NIETZSCHE AND THE PARADOX OF POSTMODERN EDUCATION

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Postmodernism means different things to different people. Linguistically, it must refer to some sort of reaction to unbridled or overzealously modern attitudes or practices. Charles Jencks shows how postmodern architects, for instance, have reacted against the cheap utilitarian designs they view as symptomatic of "Protestant" industrialism.[1] Crucially, architects continue to rely on industrial processes; so Jencks defines postmodernism as a way forward that *more self-consciously applies* modern "discoveries." Postmodern educational thought, likewise, responds to the dilemmas posed by modern education, such as the ways it might impinge upon minority communities in society seeking out and sustaining their particular conceptions of knowledge, truth, and the good. Friedrich Nietzsche is one thinker who can be referred to here who sought in the early modern era to expose proponents of the Enlightenment's ideals of rationality and progress as "sly defenders of their prejudices which they christen[ed] 'truths'."[2] This essay considers the potential merit of a Nietzschean postmodern education in light of his criticality toward modern projects like schooling and the morality of individuals serving each other in society in the name of progress, development, enlightenment, and so on.

Nietzsche and postmodern philosophy more generally are not easy topics for discussion. Regularly misappropriated by both philosophers and politicians, still sparking debates about the right way to "unlock the hidden educator in the philosopher,"[3] Nietzsche's style and methods of argumentation provide a substantial challenge to any reader. Diverse, often incompatible interpretations of his various writings can be surprisingly difficult to distinguish as correct or incorrect, given his dramatic, often sarcastic way of juxtaposing his views with various contemporaries. His creatively critical method has influenced many of those regarded as postmodern thinkers today, such as: Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, and Judith Butler. Perhaps owing in part to the complexity of their writing, Nietzsche and these so-called postmodernists are regularly dismissed by many as unnecessarily difficult or nihilistically critical, bordering on (if not personifying) the position of moral relativism. Yet there are others who read their works more sympathetically, as socially conscientious if not particularly moralistic observations of power in society.[4] Here I will examine Nietzsche's postmodern position to illustrate how many have been hasty to regard him as an opponent of truth and norms or a nihilist, even if his work presents an essential paradox for educationally minded thinkers.

Circling Truth

To be sure, postmodernists generally reject claims to absolute truth—that is, unchangeable and/or universal truth—in social contexts, in light of differences of perspective; Nietzsche himself did it repeatedly in much of his writing. Yet here I want to stress one implication of this perspective which might be taken as implicit of any postmodern position: some truths are better—more useful, valuable, and coherent with perception—than are others, for certain aims or purposes. This of course is different from relativism, the idea that differences in perspective render all interpretations equally valuable or worthy, and while many feel that such an attack on foundations, metaphysics, realism(s), and the like render any purposive theory self-destructively relativistic, there is reason to reconsider and *revalue*, as Nietzsche might put it, postmodern theory in light of its noble aim toward *truthfulness*, if not necessarily toward a single unceasing truth.[5]

Much of what Nietzsche has written on truth is not particularly controversial to most of us today. In communicating and recording thought as a means towards productive or practical social action, we code our perceptions with language. Yet while "everything which distinguishes man from the animals depends on this ability to volatize perceptual metaphors in a schema, and thus to dissolve the image into a concept," our codes also *distort* reality. They make everything appear primarily as it relates to ourselves as we seek out "the pleasant, life-preserving consequences of truth," over "knowledge which has no consequences" or "truths which are possibly harmful and destructive." Nietzsche's concession that "only by forgetting this primitive world of metaphor can one live with any repose, security, and consistency" suggests he judges those forgetful of language's power as *reasonably* pragmatic, as I think many a postpositivist, for instance, would today.[6]

Yet we must not willfully *ignore* language's powers of distortion and our will to be happily deceived, turning a blind eye to what might be around us but not consciously, socially cultivated as such. As Nietzsche wrote,

> He who wants to understand, grasp and assess in a moment that before which he ought to stand long in awe as before an incomprehensible sublimity may be called reasonable, but…there are things he does not see which even a child sees, there are things he does not hear which even a child hears, and these are precisely the most important things….The truth is that he has lost and destroyed his instincts and, having thus lost his trust in the "divine animal," he can no longer let go the reins when his reason falters….the individual grows fainthearted and unsure and dares no longer believe in himself: he sinks into his own subjective depths, which here means into the accumulated lumber of what he has learned but which has no outward effect.[7]

This is *not to say* that language and other aspects of culture, its accompanying "chains of fear and convention," are merely detrimental— and now we delve into Nietzsche's more normative claims— for Nietzsche has conceded that he would be a fool to deny "that many actions called immoral ought to be avoided and resisted, or that many actions called moral ought to be done and encouraged," and elsewhere has rejected the conclusion against morality's bind as a "childish folly."[8] It does require, however, that one discipline oneself in order to critically consider what exactly one *ought* to be bound by. Because the world we create through language and metaphor differs essentially from the physical, material, social sphere within which we intend to act purposefully, discipline requires an appreciation for the tentative quality of truth claims in light of what is often referred to today as *perspectivism*, an awareness of knowledge's contextual nature.

> It may be necessary to the education of a genuine philosopher that he should have stood once on all the steps on which his servants, the scientific workers in philosophy, have now stepped—*must* have stepped; he himself must perhaps have been a critic and a skeptic and a dogmatist and a historian, not to mention poet, collector, traveler, riddle-reader, moralist, seer, "free thinker," and almost everything else, in order to run the entire circumference of human values and value-feelings, in order to be *able* to gaze with many eyes and many consciences from the heights to any distance, from the depths to any height, from the corners to any open spaces.[9]

From such reflection from different positions one finds that even seemingly fundamental truths are contextual. Different countries, Nietzsche noted, may have contrasting mores, and claims like "all men are equal" are no more than convenient ideals from some perspectives.[10]

While I think that few among us would disagree with these statements today, as they relate to critiques of scientism or positivism for instance, Nietzsche called attention to "the trouble with truth" at the height of modernism: Immanuel Kant's categorical imperatives had seemingly freed men to use autonomous, universal reason to construct the world (or reconstruct it) in their image. While generally quite scathing, the substance of Nietzsche's responses to Kant cohere strikingly with more recent reviews of Kant's influence, as seen more often than not today in John Rawls's theory of justice and political liberalism.[11]

> You admire the categorical imperative in you? This "persistency" of your so called moral judgment? This absoluteness of the feeling that "as I think on this matter, so must everyone think"? Admire rather your *selfishness* therein!…He who still thinks that "each would have to act in this manner in this case," has not yet advanced half a dozen paces in self-knowledge: otherwise he would know that there neither are, nor can be, similar actions,—that every

> action that has been done, has been done in an entirely unique and inimitable manner, and that it will be the same with regard to all future actions; that all precepts of conduct…—by means of them, indeed, a semblance of equality can be attained, *but only a semblance*.[12]

Knowledge is not absolutely relative for Nietzsche; as many an analytical thinker has pointed out, such an epistemology would be untenable. To repeat, it is precisely within particular social contexts or relations that various views holds value, and they have no value outside human aims and related frames of reference. Yet because conditions change continuously, continuously reevaluating our truth claims in light of evolving current circumstances is central to Nietzsche's normative thought. Rather than presume to "*now know better* than any other age," Nietzsche wrote that we must follow-up with Kant and other ethicists by asking continually "preservation of *what?*…Advancement to *what?*"[13] Otherwise we are following the herd, obeying the community consciousness, and not seeking out our full, individual potentials. Answering these questions of "to what" and "for what" requires an appreciation for truthfulness, which Nietzsche seems to reluctantly, perhaps paradoxically, concede in the end. The possibility for more useful truth claims, despite the contextual, tentative, *empowering* nature of all of our truths, ultimately distinguishes Nietzsche's perspective from that of the nihilist.

> [T]he conscientious man in the daring and extreme sense of in which he is presupposed by his belief in science, *affirms thereby a world other than* that of life, nature, and history; and in so far as he affirms this "other world," what? must he not just thereby—deny its counterpart, this world, *our* world?…it is always a *metaphysical belief* on which our belief in science rests…even us knowing ones of to-day, the godless and anti-metaphysical, still take *our* fire from the conflagration kindled by a belief a millennium old, the Christian belief, which was also that belief of Plato, that God is truth, that the truth is divine.[14]

Nietzsche's apparently positive reference to Christianity and God here might come as a surprise to some. With this particularly uncharacteristic quote, I turn now to Nietzsche's pedagogy or lack thereof.

Nietzsche on Education

There is no single correct way to interpret Nietzsche when it comes to the goals and practices of education. Those familiar with his canon realize that deception plays a role in his argumentation and sense of *Bildung*, ranging from modeling his views after Plato's notion of "the noble lie," to creating rather reactionary, apparently impassioned constructions of metaphor, sarcasm, and cynicism. As Andrea English has most recently noted, such provocations demand on the part of the reader or the student critical examination and further,

continuous consideration, rather than passive internalization.[15] And while Nietzsche's thesis that the mass of civilization is uneducable might be undercut by his common use of this rhetorical strategy, the extent to which his method can be viewed pedagogically in the way we typically discuss pedagogy today—in terms of classroom teaching—is unclear.

For English, Nietzsche's engagement with doubt, deception, and negativity reinforce the possibility within educational settings for learning to take place as new, critical knowledge is produced. She writes that it is within experiences of negativity—discomfort, frustration, irritation, and the like—that a Nietzschean education can occur, as learners must "engage in critical self-reflection…begin the search for new habits, new thoughts, and new modes of action, and…initiate processes of self-transformation."[16] Likewise, Nicholas Burbules deciphers from postmodernism generally the need to be reason*able* (rather than reasoned) by observing the need to continuously strive for objectivity (or lack of subjective bias) as one frequently makes value judgments when producing knowledge.[17] Burbules finds from his examination of postmodernism's contributions the educational task of "fostering and encouraging" these capacities in learners.

Nietzsche leaves us less certain and hopeful about the educational prospects of his critical philosophy, however. The mass that follows the mentality of the herd is hopeless for Nietzsche, as it was for Kant, precisely because individuals must create values through the use of disciplined, critical, autonomous reasoning. As he takes Kant and other scholars to task, so too must anyone, *as an individual,* who seeks valuable knowledge. Schools could hardly succeed in enabling this sort of critical thinking as the educator cannot help someone think for him or herself or become who he or she is. Nietzsche thus speaks of the necessarily regrettable results of educational practice, given his sense of the nature of human reason, in a particularly disappointing manner in *Ecce Homo*.

> Go away from me and resist Zarathustra! And even better: be ashamed of him! Perhaps he deceived you. The man of knowledge must not only love his enemies, he must also be able to hate his friends. One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil…You revere me; but what if your reverence *tumbles* one day?…Now I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only *when you have all denied me* will I return to you.[18]

Education as the transmission of knowledge seems impossible here. Reviewing the tale of Zarathustra, James Scott Johnston observes that "his techniques, as challenging and unorthodox as they are, ultimately prove unsuccessful, leaving Zarathustra with the realization that only the self-overcoming, self-valuating individual, can reach the higher state."[19] So where does this leave us in conceiving of a Nietzschean postmodern education?

The tensions described here highlight the possibility for a Nietzschean postmodern educational theory, but not that of a practice, as Nietzsche doubts anyone's capacity to formulaically or systematically help another develop the capacities he or she needs to succeed, as maturity for Nietzsche depends upon a socially detached sort of inquiry, rather than a willingness to pleasingly collaborate with another. This does not mean that schooling should not take place; transmission of values and ideas, including truth claims, is an essential task which is increasingly being taken up in collective manners under states and other social institutions. This is not something I would imagine any postmodernist need be against, and I furthermore doubt any would seriously suggest anything like valuing a child's knowledge over an adult's knowledge in learning how to read or do math, for instance, although certainly postmodern perspectivism has contributed to research and theory increasingly being done in a similar vein. While Nietzsche hardly praises the educational institutions of his day, the tasks related to transmitting cultural context for normative social life to continue would seem to require schooling in any case, if much of what goes on in schools cannot be enhanced by postmodern sensibilities.

Nietzsche postmodernism can help shape one's philosophy of education, however, and in two major ways. First, at the level of knowledge production, postmodernism may play a fundamental role in a philosophy of education. A dissertation advisor may, for instance, provoke his or her advisee to frustration or irritation by being deceptive or disingenuous, to prompt the latter to consider claims more independently from others' teachings. As one moves away from being a student toward distinguishing oneself as a scholar, one must learn to view authoritative perspectives and approaches as relative (or in relation to the self), as well.

Second, postmodern perspectivism has contributed much to our developing less prejudiced understandings of those who modern conventions might identify as stupid, miseducated, or wrongheaded. The idea that the teacher should know and *seek relation* with regard for the student's approximate perspective might approach a sort of postmodern pedagogy (although a behaviorist might claim this "discovery" just as easily). Numerous scholars, such as Paulo Freire, critical educators like Megan Boler and Ronald Glass, multiculturalists, and others who emphasize difference critically in educational settings reflect an appreciation for postmodern perspectivism.

Perspectivism has limited value, however; it is more useful in classes in social or political studies than in mathematics, for instance. In the main arena where education as preparing for full participation in society is unfolded, the usefulness of such a postmodern approach to education is less clear. Many identify as helpful postmodern doubt and the sort of internal tension that postmodern perspectivism can inspire in a conscientious and reflexive teacher. Where it infuses educators with humility in the face of certain tragedy—that being the impossibility of enabling one to become him- or herself—it may be

useful. A recognition that oneself as an educator has no monopoly on which truths matter most and are most necessary for the future independence of his students, among other noble aims, seems crucial to teaching sensitively rather than dogmatically or overzealously. Yet taking the anxiety postmodern educational thought entails too seriously—in the same vein as Nietzsche does when he speaks as Zarathustra—can be, as Boler has put it, "broaching a faith in crisis."[20] Furthermore, while embracing the implications of postmodernism such as alienation, doubt, and anxiety in the face of zealous certainty, Nietzsche at least would surely find it indulgent for an educator to settle on such a state when he or she has other things to attend to and *truths*, or values, to transmit.

Conclusion

In the end, education cannot entertain the task of overturning valuations and revising or creating them anew, because education itself comprises and is implicit in these valuations. At the most it can encourage critical inquiry into various subject matters, as it often does, or foster individualism, although one wonders how a socially transmitted valuation of individualism or of criticality is possible. Boler writes of this too, as many have before her, in her sense of the tragedy of education.[21] As with Nietzsche's portrayal of Zarathustra, a truly postmodern education dedicating itself to the flourishing of the individual in the face of hegemonic, conformist cultural and social forces would be precluded by the educator's authoritative relation to his or her pupil.

It is interesting to ponder what Nietzsche or Foucault might think today, of students whispering among themselves about what their teacher means by "come to your own conclusion," anxiously comparing notes for hidden instructor directives, and of the teacher patting him- or herself on the back while reading students' essays for evidence of his or her job well done. In the end, it is clearly useful to understand the effects of power—the windows on classroom doors reminiscent of the panopticon, the claims to knowledge being self evident—and view critically the idea that people are free or autonomous while they must construct themselves within society. Yet compelling stories of knowledge's relationships to (other) powers provide us with little more than additional puzzles to think through. While Nietzsche, Foucault, and other postmodern thinkers provide impetus to rethink and revise our knowledge claims and systems of knowledge more generally with greater reference to the perspectivism inherent within, such approaches cannot inform our continuous directing of young people in the particular ways we choose, despite their personal interests and ideas. I regard this latter practice as modern education: exemplary among movements that Nietzschean postmodernism essentially contests.

Notes

1. Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1886), trans. Marianne Cowan, in *Nietzsche: Selections,* ed. Richard Schacht (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1993), 165.

3. James Scott Johnston, "Nietzsche as Educator: A Reexamination," *Educational Theory* 48, no. 1 (1998), 67.

4. For brief, critical assessments of postmodernism and Nietzsche's contribution to philosophy see, for instance, D.C. Phillips, "The Contested Nature of Empirical Educational Research (and Why Philosophy of Education Offers Little Help)," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 39, no 4 (2005); Warren A. Nord, *Religion and American Education: Rethinking a National Dilemma* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); or Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 165. For alternate perspectives on Nietzsche and/or postmodernism see Richard Schacht, *Nietzsche* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983); Patti Lather, "This *is* Your Father's Paradigm: Government Intrusion and the Case of Qualitative Research in Education," *Qualitative Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (2004); or David E. Cooper, "Postmodernism," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Education,* ed. Randall Curren (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

5. For an analysis of truthfulness see David E. Cooper, "Teaching and Truthfulness," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Educational Practice in the Twenty-First Century: Proceedings of the International Network of Philosophers of Education Tenth Biennial Conference*, ed. Padraig Hogan (Malta: Allied, 2006).

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense* (1873), trans. Daniel Breazeale, in Schacht, ed., *Nietzsche,* 49, 47, and 51. On postpositivism see Kenneth R. Howe, "A Critique of Experimentalism," *Qualitative Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (2004); D.C. Phillips and Nicholas C. Burbules, *Postpositivism and Educational Research* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); or Eric Bredo and Walter Feinberg's "The Positivistic Approach to Social and Educational Research," in *Knowledge and Values in Social and Educational Research* (Temple University, 1982).

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* (1874), trans. R.J. Hollingdale, in Schacht, ed., *Nietzsche,* 60–61.

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak* (1881), trans., R.J. Hollingdale, in Schacht, ed., *Nietzsche: Selections,* 97; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Joyful Wisdom (or The Gay Science)* (1887), trans. Thomas Common, in Schacht, ed., *Nietzsche*, 198.

9. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 189.

10. Ibid.

11. See particularly Onora O'Neill, *Acting on Principle: An Essay on Kantian Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), and Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Theories by Charles Taylor and Richard Rorty also immediately come to mind. For an overview of these issues and theories, see Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians,* 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

12. Nietzsche, *Joyful Wisdom,* 118.

13. Nietzsche, *Daybreak,* 2, 92, 106, and 98.

14. Nietzsche, *Joyful Wisdom*, 120.

15. Andrea English, "Nietzsche, Deception, and Education: A Response to Katz's Nietzschean Puzzle," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2006*, ed. Daniel Vokey (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2007).

16. Ibid.

17. Nicholas C. Burbules, "Reasonable Doubt: Toward a Postmodern Defense of Reason as an Educational Aim," in *Critical Conversations in Education*, ed. Wendy Kohli (New York: Routledge, 1995).

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883), trans. Walter Kaufmann, in Schacht, ed., *Nietzsche.*

19. Johnston, "Nietzsche as Educator."

20. Megan Boler, "An Epoch of Difference: Hearing Voices in the Nineties," *Educational Theory* 50, no. 3 (2000).

21. Ibid. See also Nicholas C. Burbules, "The Tragic Sense of Education," *Teachers College Record* 91, no. 4 (1990).