FROM PRE-CONCEPTS TO REASONS. EMPIRICALLY-BASED RECONSTRUCTION OF A PHILOSOPHICAL LEARNING SCENARIO

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Abstract

In this article, I present findings from a workshop with high school students focusing on a problem-oriented learning scenario about the leading questions in the just-war-debate. The underlying scientific and methodological framework refers to contemporary questions in the field of didactics of philosophy, mainly considering the relevance of pre-concepts in philosophical learning processes. In referring to the empirical example of the workshop, this paper will show how a learning progress in philosophical reasoning is possible. The learning steps of the students are explained among others by reference to performative linguistic theories. The article concludes with a normative discussion of the learning results considering two issues. First, it considers the relationship between reasoning and understanding in philosophical education in general. Second, it shows that especially in teaching philosophy it is necessary to be aware of and distinguish the different ethical and educational dimensions of teaching practices. I will argue that understanding in a wider sense only takes place under the condition that students are able to refer to the genetic development and context-dependence of a set of arguments. This step of learning, then again, helps to keep in mind the different dimensions and aims of teaching practice.[1]

1. Conceptual framework and methodological background

In scientific talks about philosophical education, it is a widespread consensus that the so-called pre-concepts of the students play a crucial role in different kinds of learning scenarios (Bohlmann 2016: 59, Zimmermann 2016: 65-67). Therefore, one of the important tasks in teaching philosophy is to make pre-concepts explicit. For example, in a problem-oriented teaching practice, the pre-concepts of the students concerning the focused philosophical topic can, among other things, be founded in practical und theoretical forms of lifeworld-knowledge, in pre-judices, in ethical

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intuitions, in ideologies or in emotions. These sources are the basis for all further steps of a philosophical learning process, regardless of whether it aims at the acquisition of formal competences like reasoning or substantial input like knowledge about a philosophical position in its history. Anne Burkard and Laura Martena correspondingly defined pre-concepts of students as "attitudes, states of mind and judgements which a) school students contribute to the lesson at a certain point at time, b) which are not yet influenced by the concrete philosophical contents to be dealt with in the following lesson, and c) but which, conversely, can be relevant to the discussion of these contents" (Burkard/Martena 2018: 83; translation C.T.).

This definition follows from some general ideas about what pre-concepts are and which role they can play in learning processes. But beyond that, I want to mention some differentiating aspects about the genesis and structure of pre-concepts. First, I want to argue for a more holistic approach and picture of these primary propositions, attitudes, intuitions and judgements. They are embedded in a complex background of knowledge, beliefs and opinions, that are themselves part of a specific cultural and historical context (Zimmermann 2016: 66-67). Secondly, the sources of pre-concepts like intuitions or prejudices must be distinguished from that what we artificially call *pre-concepts* from the scientific perspective in didactical and philosophical reflections. Pre-concepts are propositions with a determined semantic content that are the result of a first philosophical learning step. Thirdly, I would not draw the line between pre-concepts and scientific concepts for philosophical education as sharp as the sciences of nature do (Bohlmann 2016: 54-56). On the one hand, knowledge and beliefs in lifeworld could surely be influenced by common scientific or philosophical ideas. On the other hand, science itself and its protagonists are part of a society with specific interests and personal points of view that reach beyond the inner circle of the research processes. In regards to students of philosophy, it seems obvious that their capacity of knowledge does not only have a propositional structure, but also a personal and cultural component that serves as a relevant basis for further steps of reasoning and reflecting (Hofer 2012: 176). So, the main concern regards the possibility to describe the philosophical learning process without a strong reference to the idea of conceptual change. The difference between pre-concepts and judgements that are based on philosophical argumentation (Thein 2017: 33-74) instead lies – so my main argument in this paper – in the ability to get the inferences and incompatibilities between complex argumentations into both an internal and an external view. This is what I call *understanding* (*verstehen*), a sophisticated and emphatic act that includes a reflection on the own (speaker) position within the so-called "game of giving and asking for reasons" (Brandom 1994: 167-198).

Below, I want to show how this could work in practice by trying an empirical reconstruction of a typical learning scenario. On the World-Day of Philosophy in November 2014, I got the possibility to philosophize with 20 higher-degree-students between the age of 16 and 18 about questions of *human rights*. To specify the topic, we focused on the justified-war debates by openly discussing authentic examples of the so-called *humanitarian military interventions*[2] and reached an agreement on working on the key question "War for the protection of human rights?"

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[2] The examples referred to prototypical situations in failed states with deep inner conflicts where the government itself is not able to secure the basic rights of its citizens. In these cases the situation was further deteriorated through the impossibility to achieve human aims in a diplomatic way. So, from an external political position, only a military intervention could lead to a change of the situation.

(Schmücker 2004).[3] In the process of the philosophical learning process that lasted over three full hours, I moderated the discussions and readings. At the same time, I transcribed selected oral and written contributions of the students by observing their participation. In this first step, the criterium for the selection of a specific utterance was its philosophical determination. In the second step, the evaluation of the arguments focused on the level of progress regarding the argumentation in the context of the chosen discussion topics. Consequently, the empirically-based reconstruction of a case study I present in the following chapter is enclosed by a normative stance from two sides. Firstly, from the philosophical point of view I reconstruct the transformation of the pre-concepts of the students into reasons with regard to the pragmatic speech act-theories of Robert B. Brandom and Jürgen Habermas. Both theories offer a theoretical background for this reconstruction since they refer to the usage of propositions within holistic and progressive forms of communication that are typical for the learning step in view. Within the whole setting this learning step is the second one after the articulation of pre-concepts in the propositional form of assertions. From this result the study presented here starts.

Secondly, from the perspective of teaching practice the didactical scenario was adapted to common ideas about problem-based learning scenarios with judgement formation as the main purpose. In this paper, my aim is not to look for practical alternatives to teach the topic in question to students. The empirically-based reconstruction follows a research interest in getting into view how a progression in reasoning could work and which learning steps have to be taken, by the example of the case-study presented here (Thein 2016: 159-162). Questions of better forms of initiating such learning settings have to be discussed subsequently. The only normative presupposition with regard to a successful teaching practice I make is that the reference and confrontation of the pre-concepts of the students with controversial philosophical theories has to be seen as the core element for the progression in argumentation and judgement (Thein 2017: 55). On the basis of the clear distinction between change, transformation or complement of pre-concepts through the critical reception of philosophical theories (Zimmermann 2016: 67) I, in practice, focused the argumentation process immanently on the last ones. However, within the learning process focusing the just-war-debates, the students made a radical philosophical turn from pacifistic positions to a justification of military interventions in conflicts. The main reason for this challenge was the stronger argumentation-line for military interventions. This is what seems to be important referring to the philosophical point of view as well as astonishing with regard to the ethical and educational dimensions of the teaching practice. Therefore, in the last section, after my reconstruction of the transformation of pre-concepts into reasons in the second chapter, I will argue for the need of a further meta-cognitive reflection that is a significant third learning step with the view of achieving a saturated philosophical education.

2. From pre-concepts to reasons – reconstruction of the learning scenario

In the following section, I will introduce an example in order to show how conceptional learning can be fostered through philosophical-reflective work on pre-concepts that were previously uttered

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[3] Although the question in itself has a dreadful character, it directly confronts the students with the dilemma explained in the footnote above. A philosophical and didactical discussion of the question itself follows in chapter 3.

by the students. In doing so, I will first refer back to four selected and typecasted statements[4] which were collected during an initial collection of thoughts in the context of the addressed workshop on the leading question "War for the protection of human rights?". For the scientific need, I here and in the following articulate the statements in free translation:

– "Force always triggers counterforce; therefore, I am against war if it means that innocent people die." (a)
– "I think states should not interfere in other states' affairs." (b)
– "People in need should be supported by all means available." (c)
– "I categorically do not approve force – the use of force is always bad." (d)

With my assistance, in a second step the students ascribed these pre-concepts to certain philosophical, ethical and political dimensions of questioning in order to deduce criteria and principles:

a) is oriented towards the question of fundamental human rights (of innocent people)
b) is oriented towards juridical and political rights of states
c) refers to the relevance of the humanitarian principle
d) refers to the prohibition of force

In this phase students generally showed a tendency to negate the leading question (Contra: a, b, d). There were only few arguments (Pro: c) approving of the use of military means in order to protect human rights in states that materially violate these.

In a following step there was a phase of working in groups on different philosophical and political texts in shared work to get a profound examination on the topic. The greater purpose was the creation of a structured *judgement map* through the successive validation of the previously articulated pre-concepts in course of the workshop. While working on the pre-concepts, the statements were re-formulated in such a manner that they could claim validity as generalizable reasons for a positioning towards the leading question:

a) Military means are not to be used if their application entails the violation of the human rights of civilians.
b) According to established law (UN-Charta), states are not to interfere in another state's sovereignty.
c) It is an obligation to help people in need; even with the aid of military means.
d) Force should never be used as a means for another purpose.

Considering the structuring principles, moreover appropriate arguments against (a) - (d) could be

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[4] As mentioned above, two criteria were essential for the selection of the following statements: 1.) philosophical determination and significance of the propositions with regard to the key question; 2.) a reasonable development of the argument from a pre-concept to a reason. The first criterium was the one primarily within the teaching practice. The second criterium was the leading one for the empirically-based reconstruction of the learning steps.

developed and analyzed argumentatively. The following table shows the result of the workshop:

War for the protection of human rights?

Yes, because …	Principle	No, because …
If necessary – in accordance with thorough assessment (e.g. avoidance of greater evil) – human rights should be protected through force. (e)	Principle of human rights	Military means should not be used if their appliance entails the violation of the human rights of civilians. **(a)**
A state's right for sovereignty ends if it cannot further warrant the protection of human rights in its country. (f)	Principle of state sovereignty	According to established law (UN-Charta), states are not to interfere in another state's sovereignty. **(b)**
It is an obligation to help people in need; even with the aid of military means. **(c)**	Humanitarian Principle	The humanitarian principle only applies for (immediate) vicinity. (g)
The fundamental prohibition of force leads towards a false tolerance towards its perpetrators. (h)	Prohibition of force	Force should never be used as a means to another purpose. **(d)**

Tab 1. Judgment-Map of Reasons

The learning progress can be reconstructed philosophically by following some aspects of the pragmatic speech-act-theories of Robert B. Brandom and Jürgen Habermas. While Brandom analyses the processes of the explication of reasons in intersubjective communication, Habermas discusses how, from the perspective of the communicative speakers, a reference to social and empirical questions is possible (Giovagnioli 2001). I am using these philosophical approaches to explain some of the learning steps by pointing out four crucial aspects of the reasoning presented above. We could speak of a "transformation of pre-concepts into reasons" (Thein 2017: 55-58), which is guided by the following steps in argumentation practice:

- Generalization of individual beliefs (a, b, d)
- Retrospective explication of implied premises (a) and conclusions (d)
- Explication of attitudes (wishes, preferences, evaluative attitudes) by introduction of normative vocabulary (should, ought to, law etc.) (a, b, c, d)
- Introduction of a distinction between institutional (b) and moral ought (a, c, d)

The generalization of individual beliefs shows the students' ability to take up a critical-reflective attitude towards pre-concepts. In this context, according to Habermas, the strive for statements with a universal and intersubjectively verifiable claim of truth is crucial (Habermas 1981: 148). The ability to switch between a subjective articulation of pre-opinions and pre-knowledge and a problematizing communication on the subject matter in these terms is as relevant as the examination of the intersubjectively agreed-on result with regard to the factual status of social and objective reality (Habermas 1981: 149-151). Following this theoretical consideration, one can argue for the necessity of an academic orientation even for lifeworld-oriented teaching. In practice, this can be warranted through the argumentative elaboration and differentiation of students' pre-concepts concerning philosophical topics, theories and facts.

The following philosophical reconstruction of the conceptual-argumentative phases of learning is oriented towards the model of explication of interferential structures between term and sentence in intersubjective contexts of practical reasoning (Brandom 1994: 245). The retrospective explication of implied premises and conclusions, according to Brandom, takes place in reciprocal quests for reasons for the given claims (Brandom 1994: 141-175). Starting point of the example at hand was the student statement (a): "Force always triggers counterforce and leads to new suffering; therefore, I am against war if it means that innocent people die." Through the reading of Rüdiger Bittner's statement on the subject matter (Bittner 2004) the premise underlying this statement was revealed: "Military means should not be used if their appliance entails the violation of the human rights of civilians." From this consideration, Bittner finally deduces a fundamental prohibition of force regarding international conflicts and thus including the rejection of humanitarian interventions. This, abstracted from a level of pragmatic issues, was explicated as a conclusion of statement (d) by the students because from the general prohibition of force the following sentence, implying a moral obligation, could be deduced: "Force should never be used as a means to another purpose." The explication of implied premises and conclusions, which become visible in the process of transformation of argument (a) and (d), then again is based on logical vocabulary such as the conditional (Brandom 1994: 102-104).

For all four conceptual steps of learning it can be stated that a successive explication of life-world-related attitudes – such as individual wishes, preferences as well as general judgements – takes place, which is accomplished by the introduction of normative vocabulary (Brandom 1994: 247-249). In the students' first statements, these attitudes usually remain implicit, though they need explication in order to transform the formulated attitudes into a valid reason. Especially behind individualized or anonymized statements such as "I think…" (b) or "One should…" (c) often lie more general or generalizable beliefs with normative implications. Thus, especially the moral ought, which is introduced in the arguments (a) and (c) by the use of terms of ought (a) as well as terms of obligations (c), according to Brandom not only qualifies for a moral statement, but moreover in a Kantian sense determines the agent with regard to the statement made (Brandom 1994: 252). However, moral ought can be distinguished from institutional ought, as is it for example stated by laws (b). In the learning scenario, with recourse to a key text from Juliane Kokott (Kokott 1999) the ambivalence of the legal framework of the UN-Charta has been indicated, which on the one hand argues for the unconditional protection of human rights (e) and on the other hand argues for the sovereignty of states (c). At the end of the workshop students referred to the institutional-

legal mediation of the contradiction through the concept of *responsibility to protect*, the basic idea of which was added to the *judgement map* (f).

This example shows the possibility to close existing political and factual gaps of knowledge and thereby customize these for philosophical reflection. Especially the argument of the "humanitarian principle" with its different levels (g, c and f) had been elaborated with reference to extracts from Juliane Kokott (Kokott 1999) as well as Wilfried Hinsch and Dieter Janssen (Hinsch/Janssen 2006). This indicates very well how a global question with politically and philosophically controversial substance could be related – in the sense of background and horizon – to the initial lifeworld situation of "vicinity." In this context, with reference to examples close to everyday life in the workshop it was considered and discussed, in which situational, local and territorial contexts the legally established humanitarian obligation could claim legitimacy for which agents, so that finally (g) was developed as a counterargument to (c).

3. Philosophical, ethical and educational dimensions of the learning scenario

At the end of the workshop the students were asked for their opinion again. During the process, it became obvious that most of the about 20 participants had receded from the pacifistic position. Overall, the revealed argumentative connection of the protection of human rights and the humanitarian obligation had motivated the students to answer the focused question *War for the protection of human rights?* with 'yes' by absolute majority. This leads to questions about further knowledge and reflection of the results of argumentation from the philosophical point of view, but also with regard to the ethical and educational dimensions of the learning scenario.

For further opinion-forming work on the topic of human rights, considering the value-based school education, to me it seems crucial to approach the reflection of the question from an even more abstract level, but within the well-known immanent philosophical object-level:

- Working out the criteria of "ius ad bellum" and "ius in bello"
- Undertaking an autonomous examination, reflection and critique of key terms in the leading question ("war", "protection" and "human rights")
- Critically questioning the leading question itself and thus problematizing the question itself

Although this teaching scenario would have gone beyond the limited scope of the workshop, its consideration may help to open up a comprehensive and holistic view of understanding in regards to the philosophical leading question. "Understanding always is about recognizing relations, structures, connections and patterns […], as well as about the recognition of coherences" (Scholz 2016: 23; translation C.T.). The development of complex and inferential argumentative structures, as they are visualized in the elaborated *judgement map*, only constitutes one initial step into this direction. In a second step that starts with the three questions mentioned above, the students learn to take the genesis and the context-dependence of their reasoning and the setting of arguments into account. This means that not only the acquisition of knowledge on political, historical and juridical contexts regarding the leading question is crucial for the learning progress, but also a reflection about the speaker-positions within and towards the discourse. These new critical questions can help to approach habitual patterns of argumentation from new perspectives. Thus, the crucial

philosophical learning progress should be that the result of the *judgement map* can only ever be a preliminary one. It follows that the connections and inter-weavings have to be further examined for the argumentations and attempts of judgements of the students to be framed by profound performances of understanding. From this point of view new questions arise:

- Who is the subject of reasoning in just-war-debates? And who is not?
- How would affected persons feel about this kind of discourse? How would they position themselves within that game of giving and asking for reasons?
- How could political and economic constraints be integrated into the normative reasoning and judging?
- What are the limits of normative reasoning, especially with respect to these global political and economic constraints?
- Which kind of epistemic injustices would cause distorted interpretations of the topic in question and its facts?
- How relevant is the reference to empirical facts for an argumentation with soil adhesion?

Therefore, my final thesis is that "understanding of arguments" does not only go along with the ability to answer questions on the exchange of arguments in regards to their relation to a thesis in forms of horizontal or vertical differentiating, as Gregor Betz claims (Betz 2016: 190-193). A retrospective form of getting a completed argumentation into view from a hermeneutic stance has to start with posing new critical questions about the whole setting of the operated argumentation as well. Here, the explication of the difference between internal and external reflections would be useful to give students a deeper understanding of the learning steps they perform. This kind of progression within the learning process requires a change from immanent critique on specific arguments to forms of external critique and meta-cognitions. Also, an approach to nourish the ability of empathy could be crucial (Wesche 2009: 203-213). This seems to be the only way to generate synergy between the ethical and educational objectives of teaching *and* the crucial philosophical ones.

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