The BERA/ RSA Enquiry into Research and Teacher Education: a missed philosophical opportunity

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The BERA/ RSA Enquiry into Research and Teacher Education was informed by seven review papers which drew on different international and disciplinary perspectives. This paper begins with a critique of Review paper 3, 'Philosophical reflections on the contribution of research to teachers' professional knowledge', written by Winch, Oancea and Orchard (2013). The main criticism is a lack of ontological depth. The writers satisfy themselves with a taxonomy of three 'aspects' of teachers' professional knowledge, informed by Aristotle - situated understanding (phronesis), technical knowledge, and critical reflection. This taxonomy makes a significant contribution to the overall report, in which it is asserted, without particular development, that the domains interrelate.

However, what the review does not do, somewhat surprisingly, is recognise the specific contributions that philosophical research, as a type of enquiry, can offer to the understanding of teaching practice. One of these contributions is to attempt an ontological account of how these three domains interact. The significant difficulty entailed here is illustrated in Winch et al's discussion of phronesis, in which it is acknowledged that some well-known writers on the subject (e.g. Hogan, Carr D, Carr W) are 'sceptical, even hostile, towards the relevance of findings from empirical educational inquiry' (p. 3). The review report does not pursue this or engage with the fact that the specifically phenomenological tradition that has informed these divergent accounts of phronesis gives rise to a disturbing critique of empirical modes of enquiry. Furthermore, despite a brief acknowledgment that teachers are 'making moral choices' (p. 3), the report does not elaborate on the philosophical contribution that can be made to the ethical dimension of teachers' practice.

There is a difficulty in reconciling phenomenological accounts of teaching and learning with analytical approaches to the value of empirical research: philosophers in each domain have often seen themselves largely as 'doing different things'. In the second half of the paper I attempt to address this missed opportunity by offering an account of the relationship between the three aspects of professional knowledge. I draw on the two traditions of philosophical phenomenology and critical realism to offer a unified description of the intentionality of teaching practice, situating both the potential and the limitations of what might be called empirical enquiry within a more fundamental ontology of education as an irreducibly human and inexhaustibly ethical moment.