

FERDINAND J POTGIETER

CONSIDERING A PEDAGOGY OF DISCERNMENT AS *PRIMUS INTER PARES*: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMPARATIVE EDUCATIONISTS

Abstract

Making use of hermeneutic phenomenology and morality critique as methodological navigation points, this paper challenges the phantasmatic prestige and power of normative orders and the education systems that are designed to keep them alive. It is suggested that what education needs is not morals and ethics, but a pedagogy of discernment that will teach pupils to keep their eyes open and to recognise the tragic truth that normative systems maintain themselves at the cost of obliterating the onticity of singularisation, mortality and the non-normalisability of the human condition.

The Problem

Life begins and ends between the head and the foot of the bed. For the journey between these two signposts of existence – i.e. between natality and mortality – we depend, amongst others, on education. However, all is not well on the education front. The pursuit of the *agein perenne* – the perpetual and timeless process of leading each successive generation towards a meaningful, flourishing and fulfilling life – seems to be losing its appeal. The current strife in Syria, the recent “Arabic Spring” uprisings, the conflict between the Muslim north and the Christian south of Nigeria and Mali (Potgieter, Van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2014: 1), as well as the countless incidents of “...slaughtering, murders, tortures, incarcerations, land expropriations, internments...” etc. (Schoeman, 2013: 308) all count as examples of education that, although advocating and almost exclusively promoting natality in spirit and principle, demonstrate, instead, the tragic integrative violence (Schoeman, 2013: 309) of the normative systems that it supports.

Efforts to counter this have resulted, over the years, in various “pedagogies”: pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 2007), pedagogy of hope (Van Teeffelen, 2012) and pedagogy of trust (DeMeulenaere, 2012), to name but three. In this paper, I propose that a pedagogy of discernment as the *primus inter pares* (first among equals) of all other pedagogies, may hold the key to understanding the integrative violence of normative systems and thus to understanding why education, while claiming to be protecting and maintaining life, is not only promoting, but effectively causing death, instead. I conclude by asking seven core, fundamental, normative questions that comparative educationists may have to consider in this regard.

Conceptualising education

Most contemporary conceptualisations of education are located somewhere between John White’s seemingly irreconcilable polarities of “education for Smithian

efficiency and education for Deweyian democracy”¹ (Howe, 2014: 77). They nevertheless all advocate natality as life-force, referring to education as being an essential, praiseworthy endeavour in which a relatively more mature person interacts with a less mature person for the purpose of guiding, forming, equipping and enabling the latter for his or her future calling or occupation, including to become a mature and responsible, whole member (with integrity of character) of the various societal relationships that s/he will belong to in future (Basave, 2006: 1; Potgieter, Van Crombrugge, 2006: 12, 13, 23, 41, 59, 62, 64, 86 et seq.; Van der Walt, Valenkamp & Wolhuter, 2012: 20, 21; Potgieter, Van der Walt, Wolhuter & Valenkamp, 2013: 290, 292; Cuypers, 2014: 55, 56). They all envisage a person who will be able

- to lead a meaningful life (Seo, 2014: 90),
- to discern between what is right and wrong, good and bad,
- to act on what has been so discerned, even at personal cost,
- and to take responsibility for such actions and behaviour (Noshulwana, 2011: 16).

Favouring and supporting natality, conceptualisations of education are customarily enmeshed in conflicts of value – the kind of value that is usually attached to the notion of the “human good” (resp. “the common good” / creating and promoting the conditions of and for the “good life”/“the flourishing life”) (cf. White, 1995: 3; Parekh, 2000: 156; Potgieter, 2011: 397; Potgieter, et al, 2013: 295; Seo, 2014: 87-89; Van der Walt, 2014: 38). It is believed that education should contribute to the enhancement of the quality of life of all concerned as well as of broader society (refer Strauss, 2009: 509), while the school should continue to offer dialogic spaces for teachers and their pupils in which to rehearse and develop these qualities (White, 2009: 9; Seo, 2014: 91). If these persuasions were, at the very least, credible or believable, why do we then continue to witness so much evil in this world, as pointed out above?

Normative systems and their phantasmatic claims

Gray (2003: 12) and Van der Walt (2014: 4) allude to the observable failure of education to produce consistently and reliably a new generation of whole, noble citizens with integrity, remarking that human beings seem to be driven by conflicting needs and illusions. They are subject to every kind of infirmity of will and judgement and thus unable to live together peacefully, explaining why they are often engaged in strife, whether on a personal, community or (inter-)national level. In this regard, Peck (2006: 184) observes: “We see dogmatism, and proceeding from dogmatism, we see wars and inquisitions and persecutions. We see hypocrisy: people professing the brotherhood of man killing their fellows in the name of faith, lining their pockets at the expense of others, and practicing all manner of brutality”. Despite unparalleled advances in almost every field of human endeavour, especially technology, our streets still abound with the hungry and homeless, and violence and war still continue to plague us (Olthuis, 2012: 2/7; Van der Walt, 2014: 38).

¹ Although these Whitean polarities can be demonstrated to relate meaningfully to the notions of natality and mortality, it falls outside the scope and purpose of this paper.

The above-mentioned examples have inspired many teachers, parents, pupils and education administrators to distrust the phantasmatic promises and claims (of the “good life”) of the normative systems that they have been educated to support and defend (Van der Walt & Potgieter, 2014: 5). Nowhere was this perhaps better illustrated than in 1976, in South Africa, when the majority of the school-going population at the time were finally conscientised into understanding that they needed to liberate themselves from the phantasmatic power of an oppressive normative system. These uprisings marked the beginning of the end of Apartheid – leading to the first democratic elections in South Africa’s history in 1994.

An increasing number of people worldwide now prefer to construct and accept their own, individual ethical and moral systems, and also to live in accordance with such systems (Koelble & Li Puma, 2011; Standish, 2004). I argue that it is for these reasons that the scholarly contemplation of a pedagogy of discernment, as *primus inter pares*, should lead to rethinking the place and role of moral and ethical systems that are supposed to continue guiding education.

Ethics, morals and the essential fallability of normative systems

The phantasmatic prestige of “grand narratives” (resp. normative systems) is such that their followers subject themselves wilfully to its presumed power. Ethics and morals presuppose, as the conditions of their possibility, that human life is finally normable and that some univocal field of normative power, in principle, covers and secures human life (cf. Pearce and MacLure, 2009; Pelcova, 2008; Vox Nova, 2010; Kourie, 2006). They remain naive about the norms that they seek to posit, because they believe the phantasmatic promise and claim of their particular normative system, namely that it can provide human beings with the wherewithal to master the human condition (Schürmann, 2003: 621, 773; Schoeman, 2013: 305, 306). However, the essential fallibility of all normative systems lies in the fact that although they present themselves as the cure that will get rid of all evil, they actually prolong the societal diseases that they are supposed to cure (Schoeman, 2013: 305). In this regard, Hannah Arendt argues that it is not the absence or loss of values that is creating the preconditions for evil (as moralists keep telling us), but the oversupply – the barrage – of values, instead (Arendt, 2006: 150).

Educational efforts to ground and articulate the norms that teach us what we are supposed to do and who we are supposed to be, may therefore be questioned (Schoeman, 2013: 307). Because of the presumed and wilfully delegated power and prestige of normative systems, their subjects believe these systems to be based on some or other highest principle; they believe the systems to hold exclusive rights to the promise of life that they offer their subjects (Schoeman, 2013: 309). Although there is certainly a case to be made that normative systems (and the morals and ethics that help to propagate them) make our lives liveable, they also effect integrative violence.

There exists an original, undeniable discord between morals and ethics and that to which they apply; between norms and those who are subjected to such norms. It is a discord that is perpetually being denied (Schoeman, 2013: 309) by the self-generating power and prestige of all normative systems (Schoeman, 2013: 309). As a result, morals and ethics never come to grips with the integrative power of normative systems. Even though every single ultimate normative referent that has

ever been promulgated in the history of humankind can testify to this, morals and ethics simply do not see how a normative system necessarily entails a denial within its very structure (ibid.). Indeed, according to Schürmann (2003: 613) each *tranquilitas ordinis*² gives rise – at some stage – to conflict and discontent (ibid.) and it is precisely in this regard that all normative systems execute their integrative violence. By simply denying the singularity of any human subject that seeks to escape a particular normative system's own terms, it forces all its human subjects to fit in – sometimes even by force and coercion, if need be (ibid.). It subdues, suppresses and regulates every conceivable case or contingency (ibid.) and in doing so, it denies the ontic inescapability of mortality. So, while the morals and ethics that are derived from normative systems do their best to promise life, they all eventually cause death (Schürmann, 2003: 28).

Towards a pedagogy of discernment

Instead of education systems worldwide that insist on curtsying to the phantasmatic power of norms and values, I suggest that we consider a pedagogy of discernment as the basis of our efforts to reclaim the original appeal of the *agein perenne*. What we need is a new generation of individuals who are fine with embracing their singularity and the onticity of their mortality. We need people who will be able to expose the hubris of the normative systems that seek to enslave them. Instead of pedagogies that strive to addict people to the power of norms and values, we need a pedagogy of discernment, as *primus inter pares*, that will accompany people towards keeping their eyes wide open so that they may acknowledge everything that natality (and, hence, all normative systems) is not prepared to concede, namely singularisation, mortality and the non-normalisability of the human condition.

Implications for comparative educationists

Against the backdrop painted above, I argue that comparative educationists should consider the implications of a possible pedagogy of discernment as *primus inter pares* and how it might relate to the alluring nature of the *agein perenne*. For this purpose I suggest that they do it against the decor of the core questions that philosophy of education is usually expected to articulate convincingly in a situation such as this – normative questions that pertain to the basic forms or features of a pedagogy of discernment as educational endeavour. With reference to the work of Schürmann (1991: 219), Curren (2013: 232) and Schoeman (2013: 313), I propose that a pedagogy of discernment as *primus inter pares* should, amongst others, refer to the tasks, duties and obligations of all role-players and stakeholders in education. It should reflect on and address not only the teaching activities of the teachers and educators who are involved, but also the learning activities of all those millions of pupils who attend public and private schools everywhere.

To understand properly any aspect of a possible pedagogy of discernment and its incorporation and possible implementation in education systems worldwide, I finally propose adapting the thinking of Curren (2013: 232) so that comparative

² Eng. “the tranquillity of order”; the peace of all things; a well-ordered concord.

educationists may ask at least the following seven core, fundamental and normative questions:

- What are the proper aims of a pedagogy of discernment?
- Why are these aims considered to be the proper aims of a pedagogy of discernment?
- On what ontological, epistemological and anthropological authority do these aims rest?
- What responsibilities do these aims entail?
- How, or in what manner, should the realisation of these aims in terms of the *agein perenne*, as alluded to above, be managed and conducted?
- What should its communicated content (expressed in education policy, legislation and other acts of state) be?
- Why should its communicated content look and read the way it does?

Conclusion

Stakeholders and role-players in education are increasingly distrusting the phantasmatic promises and claims of the normative systems that they have been educated to support and defend. We need comparative educationists to ponder the merits and demerits of a possible pedagogy of discernment as *primus inter pares* with a view to start shaping a new educational system – including its aims, its kinds of pedagogy, its distribution, its organisational structures, its teachers, its assessment systems, etc. – that will eventually produce a generation who will no longer be the addicted followers of normative systems (White, 2013: 302; Cuypers, 2014: 56).

References

- Arendt, H. (2006): *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Schocken.
- Basave, A. (2006): Integral Philosophy of Education: A New “Paideia”. [Online]. Available from: <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Educ/EducBasa.htm>. Accessed: 8 November 2006.
- Curren, R. (2013): A neo-Aristotelian account of education, justice, and the human good. *Theory and Research in Education*, 11(3), 231-249.
- Cuypers, S. E. (2014): Philosophy of education and other educational sciences. *Theory and Research in Education*, 12(1), 54-64.
- DeMeulenaere, E. (2012): Toward a Pedagogy of Trust. In S. Michaels and C. Dudley-Martin (Eds.) *Places where ALL children learn: The power of high expectation curricula with low achieving students*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Freire, P. (2007): *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, London: Continuum.
- Gray, J. (2003): *Straw Dogs. Thoughts on humans and other animals*. London: Granta Books.
- Grayling, A. C. (2010): *Thinking of answers*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Hampshire, S. (2003): Justice and conflict. In Baggini, J. & Stangroom J. (Eds.) *What philosophers think*. London: Continuum Books.
- Heidegger, M. (1962): *Being and Time*. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, trans. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Heidegger, M. (1966): *Discourse on Thinking*. J. M. Anderson and E. H. Freund, trans. New York: Harper & Row.

- Heidegger, M. (1997): *Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*. P. Emad and K. Maly, trans. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Howe, K. R. (2014): Philosophy of education and other educational sciences. *Theory and Research in Education*, 12(1), 77-87.
- Koelble, T. A. & Li Puma, E. (2011): Traditional Leaders and the Culture of Governance in South Africa. *Governance*, 24(1), 5-29.
- Kourie, C. (2006): The "Turn" to Spirituality. *Acta Theologica Supplementum* 8, 19-38.
- Noshulwana, V. (2011): Integrity and what it really means in age of entitlement. *The Herald*: p. 16. 17 February.
- Olthuis, J. H. (2012): A vision of and for love: Towards a Christian post-postmodern worldview. *Koers. Bulletin for Christian Scholarship* 77(1), Art #28, 7 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/koers.v77i.28>
- Parekh, B. (2000): Non-ethnocentric universalism. In Dunne, T. & Wheeler, N. J. *Human rights in global politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 128-159.
- Pearce, C. & MacLure, M. (2009): The wonder of method. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 32(3), 249-265.
- Peck, M. S. (2006): *The road less travelled*. New York: Arrow Books.
- Pelcova, N. (2008): The ontology of education (The modern and postmodern philosophy of education). *Philosophy of Education*, Special Issue (1), 8-20.
- Potgieter, F. J. (2011): Morality as the substructure of social justice: religion in education as a case in point. *South African Journal of Education*, 31, 394-406.
- Potgieter, F. J., Van der Walt, J. L., Valenkamp, M., Wolhuter, C. C. (2012): Towards an Integrated Theory of Some core Concepts in Education. Chapter 3. In De Muynck, A. (Ed.) *Inspiration, Religion and Teacher Training. Report of the lectorate Onderwijs en Identiteit, Volume 2*. Gouda: Driestar Educatief, 18-34.
- Potgieter, F. J., Van der Walt, J. L., Wolhuter, C. C., Valenkamp, M. (2013): Naar een integrale theorie van kernbegrippen in onderwijs en opvoeding / Op weg na 'n integrale teorie van kernbegrippe in onderwys en opvoeding / Towards an integrated theory of core concepts in education. *Journal of Humanities*, 53(3), 286-304.
- Potgieter, F. J., Van der Walt, J. L. & Wolhuter, C. C. (2014): Towards understanding (religious) (in)tolerance in education. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 70(3), Art. # 1977, 8 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.1977>
- Schoeman, M. (2013): Morality critique and tragic wisdom in the work of Reiner Schürmann. *Journal of Humanities*, 53(3), 305-313.
- Schürmann, R. (2003): *Broken Hegemonies*. R. Lily, trans. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Seo, Y-S. (2014): What lies between religious and the secular?: Education beyond the Human. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 48(1), 86-99.
- Standish, P. (2004): Europe, Continental Philosophy and the Philosophy of Education. *Comparative Education*, 40(4), 485-501.
- Strauss, D. F. M. (2009): *Philosophy: Discipline of the disciplines*. Grand Rapids: Paideia Press.
- Van der Walt, J. L. (2011): *Spiritual education for moral integrity*. Port Elizabeth: 16 February 2011. Personal communication.
- Van der Walt, J. L. (2014): *Measuring religious tolerance in education. Towards an instrument for measuring religious tolerance among educators and their students*

- worldwide*. Monograph. Potchefstroom: Edu-HRight Research Unit. Research Focus Area. Faculty of Education Sciences. North-West University.
- Van der Walt, J. L. & Potgieter, F. J. (2014): Postmodern relativism and the challenge to overcome the “value-vacuum”. *Dutch-reformed Theological Journal*. Under peer-review to be published. January.
- Vox Nova (2010): *Postmodern Theology and Jean-Luc Marion: From ‘ego cogito’ to ‘ego amans’* [online]. Available from: <http://vox-nova.com/2009/06/16/postmodern-theology-and-jean-luc-marion-from-ego-cogito-to-ego-amans/> [Accessed 29 September 2010].
- Van Teeffelen, T. (2012): *Challenging the Wall: Towards a Pedagogy of Hope*. Bethlehem: Arab Educational Institute.
- White, J. (1990): *Education and the Good Life*. London: Kogan Page.
- White, J. (1995): *Education and Personal Well-being in a Secular Universe*. London: Institute of Education University of London.
- White, J. (2009): Education and a Meaningful Life. *Oxford Review of Education*, 35(2), 1-13.
- White J. (2013): Philosophy, philosophy of education, and economic realities. *Theory and Research in Education*, 11(3), 294-303.

Prof. Dr. Ferdinand J Potgieter
Edu-HRight Research Unit
School of Education Studies
Potchefstroom Campus
North-West University
South Africa
ferdinand.potgieter@nwu.ac.za
EDU-HRight@nwu.ac.za