be shown that Kminek's (and Gruschka's) identification of claims is eclectic, albeit well-founded. It remains doubtful that the claims of the school subject, the philosophical topics and the teachers' speech acts are the only and most relevant for an interpretation of the social process in class – what about the claims of the school's pedagogical agenda, of the education policy or even of the pupils?

After all, it's certain that Helge Kminek's study invites all teachers in philosophy, the field of educational science, and in particular the didactics of philosophy to a further discussion about what philosophy is and how it is taught in school at the beginning of the third millennium.

How to cite this article

Braun, Jürgen (2018), "Review of: Kminek, Helge: Philosophie und Philosophieren im Unterricht. Empirische Erschließung einer widersprüchlichen Praxis", *Journal of Didactics of Philosophy* 2, Nr. 2, 69-71. URL: DOI: 10.46586/JDPh.2018.9551.