The Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

Philosophical Studies in Education 55, 2024

Table of Contents

EDITORS PAGE

INTRODUCTION

Attending to Human Subjectivity in the Digital Age, *Thomas Falk*…1

PHIL SMITH LECTURE

Learning Attention: A Study in Three Generations, *Lauren Bialystok*…8

RESPONSE TO THE PHIL SMITH LECTURE

Ordinary Attention, *Samantha Deane*…21

ARTICLES

Look Closer: Scrutinizing Higher Education's Conception of Attention Through Neurodivergent Eyes, *Jennifer Hough*…27

Metaphor and Apophatic Identity, *William Kuehnle*…38

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Attending to Each *Other*: Identity and Climate Catastrophe, *Brad Rowe*…48

RESPONSES TO THE PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Rivers as Blood, Mountains as Bones: A Response to Brad Rowe, *Bryan R. Warnick*…61

Response to Presidential Address, *Lauren Bialystok*…64

ARTICLES

Loving Democracy as a Pedagogical Problem: The Crisis in Civic Education as a Forgetting of Eros, *Kerry Burch*…66

Thinking with School Leaders: What Can Philosophers Offer? *Michael G. Gunzenhauser*…77

Library Holdings, "Divisive Concepts," and Parental Rights, *Bryan R. Warnick*…88

Polarization, Politics, and Family Voice in Schools: Extending a Framework for Inclusive Freedom to Family-School Interactions, *Thomas Capretta*…99

AUTHOR MEETS CRITICS

Book Overview: Public Education in the Digital Age: Neoliberalism, EdTech, and the Future of Our Schools, *Morgan Anderson*…109

Resisting Technophilia, Reconciling Humanization: A Luddite's Lament, *Erin C. Scussel*…112

What's So Different About the Digital Age? *Kip Kline*….117

Problematizing the Digital Subject in the Age of Educational Technology, *Austin Pickup*…123

Toward an Agentic Pessimism: Epistemic Struggle and Data-fied Subjects in the Digital Age, *Morgan Anderson*…134

FINAL ARTICLE

Graduate Teacher Assistants, DFW Rates, and the Simulacrum: Baudrillard Meets the Modern University, *Abbey Hortenstine and Deron Boyles*…144

PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES IN EDUCATION

Thomas Falk
Contributing Editor

Brad Rowe
Amy Shuffelton
Executive Editors

Tanya Bomsta
Annie Schultz
Production Editors

Editorial Review Board

Chair, Thomas Falk
University of Dayton

Derek Gottlieb
University of Northern Colorado

Clarence Joldersma
Calvin University

Alex Nikolaidis
University of Central Florida

Spencer Smith
Ohio University

Lance Mason
Indiana University Kokomo

Natasha Levinson
Kent State University

Aaron Schutz
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Caitlin Howlett
DePauw University

Sarah Stitzlein
University of Cincinnati

Austin Pickup
Aurora University

Michael Gunzenhauser
University of Pittsburgh

Tony Decesare
Saint Xavier University

2023–2024 OVPES Leadership

President: Brad Rowe, Flagler College
Past President: Amy Shuffelton, Loyola University Chicago
President Elect: Sarah Stitzlein, University of Cincinnati
Secretary-Treasurer: Morgan Anderson, University of Northern Iowa
Site Coordinator: Annie Schultz, Flagler College
Electronic Editor: Gabriel Keehn, University of Northern Iowa

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN 0160-7561

Editorial Policy:
Articles published in *Philosophical Studies in Education* do not necessarily represent the views of the editors, the editorial assistants, or the members of the Society. The authors of the articles are solely responsible for the accuracy and truthfulness of their work. The authors are solely responsible for ensuring that they do not infringe on copyright, violate any right of privacy, and do not use libelous and obscene language.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

ATTENDING TO HUMAN SUBJECTIVITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Thomas Falk
University of Dayton

At the second and final parent-teacher conference of the year, my son's wonderful, talented, and conscientious third-grade teacher spent 12 of our 15 allotted minutes together walking me through the three standardized tests—one MAP and two Ohio state exams[1]—that determine whether or not students move on to fourth grade. She explained the knowledge and skills measured by the tests' various sections, where he performed well, and how he could improve. None of this mattered officially, as he had already earned passing scores in the fall. With three minutes remaining, I firehosed her with questions that mattered to me: Is he a good classmate? Does he find joy in his studies? Does he stand up for himself when picked on? She answered summarily and satisfactorily; then our time was up, and we were ushered out. This typical parent-teacher conference seemed to illustrate something about how educational policy directs the attention of teachers, students, and parents. Not yet nine years old, my son had become aware of the significance of standardized testing in the eyes of his teacher and school leaders and thus his value as a student to his school.

Taking an assembly line job for the purpose of learning first-hand about the plight of the working class, the early-twentieth-century mystic philosopher, Simone Weil, discovered that nothing mattered so much in a factory as the quota. Workers quickly learned that any thoughts or curiosities they might have about their work—to what use the products of their labor would be put, or who the person working next to them is—slowed their productivity and thus had to be abandoned.[2] The factory worker, Weil found, had to choose between surrendering their thought or being fired. Later on, as a teacher, Weil observed how similar dynamics obtained in the modern school. By focusing pupils' attention on getting to the correct answer—typically by application of a given formula—schools rendered students' own thoughts and curiosities mere obstacles to the real business of making the grade.[3] In this way, schools pre-alienated children for the dehumanization that most would later experience in the

[1] MAP refers to Measures of Academic Progress assessments in math, language, and writing are created by the Northwest Evaluation Association, a division of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, and aligned to Common Core standards.
[2] Simone Weil, "Factory Work," *The Simone Weil Reader,* ed. George Panichas (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1977), 53-71.
[3] Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," *Waiting for God,* trans. Emma Craufurd (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 57-56.

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

factory. Instead, she believed, the primary goal of education should be to shake students out of this narrow mode of thought and open the aperture of their consciousness to more fully receive the realities of the world. Almost a century hence, what can we say about schooling and student attention in the digital age?

Citing Jonathan Haidt, Lauren Bialystok writes in her Phil Smith Lecture that students now seem "permanently distracted and congenitally distractible." "Classroom teaching," she continues, "is no longer possible…We are not hallucinating this phenomenon. Nor is it accidental. The hijacking of our attention is deliberate, systematic, and nefarious…"[4] Considering our personal and collective implications in this dilemma, the organizers of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society's 2023 conference asked scholars of philosophy and education to explore what we do and do not know about attention. While several articles in this volume help us to understand attention more fully and practice it more powerfully, all have something significant to tell us about what merits our attention as philosophers and educators. Despite their variety of foci, each essay speaks to the ways in which political, economic, technological, and ideological forces condition attention and thus shape human subjectivity.

This volume's first four entries approach the mystery of attention through the lens of identity and an ethic of humility. To begin, Lauren Bialystok examines attention in the context of three generations of her family: father, self, and daughter. As Alzheimer's consumed her father's memory and rendered him more dependent on others, Bialystok notes that he also somehow became more authentically himself. Dis-attention to the past, it seemed, freed him from the burdens of maintaining his identity. Based upon her experiences as a caregiver in the digital age, she counters Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil—who respectively depicted "just and loving attention" and "patient responsiveness to the needs of others" as foundational to morality—by arguing for a non-ideal theory of ethics that does not make "servitude the threshold."[5] Between her father, self, and daughter, Bialystok sees enough to raise doubts as to whether we understand attention well enough to make normative judgments about it. Resonating with this tone of humility regarding our descriptive accounts of, and normative relations with, attention, Jennifer Hough challenges dominant conceptions of neurodivergence as disability.[6] After describing ways in which K-12 and higher education classrooms perpetuate hegemonic conceptions of attention that penalize non-conforming students, Hough entreats us to re-consider attention through Universal Design frameworks that are more

[4] Lauren Bialystok, "Learning Attention: A Study in Three Generations," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024): 8.

[5] Bialystok, "Learning Attention," 18.

[6] Jennifer Hough, "Look Closer: Scrutinizing Higher Education's Conception of Attention Through Neurodivergent Eyes," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024).

holistically suited to engaging the twenty-first century's increasingly neurodiverse students.

Still focusing on the classroom, but addressing identity from a linguistic and apophatic perspective, Will Kuehnle cleverly exposes the value and limitations of utilizing metaphors to understand ourselves as teachers.[7] Among many other things, teachers may see themselves as prophets in the Deweyan tradition, ushering in a new social order; liberators of the Freirean type, who empower students through conscientization to overcome the circumstances that oppress them; texts according to that of Abraham Joshua Heschel; midwives like Socrates; therapists in the mold of Paul Goodman; or, most loathsomely, entertainers who compete with ubiquitous phones and laptops for student attention. Although teachers may wear any or all of these hats in a given day, the metaphors nonetheless fail to capture the complexity and enormity of what a teacher in fact is. Kuehnle thus suggests that we adopt an *apophatic* view of the teacher, which he derives from a negative theology that approaches divinity by way of what we cannot say about it.

Telescoping out from the family and classroom to the terrestrial web of life, Brad Rowe's presidential address challenges us to expand our notion of what makes us human by drawing our attention to Nature in the tradition of Ralph Waldo Emerson. According to Rowe, we have become too egotistical to recognize our animality and dependency upon the Oversoul that encompasses all of life on Earth.[8] Noting inspiration from Bryan Warnick's "Educational Temptations at the End of the World,"[9] Rowe bids us to *look up* and behold the Sixth Extinction, yet also appreciate our fuller implication with our dogs and cats, as well as the rest of creation.

In a collection of essays whose topics feel equally existential, Kerry Burch, Mike Gunzenhauser, Bryan Warnick, and Thomas Capretta turn thoughts to contemporary problems of democracy and the responsibilities of those who love it. As this volume goes to press, America will stand on the precipice of deciding whether we love democracy or the cult of MAGA. Observing that too many Americans feel disconnected from democracy's moral and spiritual essence, Burch embarks upon a close reading of the Declaration of Independence that highlights philosophy's kinship with democracy. Rooted in questions of who we are, how to understand and organize power, and how to live in closer alignment with our ideals, philosophy and democracy assume the *moral stance* that human beings are capable of improving their selves and societies. Twenty-five hundred years after Athens committed the first sin against philosophy, it is

---

[7] Will Kuehnle, "Metaphor and Apophatic Identity," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024).

[8] Brad Rowe, "Attending to Each *Other*: Identity and Climate Catastrophe," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024).

[9] Bryan Warnick, "Educational Temptations at the End of the World," *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 2 (2023), 1-13, https://www.philofed.org/_files/ugd/803b74_5a841fcd33c04555b5b35dee7ec82655.pdf.

unclear whether America values the spirit of questioning or reviles it. Fear and destruction, Burch remind us, are the major emotional sources of fascism. With eros as a pedagogical North Star, he hopes that educators can inspire their students to embark upon journeys of personal and civic transformation.[10]

Nonetheless, school leaders facing unrelenting pressure for test performance and political hostility in response to efforts to promote equity might be forgiven for their dis-attention to fundamental questions about democracy and education. Neoliberal era policies, Gunzenhauser reminds us, have emphasized individualism, competition, and standardization in ways that constrain possibilities for public education and narrow our conceptions of what attention is. Educational philosophers are uniquely suited to empathize with teachers who see and feel the harms wrought by these forces and to explore with them distinctions between high standards and standardization. "Philosophers of education," writes Gunzenhauser, "can help school leaders attend to the stated and unstated aims in their schools," and hence lead their school communities—teachers, students, parents, and citizens included—in more democratic and deliberative directions.[11]

In parallel, Warnick and Capretta illustrate ways in which the ethics of philosophy and democracy are presently contested in American schools and society. As democratic institutions, Warnick writes, schools should balance respect for parental rights with their responsibility to promote liberal democracy. In the teeth of the dehumanizing standards and accountability regime, Warnick reminds us, many schools informally yet successfully expose students to lifeways that are distinct from those of their nuclear family. However, in at least 38 states now, "parental rights" are restricting schools' abilities to expose students to the diversity of American life and hence grow into autonomous moral agents.[12] While respecting the wishes of some parents to opt their children out of objectionable curricula, Warnick insists that schools can promote philosophy and democracy by helping students grasp the ways in which history affects their standing in society, shapes their identities, and configures their possibilities for the future.[13] Invoking Sigal Ben-Porath's concept of *inclusive freedom*, Capretta critiques free speech discourse in American society broadly, and on college campuses specifically, as too narrowly focused in the liberty of the speaker. Although free speech aligns with core values of the university insofar as it furthers academic freedom, the ethic of inclusive freedom re-focuses attention onto the dignity of school community members who may be harmed by others' speech. The principle of *dignitary safety*, argues Capretta, can strengthen the

[10] Kerry Burch, "Loving Democracy as a Pedagogical Problem: The Crisis in Civic Education as a Forgetting of Eros," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024).
[11] Michael Gunzenhauser, "Thinking with School Leaders: What Can Philosophers Offer? *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024), page 83.
[12] Bryan Warnick, "Library Holdings, 'Divisive Concepts,' and Parental Rights," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024).
[13] Warnick, "Library Holdings, 'Divisive Concepts,' and Parental Rights."

academy by promoting inclusivity and protecting marginalized groups who are the frequent targets of illiberal forces hostile to philosophy and democracy.[14]

The final group of entries in PSIE 55 features critical responses—from Erin Scussel, Kip Kline, and Austin Pickup—to Morgan Anderson's *Public Education in the Digital Age: Neoliberalism, Ed Tech and the Future of Our Schools.*[15] Published in 2023, the book addresses ethical, philosophical, and pedagogical implications of educational technology and its corollary ideology of *technophilia,* which casts all new technologies as inherently empowering and liberating. Anderson begins with the premise that educational technology is no mere neutral tool; rather it is bound with systems of power that impair the core mission of public schools. Capitalizing on neoliberal policies of public disinvestment, techno-capitalists have presented themselves as saviors, hijacking discourse about social justice while preying upon schools as captive revenue streams. Naming this dynamic *disaster techno-capitalism*, Anderson calls on teachers to resist dehumanization with critical pedagogies and lessons from the Luddite movement.

Scussel's thoughtful response, "Resisting Technophilia, Reconciling Humanization," picks up Anderson's thesis and runs it through the gauntlet of Artificial Intelligence and the digital classroom.[16] Like the Behaviorists before them, avatars of Silicon Valley promise that their tools can relieve us of the burdens of thinking and the messiness of corporeality. However, struggle and embodiment matter a great deal in education. Both friction-laden creativity and personal interactions in live classrooms—messy, inefficient, risky, unaccountable, and free—are antithetical to the ethics of Ed Tech. By approaching Ed Tech with caution, Scussel argues that educators can offer their students a more humanizing education.

Asking "What's Different about the Digital Age?" Kip Kline recollects pre-packaged teacher materials of decades not long past and wonders whether there is a meaningful difference between "technological creep" and "convenience creep."[17] In Kline's view, technophilia is an epiphenomenon attached to the outright phenomena of neoliberalism, capitalism, and positivism. Our digital age seems to repackage, albeit more efficiently and effectively, the Skinnerian Behaviorism of the 1950's. The key strategy of Anderson's Luddites is *sabotage.* Kline asks us to consider Lewis Mumford's suggestion to steadily withdraw our interest and let the tablets collect dust.

---

[14] Thomas Capretta, "Polarization, Politics, and Family Voice in Schools: Extending a Framework for Inclusive Freedom to Family-School Interaction," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024).
[15] Morgan Anderson, *Public Education in the Digital Age: Neoliberalism, Ed Tech and the Future of Our Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2023).
[16] Erin Scussell, "Resisting Technophilia and Reconciling Humanization: A Luddite's Lament," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024).
[17] Kip Kline, "What's So Different About the 'Digital Age'?" *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024), page 119.

In "Problematizing the Digital Subject," Austin Pickup does a service to Anderson's readers by casting their gaze genealogically, through a lens of *dynamic nominalism,* in order to trace the passive, quantifiable, scalable, knowable, and governable educational subjects—referred to as "digital natives"—bred over generations for lives of consumer desire and service to powerful corporations.[18] Within the lifetime of a subject, observes Pickup, preparation begins in the first days of kindergarten, when children encounter standardized exams. On the not-distant horizon, he warns, lies a plan to herd students into the digital metaversity, where they will live within the internet rather than simply access it.

Responding to her critics, Anderson acknowledges AI's promise to relieve us of the burdens of thought and creation within the context of austerity and swelling workloads. Agreeing with Kline that Behaviorism remains the ordering ideology of our educational environment, she nonetheless maintains that the tools wielded by twentieth-century Behaviorists pale in comparative power to the digital tools of today. Against those who insist that we have no free will, Anderson contends that we must hang onto an idea of agency that can withstand justified sorrow and pessimism.[19]

In our culminating essay, Abbey Hortenstine and Deron Boyles illustrate logical absurdities of a characteristically neoliberal DFW policy proposed at Georgia State University.[20] According to this policy, graduate instructors who assign D, F, or W grades to twenty percent or more of their students must complete a remedial teaching course before returning to the classroom. Non-compliant Graduate Teaching Assistants may also lose their salaries and tuition. The illogic of such a policy, argue Hortenstine and Boyles, may reveal the university's Baudrillardian simulacrum by exposing its abandonment of substantive inquiry in favor of gamified grading by students and teachers alike. Rather than employ critical theory to challenge the core tenets of the "spiraling cadaver," Hortenstein and Boyles advocate for a strategy of hyperconformity: ruthlessly applying these rules until grades, and perhaps diplomas themselves, are rendered meaningless.

Considering the phenomenology of freedom in her editor's introduction to PSIE 54, "Caring for Hard Truths in a Shared World," Samantha Deane concludes that "the price of liberty is deep attention to the world we manifest together."[21] The collective wisdom committed to the pages of PSIE 55 suggests

---

[18] Austin Pickup, "Problematizing the Digital Subject in the Age of Educational Technology," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024).

[19] Morgan Anderson, "Towards and Agentic Pessimism: Epistemic Struggle and Data-fied Subjects in the Digital Age," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024).

[20] Abbey Hortenstine & Deron Boyles, "Graduate Teaching Assistants, DFW Rates, and the Simulacrum: Baudrillard Meets the Modern University, *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024).

[21] Samantha Deane, "Caring for Hard Truths in a Shared World," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2023), 1-6.

that the philosophy of education is a disciplined and inspired mode of attending to ourselves, others, the lifeworld that we share, the dreams that we conjure, and the nightmares that haunt us. Alas, our inherited culture of narcissism profoundly corrupts attention. The capacity of the twenty-first century attentional subject to tend the kindred flames of philosophy and democracy appears to hang in the balance. Accordingly, this year's conference theme will be *authenticity*, which may be understood as the antithesis of narcissism. With rousing focus, the scholarly community that constitutes OVPES promises to manifest the tools of thought capable of furthering, amidst great uncertainty, our common struggle for a world in which we can continue to think freely and feel enlivened together.

PHIL SMITH LECTURE

LEARNING ATTENTION: A STUDY IN THREE GENERATIONS

Lauren Bialystok
University of Toronto

Stop me if you've heard this one before. A teacher with twenty years' experience is struggling to connect with her class. She delivers the same material with the same careful planning and enthusiasm as always, but the uptake is lackadaisical. The students participate in brief bursts, if at all. Some are texting; some are online shopping between taking notes; some are looking at the front of the room blankly, seemingly expecting a more entertaining spectacle than what a seasoned teacher can provide with a chalkboard. As Jonathan Haidt found when he spoke with teachers, "Getting students' attention was harder because they seemed permanently distracted and congenitally distractible."[1] The defeated attitude in the staff room seems to be justified: classroom teaching is no longer possible. We all know why. According to a 2022 study by the Pew Research Centre, 95 percent of teens have access to a smartphone, and about half of teens say they are online "almost constantly."[2] There is a corresponding radicalness in some people's responses, even from those whose politics incline toward the permissive and the technologically optimistic. Jonathan Haidt's essay resulting from his conversations with teachers was titled "Get Phones Out of Schools Now."

Phones, as we know, are the number one culprit in the grand assault on our attention, efficiently consolidating a host of technological attacks on our focus and sanity. In his 2022 book, *Stolen Focus*, Johann Hari argues that "there are twelve factors that have been proven to reduce people's ability to pay attention and that many of these factors have been rising in the past few decades—sometimes dramatically."[3] We are not hallucinating this phenomenon. Nor is it accidental. The hijacking of our attention is deliberate, systematic, and nefarious; it serves corporate profits and authoritarianism; it is corrosive of our ability to perform the most human and most intellectual functions, including

[1] Jonathan Haidt, "Get Phones Out of Schools Now," *The Atlantic*, June 6, 2023, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/06/ban-smartphones-phone-free-schools-social-media/674304/.

[2] Emily Vogels, Risa Gelles-Watnick, and Navid Massarat, "Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022," *Pew Research Centre*, August 10, 2022, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/.

[3] Johann Hari, "Your attention didn't collapse. It was stolen.," *The Guardian*, January 2, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/science/2022/jan/02/attention-span-focus-screens-apps-smartphones-social-media.

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

criticizing the very forces that are corroding us. The phrase "paying attention" is no longer euphemistic: by giving our attention to ads, media clips, and various digital bandits that pop up when we're answering email, we literally sell our attention as revenue for whoever can capture it. If you're not outraged by all of this, you might say, you're not paying attention.

Theorists of attention—ranging from philosophers to psychologists to neuroscientists—broadly view attention as a kind of cognitive hygiene that allows us to be selective in the face of myriad stimuli.[4] Some of the selections are conscious; some happen without our awareness. There are debates about how these processes work and whether attention is fundamentally inhibitory or directive. The philosophical literature on attention largely resides in philosophy of mind, with interesting connections to empirical brain research.

Very few philosophers of attention focus on ethics, and even fewer deal seriously with education, though I will ultimately linger on two outliers—Iris Murdoch and Simone Weil—who bring refreshing (if not wholly convincing) perspectives to a discourse that is often laden with economic assumptions. Educational research mostly takes the meaning of attention for granted, applying measurable stand-ins for attention to track changes in outcomes. In one study of university students, those who wrote a test with their phones on did, on average, 20 percent worse than those who had switched their phones off.[5]

Such sobering statistics only underscore the importance of philosophical work on the educational meaning of attention. Attention is the first duty of students. The words "attention" and "attendance" have the same root: you have to start by showing up. Teachers take attendance and then justifiably expect attention. Think of a mid-twentieth-century classroom, with students sitting in neat rows, looking up at the teacher. Each student is called by name and responds with "Here" or "Present," signalling a readiness to receive the knowledge that only the teacher can bring to the space. This scene has been undergoing a radical transformation that calls into question the meaning of learning and the aims of education itself.

How do we need to rethink learning in a world of attention scarcity? What type of attention does learning require, which YouTube apparently does not? Can there be a generic educational imperative to cultivate "attention," or are there a variety of different problems here needing different solutions? Who is harmed, and what of value is lost, when new technologies divert students' attention away from the teacher at the chalkboard?

In what follows, I propose to nudge open some critical ways of thinking about attention as it relates to education and ethics. I will suggest that while education depends on attention, there can be attention without learning, and there can be learning without the types of attention that education usually insists on. But I will arrive at any provisional conclusions at best circuitously. My method

---

[4] Christopher Mole, "Attention," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2021), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/attention/.
[5] Hari, "Attention."

here is roughly to pay attention to experience and thematize what I find, or at least to test out some of the thematizations that are available. In this respect, attention is an organically complete subject of philosophical study: attention is the method and the subject. You might call it lax phenomenology.

I will tell this story in generations. I will tell it this way because of where I find myself in life as this phenomenon of corrupted attention, and this felicitous invitation for reflection, finds me. My own experience of having been swallowed up by the attention-stealing machinery of digital capitalism has knock-on effects, intersecting with the attentional capacities of others. But I object to the collapsing of attention into a single object of our will, much less to a commodity that can be subject to the laws of economics. I hope that by paying attention to the quotidian failures and breakthroughs of attention in three generations of my family, I will uncover nuances that may be of use to philosophers of education, teachers, parents, and children.

PART 1: DAD: THEN AND NOW

There was never a specific moment when Dad was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, but we all knew it was happening. It started with isolated memory failures of the kind you would easily forgive someone in their 70s once in a while: misplaced keys, forgotten names, repeated questions. He could fake it for a while. People who didn't know him well might have thought he was distracted. Just pay attention to where you put down your keys. When you meet someone new and they introduce themselves, pay attention.

The beginnings of conversations with Dad still feel mostly normal. "I'm going to a conference this weekend." "Oh, that's great! Where?" "Nashville, Indiana." "There's another Nashville?" "Apparently." We talk about something else for a bit, and inevitably loop back, Groundhog Day-style, to the beginning. "What are you doing this weekend?" "There's another Nashville?" "Apparently."

To a person without dementia—especially a person I regard as intelligent, especially a person with whom I am very comfortable—I would respond to such lapses with exasperation. *Pay attention*. For most of us, repeat questions, naïve questions, questions born of the lapses between dots that should have been easily connected, are a sure sign that our addressees are not paying attention. Teachers know that they must secure a class's attention before delivering critical information. If you take reasonable steps to get their attention and they fail to assimilate your information, it's on them.

My daughter asks me, "what's the difference between hearing and listening?" Without thinking, I answer: "paying attention."

Dad is listening. Earnestly, almost heartbreakingly. He hangs on my words. I hear the gears turn in his brain as he lines up what I say with what he remembers. He'll have an epiphany: You're going to a conference? Somewhere

in the Midwest? Yes! A glimmer of normalcy. We keep chatting. A few minutes later, he'll have the epiphany again. Attention is not retention.

For caregivers of people with dementia, this unfamiliar form of attention can become infuriating. The most patient person in the world cannot withstand the repeated breakdown between the successful communication of information and the other person's uptake. *I already told you!* Knowing that we can count on uptake is what allows us to determine the rhythm of verbal exchange.

Dad's inability to keep track of his own conversations not only frustrates his interlocutors, but also makes him dependent on them. An adult who cannot rely on his own cognitive clarity is frighteningly vulnerable, like the protagonist in the film *Memento* (2000), who tries to solve the mystery of his wife's death while suffering a complete loss of short-term memory. When he thinks he has arrived at an irrefutable truth, a Cartesian foundation on which he can build subsequent lessons, he tattoos it on his arm. But his method is flawed: without the working memory that joins recent conversations to new ones, his quest for bedrock truths is vulnerable to others' manipulation. The attempt to certify immediate information without relying on his own memory sends him into an epistemic spiral in which nothing can be verified against anything else. Even the information contained in the first tattoo turns out to be false.

Memory is attention connected over time.

The temporal quality of attention has been posited by several philosophers as central to human consciousness.[6] Sebastian Watzl describes attention as an activity of "regulating *priority structures*" that has "*temporal shape*."[7] What we are doing in a discrete time slice is linking the content of the moment to the sequence in which it appears, or what Watzl calls the "temporal neighourhood."[8] Attention itself is not a temporally discrete event, but an "unfolding process."[9] Subjective experience, he argues, depends on this higher-order priority-setting over countless discrete events. Attention is an activity that has duration and, consequently, requires working memory.

On this view, being able to zone in on any given time slice and forget about other time slices is not sufficient for paying attention. This contrasts with another view, according to which the singular focus on the now is the gold standard for attention. Mindfulness is the practice of focusing on the ephemeral while suspending our sprawling executive function, which always wants to reach backwards and forwards, stitching together an extended narrative. There are many conceptions of mindfulness, but the type that seems most salient here is what Erol Copelj, in his article, "Mindfulness and Attention," refers to as the

---

6 Mole, "Attention."

7 Sebastian Watzl, *Structuring Mind: The Nature of Attention and How it Shapes Consciousness* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 70, 52.

8 Watzl, *Structuring Mind*, 55.

9 Watzl, 52.

"quietist camp."[10] For quietists, mindfulness is "bare attention."[11] In this mode, we tune into the fact of attention itself, stripping away everything that is in excess of the granular moment. Mindfulness requires slowing down and noticing one thing at a time. You can't rush mindfulness. You can't call in things that aren't present to assist with focusing on what is. You can't autofill.

Interacting with Dad is an object lesson in mindfulness. "What are you doing this weekend?" Focus on that question. Presume nothing else. Just stay with where his brain is in this exact moment.

Being in the moment requires no working memory. In fact, memory gets in the way. "There's another Nashville?" "YES!"

I am ostensibly the one in good cognitive health, but these interactions confront me with my own attentive shortfalls. Whose attention is more compromised: Dad's, with his clown fish memory and limited logical processing, or mine, with my compulsive phone-checking and relentless mental housekeeping? Am I paying less attention because there are too many things I'm paying attention to, while he pays full attention to each thing that passes his consciousness, struggling to sustain the connections between them? How much of attention is perspective, order, continuity—the Type A bookkeeper in the back office "regulating priority structures"?[12] How much of attention is particular, momentary, disjointed from everything else—"bare"?[13]

As Dad's working memory dwindles, I pull out more and more pedagogical tricks to lubricate our exchanges. He drops a piece of the conversation; I spiral back to a simplified version and check his comprehension before continuing. He struggles to identify a logical outcome; I re-scaffold the steps of the syllogism and watch him climb my edifice, laboriously, holding my breath in anticipation. If he reaches the peak, I feel gratified. A good teacher.

Dad was a teacher for 50 years, but he has always described himself as a student. Ironically, his subject was history. "As a student of history," he has often said, before revealing what interests him about some current event. The Latin verb "studere," from which we derive the substantive, can be translated not only as "to study" but also as "to be eager for" or "to strive." A student is eager to learn, open to the text and to the world.

Stop me if you've heard the one about the teacher and the student switching places, or, for that matter, the parent and the child. It's a common trope, but my role reversal with Dad evinces a cruel optimism about the ultimate destination of our communication. For learning itself is a "striving," which is premised on the expectation of growth. When we teach, we expect students to assimilate new understanding into what they already know, spiralling and criss-

[10] Erol Copelj, "Mindfulness and Attention: Towards a Phenomenology of Mindfulness as the Feeling of Being Tuned In," *Asian Philosophy* 32, no. 2 (2022): 126-151.

[11] Copelj, "Mindfulness," 129.

[12] Watzl, *Structuring Mind,* 70.

[13] Copelj, "Mindfulness," 129.

crossing through a maze of synaptic connections that lurches them ever forward to greater complexity. The particulars may be impossible to anticipate, but without this kind of recursive retention of the old and apprehension of the new, we don't recognize any process that we would call "education."

A person who suffers from cognitive decline is the mirror image of a student. They are pushed through a process that is best understood as "de-education," often despite valiant resistance. I want to distinguish here between "de-education" and "unlearning." The latter has come to represent a desirable form of education: the replacement of stale, uncritical knowledge with ideas that may be transformative and emancipating. We "unlearn" racism and heteronormativity. We choose to relinquish the old in favour of the new, not because we can't retain it, but because it has been exposed as unworthy. I want "de-education" to refer to the involuntary process of being stripped of educability: the painful erosion of the retention that is prerequisite to assimilating anything new, to growth in the educational sense.

In Locke's 1690 text *Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* in a chapter titled "Modes of Thinking," he defines attention alongside other mental activities, including "remembrance" and "study."[14] He observes that when ideas "are taken notice of, and, as it were, registered in the memory, it is attention."[15] Learning, in other words, requires the kind of attention that requires memory.

Locke is also associated with the view that identity requires memory, making identity and attention a kind of mental cousins. The so-called Lockean criterion of psychological continuity, also presented in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, posits that a person is "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places."[16] Who is the thinking thing who loses the ability to track himself from then to now?

It is said that people with dementia become more themselves. Without the cognitive filters that have mediated their social persona for decades, we are witness to a person's raw perceptions and unselfconscious reactions. This view of identity suggests that all our higher-order supervision of ourselves is, so to speak, a decoy for who we really are. Attention is misspent on curating and managing our identities. A person with dementia is increasingly relieved of such efforts and settles into what some consider a more authentic existence.

Did I say 'authentic'? I'll have no truck with such ideals. Among other problems, it implies that our attention to social dynamics is a form of self-deception or dissimulation. Some think it's just the opposite. What I call the 'proxy view' suggests that we choose to devote our attention to those things that we most value, that our identity can be gleaned from our Instagram feed. The evidence for how easily corruptible our attention is belies this conceit: we attend

---

[14] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Hazleton, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1999), XIX.
[15] Locke, *Essay,* II. S19, i.
[16] Locke, *Essay*, XXVII. S9.

to countless things because we are primed to do so, or because we have mental routines that favour the familiar, or because we are promised rewards, or simply because things are there. How many of us would be content to have our tombstone engraved with a pie chart of what we paid attention to last week, or the results of an eye-tracker on our computer screen? Not I.

The proxy view overstates our agency, while the decoy view trades on a naïve faith in the true self. But there is no self that could be fully extricated from our entanglements with others, and there is no fully autonomous way of allocating our attention. We are porous and suggestible. That is, after all, why the algorithms work.

The inadequacy of both these poles (attention is a proxy for who we are, attention is a decoy for who we are) leaves it unclear how much we can actually control our attention, as well as the expected rewards of harnessing this power. I'm not convinced we understand this well enough to establish norms about how people should pay attention, especially children. Are we entitled to expect attention? How much attention is sufficient?

PART 2: DAUGHTER: HERE, THERE, AND EVERYWHERE

I remember exactly when my younger child was diagnosed with ADHD. She was seven. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or ADHD, is a cognitive condition in which attention is said to be deficient. Attention to what? Deficient how? The proliferation of ADHD diagnoses and pharmaceutical remedies suggests that we know the meaning of 'attention,' that there is some amount of it that is minimally required in children, and that its deficiency is educationally if not also psychologically problematic.

My daughter embraced the ADHD diagnosis like a badge of honour. Happily inducting her into the neurodiversity club, ADHD seemed to vindicate her intellectual specialness while exculpating her for behaviours that might otherwise be seen as impolite or unacceptable. *It's not my fault I interrupt everyone all the time; I can't pay attention.* Attention deficit has been helpfully reduced to an involuntary kink, like an enzyme in the blood that is mysteriously low.

The original hypothesis about the purpose of attention was that it's a mechanism to compensate for cognitive limitation: we simply can't process everything that crosses our perceptual plane.[17] Attention allows us to select a manageable amount to process. From this standpoint, we are all cognitively deficient to begin with, and attention is a mechanism to cope with other forms of deficiency. But there is another view that says attention is the traffic signalling of a mind that is liable to get distracted because it can process too much.[18] What initially looks like deficiency may in fact be excess.

---

17 Mole, "Attention."

18 Mole, "Attention."

My daughter's attention feels excessive, scattered, restless. She flits and buzzes around me, talking a mile a minute. She only gives you one eye or one ear at a time, the other member of the pair tracking an invisible scene or thrumming to an inaudible song in her busy mind. If Dad's chain of attention breaks down temporally, chopping up the line that connects the past to the present, I think of my child's attention as disjointed laterally, a spatial diffusion of overflowing perceptiveness and energy.

The attention that my daughter lacks is the kind whose deficit the adults around her find most inconvenient: the attention to sit still at the dinner table, the attention to listen when she is spoken to and wait her turn to speak, the attention to notice the anger rise in her body before she lashes out. ADHD is a descriptive shortcut for a type of misalignment between her cognitive predilections and those that we find most pro-social. In redirecting and honing her attention, I am like a Freudian superego frantically trying to stamp out impulses that civilization has deemed inadmissible. The wanderings of the mind must be sorted. The instincts must be disciplined. In our effort to extend and direct her attention, we are also trying to subdue her.

All childrearing involves subduing impulses, just as the regulation of our own attention involves rejecting some stimuli in favour of others. Perhaps children with ADHD are those who have more of the inconvenient impulses that require subduing—a form of moral bad luck. We all divert our attention from certain impulses and toward others as part of the grand trade-off required to enter the social contract. Parenting is the process of dragging our children out of the state of nature.

When we confer diagnoses like "ADHD," we try to avoid the connotation of something that must be subdued. Notwithstanding the loaded language of "deficit" and "disorder," we strive to discuss ADHD in non-judgmental terms, referring to a neutral feature of a child's cognitive settings, or even as a strength. This double-speak glosses over the fact that we implicitly measure and evaluate attention in both educational and clinical terms. Attention deficit is a condition that can't be judged because it can't be controlled, yet in the very act of naming it, we stipulate that it must be controlled.

Meta-cognition—another form of attention—steps in from contemporary educational jargon to smooth out this apparent contradiction. Children are supposed to come to know themselves as learners, to become educational psychologists of their own minds. By understanding their respective mental processes, students will ostensibly cultivate habits that are most conducive to their way of learning. The newly diagnosed child with ADHD—or, at least, her parents—can find cheery websites offering guidance on how to identify and respond to lapses in the desirable kind of attention. Letting kids in on the problem is part of the hack.

As soon as she was identified as having ADHD, my daughter began proudly declaring that she knew all about attention and that this knowledge would serve her well, mimicking the platitudes that she had absorbed from the adults around her. A skeptical relative asked her: "Do you know what attention

deficit is?" My daughter confidently answered: "It's when Mommy doesn't pay enough attention to me."

PART 3: ME: THE ABSENT-MINDED PROFESSOR

Tell me if you've been here before. I'm trying to get my kids ready for bed. I see the toothpaste applied to the toothbrush, the brush lifted to the mouth. There is now a lull when we will not be communicating for a full two minutes, according to received dental wisdom. I unconsciously reach for my phone, which, of course, waits in my pocket. Does it even matter whether I felt it buzz? Seconds later, and already toggling between several apps, I register a call of "Mom?" I glance up from my phone, but I'm not really looking. Before my eyes is the tiny two-dimensional Scrabble grid that I was just contemplating, or the fast-paced text exchange with a friend that I don't want to drop when it's my turn, or likely both. It takes me a second to switch back to the weekday evening in the children's bathroom. The other child, the one who is not brushing her teeth, needs me to look at a red mark on her elbow. I quickly triage, mumbling that it will heal by itself. Meanwhile, child number one has finished brushing and needs a towel. My voice responds while my eyes remain glued to the screen, certain that I can navigate this banal parenting situation on autopilot. Besides, that wasn't a full two minutes, and I'm about to drop a 45-point Scrabble word. "Mom!" Sorry, honey. I'm here.

Get Phones out of Moms Now.

Attention is not only about memory, or learning, or managing perceptual overstimulation. Attention is a basic emotional need. When our attention is corrupted, other individuals also suffer.

In our contemporary hubbub over the crisis of attention, the suggestion that it might be an essentially relational capacity, or even an ethical obligation, is gauche. That attention has value goes without saying; it's implied by all our handwringing about its disappearance. But this value is mostly indexed to the overall capitalist individualist values of self-improvement, efficiency, and consumption. The way we talk about the "attention economy" suggests that the purpose of attention can be explained by the logic of the market. Being distracted is bad because it costs time and, ultimately, money. Checking texts while trying to accomplish a work task takes an unrecognized toll on our performance because of the "switch-cost effect."[19] Good workers and employees should minimize such effects. This framing extends to discussions of education, where the chief damage of corrupted attention is measured in lower grades, weaker job skills, and squandered competitive potential.

---

[19] Hari, "Attention."

Iris Murdoch, writing in 1970, argued that morality depends on "attention to individuals, human individuals or individual realities of other kinds."[20] Rejecting the language of *choice* that was dominant in moral philosophy at the time, she emphasized the role of attention in acquiring moral *vision*: attention allows us to 'see' others clearly and justly.[21] This is the opposite of a consumerist mindset in which we bestow our attention in proportion to the attractiveness of an object selected from an infinite menu of things to consume. To regard other humans with that kind of attention risks subsuming them into our own quest for mastery of some kind—a narcissistic project that continental ethicists would regard as misguided. While he may not use the word "attention," Levinas sets the benchmark for non-analytic ethics by describing ethics as prior to knowledge, prior even to ontology, for we come into existence as humans only by humbling ourselves in the face of the Other. Simone Weil echoes Levinas when she writes that, in attention, "[t]he soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth."[22] Weil's template for this receptive ideal of attention is prayer. In fact, for Weil, as for Levinas, God (or a conception of the infinite) is the necessary condition of ethics between humans: it is only via an appreciation of something that totally transcends the self that we can potentially assume our responsibility to another who is not-I.

In French, the language of Weil and Levinas, "attend" [*attendre*] means "to wait." An "attendant" might have historically been a servant who "waited on" the every need and whim of a noble person, making the attendant a person whose cardinal quality (or job description) was pure patience. We may think that such unilateral attention is the opposite of justice—one person renouncing their ego entirely in the service of another—but Weil argues that a patient responsiveness to the real needs of others is both necessary for justice and the definition of attention as such. On this conception, most of us are not paying attention most of the time. According to Weil, "the capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it

[20] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1970), 36-7. Murdoch was strongly influenced by Weil and credits her with making attention the central concept in ethics, though there are differences between their conceptions. See Lawrence Blum, "Iris Murdoch," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* eds. Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (Fall 2023 Edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/murdoch/.

[21] Christopher Cordner, "To See 'Justly and Lovingly': What Did Iris Murdoch Mean by Attention?" *ABC,* July 11, 2019, https://www.abc.net.au/religion/iris-murdoch-and-the-meaning-of-attention/11301690.

[22] Simone Weil, "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God" in *Waiting on God*, trans. Emma Craufurd (New York, NY: Taylor & Francis, 1951), 36. Levinas fiercely criticized Weil, especially on theological points, though they are not believed to have met in person. See Robert Charles Reed, "Decreation as Substitution: Reading Simone Weil through Levinas," *The Journal of Religion* 93, no. 1 (2013): 25-40.

is a miracle. Nearly all those who think they have this capacity do not possess it."[23]

This radical rejection of attention as a quantifiable, click-based value in favour of attention as the highest interpersonal virtue helps explain what is going wrong in the scene with my children getting ready for bed. I think that when we become parents, many of us achieve a version of this selflessness that allows us to wait on a totally dependent other, with no expectation of reciprocity. The baby in our arms is the closest thing to the miracle of attention that we may ever experience. It is hackneyed to observe that, as time passes, the exercise of virtuous attention gives way to the familiar juggling act of modern life. We cannot always give undivided attention, nor do we consider it good role modelling to constantly efface ourselves in the service of our children's whims. But perhaps our current condition strains parental attention in especially nefarious ways. The child becomes a human pop-up window, vying with other contenders for our attention on screens everywhere.

There is pressure, especially on mothers, to override such category mistakes through sheer affect. Idealizing attention as a moral capacity, as Weil and Murdoch do, may exacerbate this. From the middleman of the Infinite to the truth of the Other, it is a short detour to fold love into the definition of attention. Murdoch describes attention as casting a "just and *loving* gaze upon an individual reality" and for Weil, "[a]ttention can be seen as love, for just as attention consents to the existence of another, love requires the recognition of a reality outside of the self, and thus de-centers the self and its particularity."[24]

In my relationships with Dad and children, I see that love and attention are related, and I vehemently resist equating them. If love is attention, why does my love for my father and my love for my children get expressed in different forms and degrees of attention? Why are we sometimes less patient with those we love, rather than more patient? What if love isn't enough? Moreover, while love entails obligation, there is no obligation to love. If attention is a human need, we must be able to meet it through a variety of relationships, irrespective of how we feel. I don't want the ethics of attention to depend on God or on a purified sentiment that only exists, if ever, in moments of tremendous intimacy. I want to stand by a non-ideal theory of the ethics of attention, in which we can be accountable for how our attention affects each other without making servitude the threshold.[25]

---

[23] Weil, "Reflections," 36.

[24] Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, 33, emphasis added; A. Rebecca Rozelle-Stone and Benjamin P. Davis, "Simone Weil," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* eds. Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (Summer 2023 Edition), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/simone-weil/.

[25] Murdoch explicitly says that love and justice entail the "idea of perfection," but that we as humans can never be perfect (Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, 23, 27); in this sense, I don't take her to be defending an ideal theory.

For similar reasons, I reject accounts that posit love as a necessary ingredient in teaching or social justice. In her essay "Teaching with Love," bell hooks argues that love is characterized by "care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust."[26] She could easily have used the word "attention," especially on a Weilian definition, to capture some or all of these moral activities. Weil also connects the love-attention dyad to education in a short essay called "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God," though her focus is on learning more than teaching.[27] In this eccentric piece of educational philosophy, she argues that attention is a unified faculty regardless of its object. Speaking of both the student's quest for understanding and a religious form of love, Weil says: "Happy then are those who pass their adolescence and youth in developing this power of attention."[28]

The teacher who experiences her students as "permanently distracted and congenitally distractible" may thrill to these words written by a French Christian mystic over 70 years ago.[29] Would that these students come to appreciate the unparalleled rewards of studious attention! This is not just another short-sighted cry of "Kids these days." Students have never before had to summon the attention to read a book while holding an immersive interface containing the entire world in the palm of their hand. But neither have we.

We all suffer from compromised attention, even as we are also always paying attention to something. We all occasionally experience the frustrations of a disobedient mind. Some of the causes are shared; some are new and deliberately intrusive; some are inevitable parts of the human condition. I am not sure what is gained by fretting about a generalized collapse of attention in culture at large. Attention is not a monolithic capacity that can be quantified on an MRI or given a price tag in a corporate boardroom. *Pace* Weil, it is also not a rare virtue that requires a divine intermediary.

My anecdotal observations about how attention operates in three generations of my family suggest that there is attention in unexpected places and that its limits take many forms. Rather than obsess over how to recapture and extend our attention, perhaps we could focus on how these limits are impacting us.[30] What goods are we forsaking when we feel our attention is corrupted? Under what circumstances does attention come more naturally to us? What, and who, deserves our attention? Dwelling on these questions has not fundamentally changed my capacity for attention, but it has helped me come closer to understanding its place in my life.

---

[26] bell hooks, "Heart to Heart: Teaching with Love" in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), 131.
[27] Murdoch also explicitly connects attention in the context of relationships to learning (*Sovereignty*, 31).
[28] Weil, "Reflections," 36.
[29] Haidt, "Phones."
[30] This re-framing is inspired by Polina Kukar, who asks what our failures of empathy may be telling us.

I would be remiss to end this address without expressing my thanks for your attention.

RESPONSE TO PHIL SMITH LECTURE

ORDINARY ATTENTION

Samantha Deane
Boston College

Recently, while I was supposed to be watching my two-year-old brush her teeth, I, like Bialystok, was on my phone. On this particular night, I was scrolling through Instagram and happened to read a post about "Montessori parenting" that advised parents to *never* interrupt their child's imaginary play. Though I'm skeptical of nearly all one-dimensional parenting advice that treats mothers as both savants and idiots and usually scoff at the decontextualized "advice," this admonishment got me. You see, my toddler is very good at dodging any activity that appears to limit her playtime. When she should be attending to brushing her teeth, she is also preparing 75 stuffed animals for bed. If I don't interrupt her imaginary play, if I don't curate her attention, both of us will end up sleeping on the bathroom floor. This is untenable, for me at least. Yet I do find some of the parenting advice that has grown up in this Montessorian vein persuasive: children need time and space to become enamored with the world.

Is complete and utter absorption attention? It is surely one kind of attention. But it is not the sum of what we mean by attention when we begin to wring our hands about contemporary crises of attention. In her beautiful essay, Lauren Bialystok asks us to recall moments that appear to highlight failures of attention: impatience with a parent who is experiencing cognitive decline, parenting with a phone in your hand, a diagnosis of ADHD. In each scenario, Bialystok asks us to think about what it means to attend. Does it mean sitting in rapture, listening intently, prosocial coordination? Is attention simply doing one thing for an extended period of time? Or is it doing the right thing, at the right time and for the right reasons? The problem as Bialystok notes, is that attention, especially as we use it in educational discourses, denotes both of these: rapture and executive function.

This problem is further compounded when we account for the cybernetic texture of modern life wherein our attention is actively cultivated for corporate profit.[1] Attention-holding architecture, says visual artist Jenny Odell, "enacts some kind of interruption, a removal from the space of familiarity."[2]

---

[1] Jenny Odell, *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy* (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House, 2020); Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck, *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business*, Revised edition (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2002).
[2] Odell, *How to Do Nothing*, 9.

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

Attention holding spaces manifest a pause in time wherein we are compelled and invited to pull back from habit, institution, role and routine. Odell draws on the example of her visits to The Rose Garden in Oakland, CA. In The Rose Garden, but also libraries, museums, and walking labyrinths, Odell sees an invitation to do nothing manifest time and space for a kind of attentive contemplation that resuscitates possibility, initiates change, and contributes to our flourishing. Of course, the internet is an attention-holding architecture too. Yet, unlike the generative nothingness of a walk through the woods, where our attention is held by our body, the cybernetic hold of social media demands productive use. The social media sites on which we labor over algorithmic versions of ourselves are scripted spaces that exclude, direct, and supervise and orchestrate use. The internet is intrusive; it is designed to demand our exogenous attention. Exogenous attention is queued by the fire alarm, the ding of the phone, the cry of the baby, menstrual cramps. Exogenous attention is distracting; it is also embodied.[3] Adrenaline races with the blare of the fire alarm or the cry of the baby, dopamine courses through you at the loving sound of the message chime on your phone, abdominal pain causes all other thoughts to eddy out of your head. The attentive introspection Odell finds in walks through the rose garden are crowded out by the repressive and frenzied world of pointless talk that feeds our need to feel or be useful.[4]

When we talk about attention as if we control it, we are talking about endogenous attention. "Endogenous attention" is the capacity we employ when we try to *pay* attention.[5] Tom Cochrane calls this kind of attention mental agency. Endogenous attention is a self-motivated activity born of a goal-directed desire. You set out to read in an airport. You decide to parent without the phone, attending with all of your might to the imaginary world of stuffed animals that have taken over your life. The trouble, as you might already see, is that endogenous attention is in conflict with exogenous, and it is not just a cybernetic technology thing, it is a body thing. Ignoring the body further entrenches the problem, doing so positions our attention as something, once again, that we must master.

---

[3] Katherine A. MacLean et al., "Interactions between Endogenous and Exogenous Attention during Vigilance," *Attention, Perception & Psychophysics* 71, no. 5 (July 2009): 1042–58, https://doi.org/10.3758/APP.71.5.1042.

[4] Odell's interpretation is similar to the discourse carried on by Ahmed and Honig. Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use*, Illustrated edition (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2019); Bonnie Honig, *A Feminist Theory of Refusal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021); Odell, *How to Do Nothing*.

[5] Tom Cochrane, "Imagination, Endogenous Attention, and Mental Agency," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, April 21, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-023-09909-y.

ATTENTION AS EMBODIED

Imagine for a moment a couple (let's leave love out of this for right now). They are out on a date, enjoying the evening and one another's company. Desire sparks. They head home to have sex. Each is captivated by the other. Each is attending to the other party's needs. But in so doing each is also attending to her own body. There is a dance of attention in sex. Exogenous attention is piqued as the other person's mind and body stimulate yours. Endogenous attention prolongs the event, calls in the future; it makes an evening of a moment. The goal: whether to have sex, to give and/or receive an orgasm, or even a loving relationship, it is mediated by the interplay of the other party's desire, your body, and theirs. During sex, we are crucially receptive, dual, connected and vulnerable, and the varied sources of our attention come into relation.

In this spirit, Katherine Angel argues that "how we understand sex is inextricable from how we understand what it is to be a person. We cannot deny that we are flexible, social creatures, constantly ingesting, incorporating, and reforming what we take in. The fantasy of total autonomy, and of total self-knowledge is not only a fantasy; it's a nightmare."[6] Sex is a site of intimacy where we both learn and unlearn who we are and who we want to be as our body is aroused by an other. Though some might find the fantasy of complete mental agency, or total control of our capacity to pay attention, appealing or even desirous, I think it is both impossible and dangerous. As the example of sex reveals, attention is a dance between embodied and mental states. No space or activity can hold (capture) the sum total of our attention, when our bodies are always primed for response.

I want to suggest that in thinking about intimate encounters, we have the opportunity to develop an embodied, integrated, and flexible, that is a non-ideal, ethics of attention, (albeit one that runs a bit afoul of Bialystok's parameters). What qualities is Bialystok looking for in a nonideal ethics of attention? In her words,

> If attention is a human need, we must be able to meet it through a variety of relationships, irrespective of how we feel. I don't want the ethics of attention to depend on God or on a purified sentiment that only exists, if ever, in moments of tremendous intimacy. I want to stand by a non-ideal theory of the ethics of attention, in which we can be accountable for how our attention affects each other without making servitude the threshold.[7]

[6] Katherine Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent* (London; New York: Verso, 2021), 114.
[7] Lauren Bialystok, "Learning Attention: A Study in Three Generations," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024): 18.

Bialystok wants an ethics of attention that is relational but not intimate— sex appears to present a violation. Sex is *the* intimate encounter. Yet since at least the 60's, feminists have implored us to understand that the personal (the intimate) is public. Family relationships, parent/child relationships; friendships; spiritual relations; sexual relationships; non-sexual cohabitation; pedagogical relationships: all of these are deeply personal; they also have public significance. In each, someone is bearing something in the face of the other. In each, we learn what it is to negotiate attention in community. When sex is not purified into an identity category (straight, gay, lesbian, bi, trans), a biological activity, or an institution (marriage), it is a messy and always relational negotiation of two (or more) corporeal persons.[8] Leaving aside the specific ways in which individuals seek pleasure and whether these require servitude, the concept, context, and activities of sex urge us to consider anew the ways in which our intimate lives school the dance of our attention. I can think of few other human activities that choregraph human response, desire, and will.

If we want an ethics of attention that is non-ideal and relational—then we need one that is premised on real experiences with the messy world of embodied others, and these are usually intimate. Sex is one encounter that demands we articulate relationality as an embodied attempt to moderate which features of a context compel our exogenous and endogenous attention. Focusing on the activity and experience of sex, and not, for instance, the environments that aim to hold our attention, we are forced to grapple with the nonideal ethics attending to the intimate space and time we share with other fleshy beings.

In *The Argonauts,* Maggie Nelson quips that she is tired of the Badiou's and Zizek's of the world waxing metaphysically about encountering the sanctified Other.[9] We need more theories of self, who/that we make up as we go. Theories that are tethered to the intimate sites of encounter that sustain us, thrust us back into our bodies just as we venture into sites less obviously marked by personal intimacy.

This too is the spirit of Bialystok's address. It is perhaps why she too picks sites of intimacy (perhaps not tremendous, what do we mean by that word anyway?) to interrogate attention. If ethics is about the worthwhile pleasures of gratifying yourself and gratifying another, then an ethics of attention is first encountered in those intimate sites of need and gratification.

A Non-ideal Ethics of Attention: Feeling Alive

In fact, Nelson's *Argonaut's* is one version of a non-ideal ethics of attention. Drawing on D. W. Winnicott, Nelson explores a relational path winding toward an ethics of being a self in the world: "feeling real is not reactive

[8] Oliver Davis and Tim Dean, *Hatred of Sex* (University of Nebraska Press, 2022).
[9] Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts*, Reprint edition (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2016), 54.

to external stimuli, nor is it an identity. It is a sensation—a sensation that spreads. Among other things, it makes one want to live." [10] The alternate title to Nelson's *Argonauts* is *Why Winnicott Now*.[11]

Attention is alive—it too is sensation— it spreads and reverberates as we receive and give attention to that which makes us feel alive, real.

The Velveteen Rabbit is a children's story written in 1922. Winnicott adherents applaud it for framing the melancholy of transitioning away from the rapture of imaginary play and toward the real. In the book, the old toy horse counsels the new toy rabbit. When the rabbit asks about becoming real, the toy horse responds,

> You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are real you can't be ugly except to people who don't understand.[12]

In relation to one another, we come alive. "We are for another by virtue of another," writes Nelson. For Winnicott as for Nelson and Bialystok, attention is a matter of embodied relation. What we stand to learn from Nelson, should we like to endeavor alongside Bialystok toward a fleshed out non-ideal ethics of ordinary attention, is that ordinary practices of paying attention breathe life into us just as they lay us bare.

Winnicott wrote about the ordinary devotions of a mother. This is the kind of attention that for some mothers brings with it an impossible ask: self-annihilation. For others, like Nelson, it presents the possibility of "eros without teleology."[13] For many of us, motherhood likely generates a vista of attention at both poles. In the miracle moments of early infancy, a tiny human appears before your postpartum body, devotion sharpens your attention but also poses a series of questions: Who am I? Who are you? Is this real? Are we separate or one? Is there a before and after? What is sleep?

Then, in the waning days of infancy, when your baby has become ambulatory and the long nights of nursing have passed into days of imaginary play, when attention, like hormones, level back out: attention shifts into its ordinary rhythm with moments of rapture and moments of banal scrolling easing into the background. You and baby become. You and child remain. You are the same and yet different. As Bialystok notes, when the miracle of attention fades,

---

[10] Nelson, *The Argonauts,* 14.

[11] Nelson, 19.

[12] Margery Williams and Matthew Kelly, *The Velveteen Rabbit: 100th Anniversary Edition* (Little Sparrow, 2021).

[13] Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 44.

we learn to give and receive attention in ways that nurture who we want to be and who those in our care are becoming.

Parenthood, like sex, lays us bare. In these sites, of tremendous, yes, tremendous, intimacy, we learn the possibility of aliveness. But, miracles of attention, the aspirational concept that is "bare attention," happen on the regular, this is the secret.[14] The principal job of a nonideal ethics of attention is to help us moderate the liminal movement between moments of embodied rapture and frenetic attempts to attend to the "pop-up windows." That these pop-up windows might sometimes be filled with the real bodies of those who also hold us in rapture (our children, pets, lovers, spiritual advisors) is okay, I think. They, these intimate relations, teach us how to attend; they remind us what it is to feel alive. They remind us that paying attention is worth the cost.

To return to the question: should you interrupt your child when they are deeply invested in play? Yes, the answer is yes. There are times for absorption and rapture; these come upon us and they are glorious. We also live in a social context. The world of becoming is a heady mix of learning to attend to one another's company. Bialystok is right on the whole, we do not need a divine intermediary to grab ahold of the rare virtue that is attention. But we do need intimacy, sites of private articulation and disarticulation, to grasp the ethical thrust of learning to attend.

[14] Bialystok, "Learning Attention," 12.

LOOK CLOSER: SCRUTINIZING HIGHER EDUCATION'S CONCEPTION OF ATTENTION THROUGH NEURODIVERGENT EYES

Jennifer Hough
University of South Dakota

Dramatic changes in education have occurred in the last twenty years due to technological developments, including social media, smartphones, increasing access to the internet, the move to learning management systems, the growth of online classes, and artificial intelligence, just to name a few. Most recently, a global pandemic caused higher education institutions to experiment with remote learning and different course models such as HyFlex. In the same twenty years, two different generations, demographically distinct from previous generations of college students, have moved into universities with the expectation that a college education is necessary for success. As such, it is unsurprising that higher education needs have shifted. Yet, in many ways, higher education has not changed at all. Structurally, it is more of the same in terms of the scheduling of classes, classroom management, syllabus policies, grading and assessment, and accommodations.

The gates of academia may seem open to all who wish to attend, yet the academic cultural walls are hard to climb once inside. The structures and systems of higher education are predisposed to accept and support specific types of students with specific expectations for those students, based on long-held higher education conceptions of intelligence and how it is demonstrated in the classroom. Bernard Stiegler articulates deep attention as being needed to solve the "battle for intelligence" and to counteract the problems of ADHD.[1] This conception fits with the structural setup of higher education, ignoring the diverse forms of brain function, behaviors, and intelligence that exist among the student population and the world. Notions of the hegemonic good student,[2] academic excellence, and cultural capital acquired in higher education's hidden curriculum[3] are tied up in conceptions of attention that reach back to Eurocentric ideas of learning. However, neurodivergent students and their capacities do not fit so neatly into the boxes of higher education, and neither do their forms of attention; yet, often, these students are penalized through classroom management

---

[1] Bernard Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).
[2] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 2020), 51-75.
[3] Michael Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum,* 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2019); José Victor Orón Semper and Maribel Blasco, "Revealing the Hidden Curriculum in Higher Education," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 37, (2018): 481-498. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-018-9608-5.

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

policies and traditional ideas of structured education.[4] Rather than trying to force these students into such boxes, this paper will argue it is necessary to reconceptualize what deep attention might be for these students and what educational possibilities exist if that is done.

Conceptions of the Attention Economy, Deep Attention and Hyper Attention

The attention economy is conceptualized as the new modern economy in which attention is the scarcest resource and exists as a valuable commodity with a growing industry of companies that specialize in capturing and measuring attention in a world where information runs rampant.[5] This attention economy has created changes in the ways people work, play, and learn with social media being a major driver in such shifts.[6] There has been much worry and conversation regarding the loss of attention (or what consumes attention) with discussion over causes and what could be done to bring back the ability to focus.

Bernard Stiegler conceptualizes attention across multiple works and in doing so, ADHD is brought into the discussion multiple times.[7] For Stiegler, attention is much more than concentration, instead involving the meshing of past experiences described as primary and secondary retentions and anticipation of future experiences described as protentions; attention itself is the accumulation of these retentions and protentions.[8] Stiegler states, “It is an accumulation of experiences in what I have previously called secondary retentions that the horizons of anticipation are formed.”[9] Stiegler adds the concept of tertiary retentions, which are externalized memories that transcend the individual and create the collective memory, consisting of technological artifacts (ranging from

[4] M.L.N. Birdwell and Keaton Bayley, “When the Syllabus is Ableist: Understanding How Class Policies Fail Disabled Students,” *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 49, no. 3 (2022): 220-237. https://doi.org/10.58680/tetyc202231803; Juuso Niemenin and Henri Pesonen, “Anti-ableist Pedagogies in Higher Education: A Systems Approach,” *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* 19, no. 4 (2022): 1-15. https://ro.uow.edu.au/jutlp/vol19/iss4/08/.
[5] Patrick Crogan and Samuel Kinsley, “Paying Attention: Towards a Critique of the Attention Economy,” *Culture Machine* 13 (2012): 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-023-04460-4.
[6] Samson Liberman, “Attention Deficit: Alienation in Platform Capitalism,” *Symposion* 8, no. 1 (2021): 79-88. https://doi.org/10.5840/symposion2021813.
[7] E.g., Bernard Stiegler, “Within the Limits of Capitalism, Economizing Means Taking Care,” Ars Industrialis. Accessed Mar 23, 2024, https://arsindustrialis.org/node/2922
[8] Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth*; Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery 1: The Hyperindustrial Epoch* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).
[9] Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery 1*, 65.

writing to art to video and more) containing this collective memory.[10] Attention itself is not an individual capacity but a psychic and social capacity.[11]

In *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, Stiegler discusses at length deep attention in contrast with hyper attention,[12] starting with Katherine Hayles's conception of deep attention and hyper attention.[13] Hayles describes deep attention as being "characterized by concentrating on a single object for long periods (say, a novel by Dickens), ignoring outside stimuli while so engaged, preferring a single information stream, and having a high tolerance for long focus times."[14] Hyper attention meanwhile is "characterized by switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom."[15] Hayles argues that higher education institutions must recognize the shift in cognitive modes that has occurred in recent generations and adapt accordingly. In articulating this shift, Hayles recognizes that both forms of attention have their advantages and that the development of deep attention occurred after that of hyper attention as deep attention requires certain environmental necessities that are luxuries—a quiet, secure environment with danger at bay. Deep attention is most effective at solving complex problems that are presented in a single medium, while hyper attention is useful for being flexible and adapting to rapidly changing environments with multiple information streams. Hayles argues a synergic combination of the two forms of attention should be cultivated to take advantage of each form's strengths.

Stiegler critiques Hayles's conceptualization of deep attention as focusing on duration rather than concentration, a distinction he makes in connection to his larger conceptualization of attention.[16] He argues that "attention's depth has less to do with duration than with the length of the circuits of transindividuation it activates…required precisely at the moment of learning, for this depth."[17] Further, Stiegler asserts that hyper attention, rather than focusing on multiple streams at once, instead is hyper*solicited*, meaning there are no circuits being activated, producing what he calls "*infra-attention,* a superficial form of attention that does not allow for length or complexity in mental connections.[18] Stiegler recognizes the implications of cultivating such a combination of deep attention and hyper attention proposed by Hayles and rejects it; he does not see the value in hyper attention, seeing it as more informational consumerism than

[10] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 2: Disorientation,* trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).
[11] Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth.*
[12] Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth*.
[13] Katherine Hayles, "Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes," *Profession* (2007): 187-199. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25595866.
[14] Hayles, "Hyper and Deep Attention," 187-199.
[15] Hayles, "Hyper and Deep Attention," 187-199.
[16] Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth*.
[17] Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth*, 80.
[18] Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth*, 80.

distributed attention, resulting in "an often hyperactive attentional *deficit*," and advocates strongly for a return to deep attention. Because he views attention as more than individual, as psychic and social, he argues that the cognitive shift from deep attention to hyper attention is a crisis of intergenerational relationships. Attention is created through intergenerational relationships in which the adults transmit experiences and knowledge to the next generations, "constructed of *retentions,* which then create *protentions,* that is, the expectations without which *attention* is impossible."[19]

Stiegler argues that Foucault's biopower[20] has been replaced by psychopower, a form of power focused on turning people into consumptive markets stimulated by media cultural institutions.[21] Such psychopower has resulted in the destruction of "attention itself, along with the ability to concentrate on an *object* of attention, which is a social faculty; the construction of such objects is, in fact, the construction of society itself, as civil space founded on [cultural] knowledge including social graces, expertise, and critical thinking (i.e., contemplation)."[22] Stiegler sees the form of deep attention as vital for the continuation of society, entrance into adulthood, and intelligence. As Stiegler articulates his argument, he claims even the ability to think is under threat, but that it is possible to win this "battle for intelligence" in the educational system by cultivating deep attention.[23]

Reproduction of Barriers and Conception of the "Good Student"

Stiegler is not wrong in arguing that educational institutions are one of the main distributors of cultural knowledge, and with that, cultural capital. Cultural capital is "an economy of cultural goods" that is considered legitimate, including the knowledge, skills, behaviors, language and other less tangible resources that accompany one's social class.[24] Connected to cultural capital is also Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, which can be defined as the dispositions that individuals learn over time, which organize their actions toward social situations.[25] Individuals can have multiple forms of expression organized by the habitus, but for these expressions to count, they must be validated by the institutions in which they operate. According to Bourdieu, institutions do not fully determine how individuals will act, behave, or talk because individuals have different life histories that have taught them lessons about what is

---

[19] Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth*, 8.
[20] Michel Foucault, "Bio-Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 257-290.
[21] Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth*.
[22] Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth,* 13.
[23] Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth*.
[24] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (New York: Routledge, 1987).
[25] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1990).

appropriate in different situations (and if they do not know, they improvise). In addition, institutions cannot exist if people do not collectively behave according to some semblance of what the institution sanctions as appropriate behavior.

Higher education institutions distribute cultural capital to those who make it through their hallowed halls and beyond. Education has often been presented as the equalizer for students, a transformative opportunity for students to move up in society, yet this is not true for everyone. Michael Apple notes, "[j]ust as our dominant economic institutions are structured so that those who inherit or already have economic capital do better, so too does cultural capital act in the same way."[26] Those students who know and understand the norms, expectations, and values in higher education institutions are at an advantage and already equipped to succeed.[27] The educational system sets up the facade that everyone exists on the same playing field with the same resources, and thus, the winners have earned their way to the top, even though entrance to the field of competition comes with stigmatized backgrounds, experiences, and educational differences. The likelihood of reaching the highest levels of education reduces with each increase of level, especially for those students who do not fit the mold, although such a possibility is never precluded. Although scholars like Bourdieu, Apple, and others are referring to the influence of class in educational institutions, this can be extended to students who do not fit the mold of the "good student" that has been in place since the beginning of higher education.

The image of the "good student" permeates higher education and is based upon previous educational experiences, requires years of preparation to become, and involves more than academic prowess. Socially appropriate behaviors are included as well, such as timeliness, active participation in class, organization, "paying attention," following the rules, respect for authority, responsibility, good work ethic, etc. This has often been described as the hidden curriculum of education.[28] This good student image exists as its own form of cultural capital in the minds of students, parents, administration, staff, and faculty. For faculty who may conceive of themselves as former good students, this conception travels with them into the classes they teach and guides their expectations, teaching methods, and policies. This kind of thinking allows educators and their institutions to avoid dealing with the complex issues that surround difficulties in higher education, some of which stem from the ways in which higher education is conducted. Students who are already disenfranchised are further stigmatized as "not measuring up" to standards that are centered in middle to upper-class norms and designed for wealthy, white students going back hundreds of years. What is considered normal is rarely questioned; only

[26] Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*.
[27] Leslie Ann Locke and Teniell Trolian, "Microaggressions and Social Class Identity in Higher Education and Student Affairs," *New Directions for Student Services* 2018, no. 162 (2018): 63-74. https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20262.
[28] Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum*; Orón Semper and Blasco, "Revealing the Hidden Curriculum," 481-498.

expectations for students to "measure up" are established. Moreover, the knowledge that students come with is not considered legitimate. Instead, it is something that needs to be fixed or corrected, positioning students as the source of the problem rather than addressing the failure of the current educational structure to match the students, a structure that has long been ableist in its design.

Students can internalize this deficit thinking as well, which can result in students becoming detached in class and struggling even more, confirming that they are not good students.[29] Angela Valenzuela notes that this detachment from the learning environment can also occur when students perceive their knowledge, identities, and values are not acknowledged or valued in return.[30] The current neoliberal practices of higher education, such as increasing class sizes and expectations for administrative labor from faculty, add strains that disincentivize them from reaching out to students perceived to be struggling.[31] Internalized deficit thinking for students can run up against the teacher's concept of the "good student," as detachment and disruptive behaviors do not fall in line with the idea of a "good student." If a professor (even mistakenly) perceives that a student does not care about the class, there is even less motivation for the teacher to reach out with support.[32] At the very least, this could continue a hostile relationship with education for the student.

This relationship is most evident in the student's relationship with the faculty member. It is the instructors, lecturers, and professors who provide access to recommendation letters, connections to internships, resources, scholarship help, etc., opening up not only cultural capital but also social capital. To access these forms of capital, students need to develop close relationships with their professors; those most likely to accomplish this are those considered to fit the concept of the good student. The meeting of students and teachers creates the classroom learning experiences through the hidden curriculum, intentional or not, which translates into these relationships.

Neurodivergence in Higher Education

While the hidden curriculum of higher education has yet to change, what has changed is the student population. College populations have diversified more than ever across a variety of diversity markers.[33] Included in this is the

---

[29] Manu Sharma, "Seeping Deficit Thinking Assumptions Maintain the Neoliberal Education Agenda: Exploring Three Conceptual Frameworks of Deficit Thinking in Inner-City Schools," *Education and Urban Society* 50, no. 2 (2016): 136-154. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124516682301.

[30] Angela Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling: US Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999).

[31] Sharma, "Seeping Deficit Thinking Assumptions," 136-154.

[32] Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling*.

[33] Leslie Davis and Richard Fry, "College Faculty Have Become More Racially and Ethnically Diverse, but Remain Far Less So than Students," Pew Research Center, July 31, 2019. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/07/31/us-college-faculty-

increase in neurodivergent students attending college, both domestically and internationally.[34] Neurodiversity acts as an umbrella term, including Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, Meares-Irlen Syndrome, Tourette's Syndrome, Synesthesia, and other similar atypical conditions.[35] The term arose in the late 1990s out of the work of Judy Singer, an autism and disability activist and Australian sociologist, as a way to shift perceptions from a deficit perspective to one of different strengths and abilities and disrupt ableist thinking and structures.[36]

Higher education has long been structured in ableist ways, and until the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, there were no requirements to adjust these structures. However, even with the ADA in place for the last three decades, there is still much about higher education that retains this ableist structure. Fiona Campbell defines ableism as "a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability then is cast as a diminished state of being human."[37] Critical disability studies examines ableist structures in higher education, and scholars frame it as a methodology that examines not the bodily or mental capacities but instead the social norms and conditions that stigmatize the disability community.[38] Dianne Pothier and Richard Devlin point out, "[d]isability is not fundamentally a question of medicine or health, nor is it just an issue of sensitivity and compassion; rather, it is a question of politics and

student-diversity/; Melanie Hanson, "College Enrollment & Student Demographic Statistics," Education Data Initiative, July 26, 2022. https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics.

[34] Colin Henning, Laura Summerfeldt, and James Parker, "ADHD and Academic Success in University Students: The Important Role of Impaired Attention," *Journal of Attention Disorders* 26, no. 6 (2021): 893-901. https://doi.org/10.1177/10870547211036758; Theo Bakker et al., "Background and Enrollment Characteristics of Students with Autism in Higher Education," *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders* 67 (2019). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2019.101424; Marco Pino and Luigina Mortarim, "The Inclusion of Students with Dyslexia in Higher Education: A Systematic Review Using Narrative Synthesis," *Dyslexia* 20, no. 4 (2014); 346-369. https://doi.org/10.1002/dys.1484.

[35] Christopher Luchs, "Considering Neurodiversity in Learning Design and Technology," *TechTrends* 65 (2021): 923. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-021-00667-9.

[36] Judy Singer, *NeuroDiversity: The Birth of an Idea,* (Judy Singer: 2017).

[37] Fiona Kumari Campbell, "Inciting Legal Fictions: 'Disability's' Date with Ontology and the Ableist Body of Law," *Griffith Law Review* 10 (2001): 44. https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au/bitstream/handle/10072/3714/17563_1.pdf?sequence=1.

[38] Julie Avril Minich, "Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now," *Lateral* 5, no. 1 (2016). https://csalateral.org/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-critical-disability-studies-now-minich/.

power(lessness), power over, and power to."[39] It is within this framework that neurodivergence and neurodiversity have come to describe not a deficiency but a naturally occurring variation in brain development that results in different strengths and challenges like anyone else who may be neurotypical.[40] Strengths may include better memory, ability to solve complex mathematical calculations in one's head, easy visualization of three-dimensional objects, aptitude for repetition, ability to learn things quickly, and others.[41] While neurodiversity contains many different types of brain variations, as Stiegler focused on ADHD as an issue with deep attention, this will be the focus of the remainder of this paper.

Neurodivergence and Attention

It is easy to see why ADHD is the subject of focus when talking about a deficit in attention as it is right in the name of the disorder—attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. ADHD is "a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that shows clear evidence of interference with social, academic, or occupational functioning in two or more settings," such as in the home or school.[42] There are a variety of therapies and treatments for ADHD, including education, behavior therapy, help with social skills, and medication. All of these can prove helpful in reducing ADHD symptoms, especially if used in a combination of treatments. There is also research that shows good academic success for students with ADHD, provided the students are supported well.[43] It is a matter of what these supports look like.

In higher education, the practice until now, as pointed out earlier, is to fix the student (usually through accommodations) rather than examine barriers within the structures and pedagogy. A common pattern is a student presents a documented diagnosis of ADHD to the accommodations office on campus, which then decides what accommodations are needed for the student and sends a letter of accommodation to the professors. All of this is done without knowing how the courses are set up or what policies exist in the course; in addition, the letter that is sent to all professors is the same. The accommodations may not even

[39] Dianne Pothier and Richard Devlin, "Introduction: Toward a Critical Theory of Dis-citizenship," in *Critical Disability Theory: Essays in Philosophy, Policy, and Law,* eds. Dianne Pothier and Richard Devlin (Toronto: UBC Press, 2006), 2.
[40] Cleveland Clinic, "Neurodivergent," Cleveland Clinic, June 6, 2022. https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/symptoms/23154-neurodivergent.
[41] Scott Robertson and Ari Ne'eman, "Autistic Acceptance, the College Campus, and Technology: Growth of Neurodiversity in Society and Academia," *Disability Studies in the Undergraduate Classroom* 28, no. 4 (2008). https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v28i4.146; Cleveland Clinic, 2022.
[42] Henning, Summerfeldt, and Parker, "ADHD and Academic Success," 893-901.
[43] Lorna Hamilton and Stephanie Petty, "Compassionate Pedagogy for Neurodiversity in Higher Education: A Conceptual Analysis," *Frontiers in Psychology,* (2023): 2. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1093290.

be applicable, e.g., extended exam time for a course that does not have exams but may have other pedagogical or structural issues that the accommodations do not address. Students often do not know the range of accommodations that exist and instead are set up with a pre-existing set of accommodations that may not meet their needs.[44] Common accommodations for ADHD students include audio recording of lectures, testing in separate rooms, additional time for exams, audio books, notetaking services, distraction-free rooms, adaptive equipment, and other technology.[45] However, there is no feedback loop for the existing practices in the course to be accommodated. Instead, if something is not working the student must return to the accommodations office to request changes.[46] This indicates that it is not the structures or pedagogy being adjusted, but the student. This is all dependent on a student having a diagnosis to begin with, which can be difficult to get for students who have little access to healthcare. It may seem as if this works in the moment. Yet, ADHD students are often masking their behaviors in order to fit in and avoid negative criticisms from other classmates and the instructor. Masking involves repressing natural responses and is emotionally and mentally exhausting for the student, which can lead to a variety of mental health issues.[47] Moreover, while providing accommodations to students may allow a university to comply with the law, this is the bare minimum and does not constitute prioritizing pedagogical practices that affirm ADHD students. To do this, higher education institutions need to incorporate universal design in everything, physically and educationally.[48]

The advocation for universal design for learning (UDL) is not new. The Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) published the framework in 2002 to design instruction to meet the needs of all learners, with multiple means of engagement, representation, action, and expression of learning.[49] Since then, a large body of literature has accumulated, documenting its success in a variety of educational settings and contexts, including higher education.[50] The benefit of

---

[44] Jay Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).
[45] Robert Weis, Christina Till, and Celeste Erickson, "Assessing and Overcoming the Functional Impact of ADHD in College Students: Evidence-Based Disability Determination and Accommodation Decision-Making," *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* 32, no. 3 (2019): 279-295. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1236801.
[46] Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*.
[47] Hamilton and Petty, "Compassionate Pedagogy for Neurodiversity," 2.
[48] Zahava Friedman and Denise Nash-Luckenbach, "Has the Time Come for Heutagogy? Supporting Neurodivergent Learners in Higher Education," *Higher Education* (2023): 2. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-023-01097-7.
[49] CAST, "Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.2," Accessed Apr 2, 2024. https://udlguidelines.cast.org/.
[50] Theresa Cumming and Megan Rose, "Exploring Universal Design for Learning as an Accessibility Tool in Higher Education: A Review of the Current Literature," *The Australian Educational Researcher* 49 (2022): 1025-1043. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-021-00471-7; Beth Fornauf and Joy Erickson, "Toward

UDL is that courses are designed as accessible for everyone from the beginning, including ADHD students as well as other neurodivergent students, making accommodations largely unnecessary. However, there still exist barriers to its widespread implementation, including a discourse of normalcy regarding ability that exists in higher education.[51] One of the major obstacles to UDL in higher education is the way in which professional development is approached as voluntary. Faculty are first rarely trained in effective teaching practices while in graduate school, and then are not required to participate in teaching and learning sessions once in professor roles, making widespread creation of accessible courses hard to achieve as each professor must decide to do it for themselves.

Stiegler is concerned with future generations not being able to tackle complex problems that face our current world, but more than that, he considers the destruction of attention to be a social crisis, a relationship crisis, one which must be remedied in order to take care of the youth and future generations, and that education must take steps to do so. However, three important factors are not considered. First, it is not that people with ADHD cannot pay attention as described in deep attention; it is that it just looks different than the neurotypical standard, nor do the behaviors that may accompany ADHD fit with what is considered good classroom behavior (e.g., stimming, in which repetitive movements or noises are made). There is also a phenomenon known as hyperfocus that is associated with ADHD and other forms of neurodiversity. Hyperfocus has four criteria consistently reported in research: an intense state of concentration or focus; when engaged in hyperfocus, unrelated external stimuli do not appear to be consciously perceived; to engage in hyperfocus, the task has to be fun or interesting; and during a hyperfocus state, task performance improves.[52] In addition to forms of attention such as hyperfocus being an aspect of ADHD, it is also important to note that complex problems require perspectives and ideas from across the board, meaning that cognitive diversity in the way people think is a benefit, not a disadvantage. Increased creativity and novel problem-solving abilities are associated with having ADHD.[53] But more importantly than this is that taking care of people involves not leaving them behind. To create inclusive learning environments, higher education must not rely on old methods of teaching but must open its doors to the students that are

---

an Inclusive Pedagogy Through Universal Design for Learning in Higher Education: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* 33, no. 2 (2022): 183-199. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1273677.

[51] Fornauf and Erickson, "Toward an Inclusive Pedagogy," 183-199.

[52] Brandon Ashinoff and Ahmad Abu-Akel, "Hyperfocus: The Forgotten Frontier of Attention," *Psychological Research* 85 (2021): 2. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00426-019-01245-8.

[53] George Bush, "Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and Attention Networks," *Neuropsychopharmacology* 35, no. 1 (2010): 278-300. https://doi.org/10.1038/npp.2009.120.

here already and build relationships with them, not with some imagined ideal of what they should be.

Conclusion

In 2022, philosopher Rosi Braidotti stated that even with "new ways of thinking about what we are becoming, what is becoming possible for us today with gene editing, with all the stem cell research, will all the amazing things that we have developed and discovered. And yet our values, our representations, our forms of self-understanding are still attached to older visions of the human."[54] This is higher education's issue in many cases, but certainly in the case of neurodivergent students. These students deserve a learning environment that is constructed to include them fully, not as an afterthought and not as something to be fixed. The students come to universities to learn, and it is the universities who must adjust to fit the students. First and foremost, universal design needs to be required across institutions along with required training for faculty about neurodivergence and its effects. For needed accommodations, conversations with the institution's ADA office and faculty need to happen so that the accommodations work effectively for the courses involved. Syllabi policies also need reworking to remove behavioral grading. Assessment of learning should be focused solely on learning rather than on creating compliant employees, a purpose that belongs outside of higher education.[55] These are just a few of the changes that could help welcome diverse learners. Such learning spaces can be transformative for everyone, but especially for neurodivergent students whose self-fulfilling prophecies of not being good students may stem from negative experiences of trying to conform, rather than learning how to work with their strengths. It is time to reimagine what higher education can be and move beyond one-dimensional solutions.

---

[54] CCCB, "Rosi Braidotti: 'The concept of human has always been associated with relations of power," YouTube Video, 9:43, March 17, 2022, https://youtu.be/mb2_a-UX1OE?si=BBma6dEvFkKF7Hik.

[55] Birdwell and Bayley, "When the Syllabus is Ableist," 220-237; Niemenin and Pesonen, "Anti-ableist Pedagogies," 1-15.

METAPHOR AND APOPHATIC IDENTITY

William Kuehnle
The Ohio State University

When confronted with the ineffable, poets turn to metaphor. Similarly, philosophers of education often employ metaphors and analogies to explain the functions of education (e.g., schools are families, machines, prisons, etc.), and, more specifically, the role of educators. Teachers have been described as prophets, liberators, and midwives, which, on the surface, suggests that the profession of education involves a range of meanings and interpretations. This may also indicate that there is an unspeakable quality to the phenomenon of education. These metaphors, while cognitively clear, are conceptually opaque.

What does it mean for education, or for educators, that discussion of this work so often turns to analogy? Moreover, what can be made of the varied meanings of these metaphors? To answer these questions, I will consider several key pedagogical metaphors: the teacher as prophet, liberator, text, physician, and entertainer. These educational metaphors present a philosophical challenge. Language, especially figurative language, that philosophers of education employ betray conceptual preferences. Reflecting on each of these metaphors reveals the insights and limitations of each concept as a tool for philosophically investigating education. However, looking over these metaphors will lead us ultimately to conclude that education, like theology, must take an apophatic turn to penetrate its deepest mysteries. The apophatic exercise, familiar to mystics and theologians, seeks understanding from negation. While each of these metaphors will illuminate teaching in some way, denying these metaphors, paradoxically, will tell us even more.

This matter of metaphor is not a mere mystery for philosophers to contemplate. Educators are personally caught up in the conceptual tension between these images, as John Buchanan explores in the patterns of self-disclosure among pre-service and in-service teachers.[1] The same teacher who sees herself as a prophet and a liberator experiences tremendous cognitive dissonance when confronted with challenges in classroom management, instruction, and assessment that seem to demand the response of the physician. Or, as Buchanan finds, teachers may evolve over time with respect to the metaphors they deploy to illuminate their own professions to themselves. This paper, then, does not merely extend lines of thought important to philosophers of education, but also offers valuable considerations for educators who must answer the terribly important questions, “Who am I and what is it that I do?”

[1] John Buchanan, “Metaphors as Two-Way Mirrors: Illuminating Pre-Service to in-Service Teacher Identity Development,” *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 40, no. 40 (January 1, 2015), https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2015v40n10.3.

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

I cannot address every metaphor for teaching or the teacher-student relationship. I have chosen to consider five. There is something arbitrary to the selection, I admit. Yet, these five were selected with an eye toward the diversity of consequences of these pedagogical arrangements. The five educational metaphors that I wish to address are prophet, liberator, text, physician, and entertainer. These metaphors span the thought of major educational philosophers, from Plato to Paulo Freire. And just as every philosopher of education emphasizes a unique set of acts and principles in the carrying on of education, so too these metaphors emphasize and obscure different features of the pedagogical relationship. Considering each metaphor in turn will reveal their respective insights and limitations.

Before the metaphorical parade begins, a few clarifications about the philosophical challenge of dealing with metaphor. For one, figurative language is widely understood as a method of approximating or emphasizing qualities of an object. This is in contrast with plain speech, which attributes adjectives to nouns simply and without offense. The difference between conventional speech and metaphors, then, is found in the degree of distance between the object and its referent. For example, when I say, "Walking home today was a bath, there was so much rain," I am highlighting the deluge of rain to suggest it was almost an immersion even though I was not, objectively, immersed. This distance between term and meaning brings us to the realm of metaphor. Importantly, this means that we should not take the following educational metaphors as mutually exclusive nor as denials of reality, even as they approximate and emphasize diverse elements of the teacher's identity and relationship to students. Metaphors can, often, reinforce or build upon one another. By reflecting on several such metaphorical devices, I intend to discover where teachers may find synergy between diverse metaphors or tensions that draw out deeper engagement with the task of educating.

I begin with the prophetic metaphor. John Dewey saw that the teacher occupied a prophetic office, though not primarily in her role as an instructor. The final assertion of Dewey's pedagogic creed states: "I believe that in this way the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God."[2] Though to understand this metaphor more deeply, we must confront one of the troubles of language, and especially figurative language: to define this metaphor in the context of Dewey's work, it is necessary to turn to other metaphors. The claim that teachers operate as prophets immediately follows a series of comparisons that set teachers as artists, scientists, and social servants.[3] In other words, Dewey's metaphor is meaningful only in an ecosystem of alternative metaphors. But even without fully plumbing out the metaphorical landscape in which the teacher-prophet emerges, Dewey provides his own excavation of the content of this analogy.

[2] John Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," accessed June 7, 2023, http://dewey.pragmatism.org/creed.htm.
[3] Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed."

The teacher-as-prophet does not stand against the student-as-cultist or student-as-devotee. Though tempting, we should not interpret the prophetic metaphor in terms that unite the teacher's role as content instructor with their role as a prophet. Dewey's teacher is a prophet not because her lessons are divinely inspired, but because she serves as an "instrument of social progress and reform," and thereby calls forth a new social order.[4] In the same way that one might refer to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as prophetic, this is what Dewey intends with his observation that the teacher is analogous to the social prophet. The educator is not necessarily a messenger of the divine, but through her a new community is forged.

This metaphor is potent, but, like each metaphor under consideration in this paper, the prophetic metaphor obscures features of pedagogy even as it illuminates. The metaphor succeeds in recognizing the social function of education. And this is, surely, a critical function of pedagogy. The social dimension of education is as inherent to the prophetic metaphor as it is central to Dewey's thought, as he writes, "education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness."[5] Even so, the teacher-as-prophet metaphor fails to account for salient features of the relationship between students and teachers. For instance, the metaphor does not bear directly on the relationship between a teacher and any particular student. The teacher who is a prophet is the teacher who oversees the multitudes of students who will one day live, work, and vote as citizens. But what of the teacher who kneels beside the dyslexic student working through a challenging text? Conventional depictions of teaching highlight these highly individualized encounters, and the prophetic metaphor neglects this feature of education. Relatedly, the teacher-as-prophet metaphor says little of the content of education itself. As noted, the prophecies of the educator have less to do with her instruction in mathematics, natural science, and history and more to do with the outcome of the educational process. While attractive and insightful, the prophetic metaphor is as subject to the inevitability of conceptual preference as all educational metaphor.

Where the prophetic metaphor succeeds socially but fails individually, the liberator metaphor succeeds and fails in the same way. John Dewey's teacher called forth the Kingdom of God through the social change stirred by Deweyan education, but the liberatory teacher imagined by Paulo Freire is not confined to the same gradualism. Like Dewey, Freire's liberatory metaphor is intelligible only within a broader figurative landscape. Freire's vision sees a liberatory teacher against the contrasting image of teachers who are, in fact, bankers. The "banking model" of education is as much the referent of Freire's liberator metaphor as the identity and function of the teacher herself.[6] Writing in twentieth-century Brazil, Freire observes that education most resembles banking.

[4] Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed."
[5] Dewy, "My Pedagogic Creed."
[6] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2005), 72.

The educator deposits some conceptual goods into the student, who acts as a purely receptive account of these deposits.[7] This banking metaphor, like the liberatory teacher who presents its foil, both illuminates and obscures the reality of education.

In place of the banking analogy, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* offers a new metaphor: the teacher is a liberator who frees her students through "radicalization."[8] The liberator does not simply deposit information into her student, but she extends to her pupils the capacities to reject the circumstances which oppress them. What more can be said of this metaphor but what has already been observed of the prophet analogy? Like Dewey's prophet, the vision of the educational liberator succeeds in emphasizing the social consequences of education. If a teacher's role is to equip students to change the world, even by "authentic revolution," which includes "cultural revolution," then we are imagining the teacher as a figure involved in the direction of the broader social order.[9] However, this metaphor offers little in our understanding of the student or the unique relationship between teachers and students. The banking metaphor made the student a passive recipient, and Freire's aspiring revolutionary forged under the tutelage of a liberator is no passive recipient. But what does this liberatory metaphor tell us of the student besides that she has become a revolutionary as well? And what sort of bond unites the liberator and those who, through their inspiration and encouragement, become liberators? Once again, we find that prevailing analogies in philosophy of education are bound to reveal and conceal simultaneously.

The third metaphor asserts itself strongly against the prophetic and liberatory images that we have so far considered. The third metaphor is that of the teacher who is a text for her students. According to this analogy, the teacher is like a written work, a text, who interacts with learners in much the same way the written word interacts with a reader. A notable instance of the teacher-as-text metaphor occurs in the work of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. As I have noted the ideological context of Dewey and Freire's metaphors, the rich Judaic context of Rabbi Heschel's image provides a landscape of metaphors within which the text-teacher emerges. Heschel's deployment of the term "text" is more significant given the meaning of "text" in Heschel's Jewish thought and worldview. For a thinker such as Rabbi Heschel, for a teacher to be a text is not simply to say that the teacher maintains an eloquent and dependable source of information. Instead, we must consider the role of text in Judaism and the implications such a meaning has for an analogy to educators. In the form of the Torah and the Talmud, the "text" for Rabbi Heschel is not a static set of linguistic symbols, but the font of tradition, community, and transcendence.[10] Therefore,

[7] Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* 72 .
[8] Freire, 37.
[9] Freire, 180.
[10] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations*, trans. Gordon Tucker (New York, NY: Continuum, 2008).

to consider the teacher as a text in the fullness of Rabbi Heschel's sense of this analogy is more than saying that a teacher is merely an animated textbook. The teacher who is a text is a human being whose occupation and consequence is sacred as scriptures are sacred.

The text-teacher becomes, in her own person, the fount of educational activity. In Rabbi Heschel's words, "It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget."[11] Under this aspect, the teacher emerges as more than a person, but as a disembodied pedagogical presence that remains with students even after their instructional relation has come to an end. This interpretation of the teacher-student relationship captures the way students poignantly describe the effects of particular teachers. How many American adults can bring to mind the "text" of a teacher whom they never forgot, despite forgetting entirely the text of the books they studied together. But, once again, we find here a metaphor that neglects the student in the conceptual scheme. Readers bring a great deal to their relationships with texts. We might suppose that the text metaphor imports to students important responsibilities as interpreters of education. However, whatever those responsibilities might be, they are not found in the thought of Rabbi Heschel. This presents a rich opportunity for philosophical consideration: how does the bliss and delight of reading a rich work of literature help us to understand those sublime occasions in one's education when a teacher becomes more than a person, even a text? This metaphor succeeds in a way that the prophetic and liberatory images fail by noting the importance of the individual, highly personal relationship between student and teacher.

In our fourth metaphor, we find an image of the teacher-student relationship that accounts meaningfully for the role of the student. I turn now to a classic analogy for education: medicine. Even etymologically, the connection between education and medicine is profound. The "doctor" who performs medicine owes her title to the learned "doctor" who leads her students to a more vital intellectual life. Cheap linguistics aside, the resonance between the work of a physician and the work of a teacher is observed by Plato in the first age of the educational philosophy. Socrates laments, as the son of a midwife, that he now finds himself in the same role. Like any teacher, it is not Socrates who gives birth to wisdom, but his student. All teachers, including Socrates, are to serve as medical guides and supports in the educational process.[12]

The physician and the teacher both enter a vulnerable relationship with another individual. This resemblance is even more interesting if one considers specifically the resemblance between a teacher and a mental health professional. Gary Fenstermacher and Jonas Soltis imagine the teacher in precisely this language in their work *Approaches to Teaching.*[13] Fenstermacher and Soltis

---

[11] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1988).
[12] Plato, *Theaetetus* (Macmillan, 1986).
[13] Gary D. Fenstermacher and Jonas F. Soltis, *Approaches to Teaching* (New York, NY:

credit the twentieth-century social critic Paul Goodman for the social origins of a therapeutic interpretation of education, which itself endorses a physician-teacher analogy. Goodman claimed that "Nothing can be efficiently learned, or, indeed, learned at all…unless it meets need, desire, curiosity, or fantasy."[14] With such a claim, Goodman is adding his name to the list of theorists, including Dewey, who perceive the necessity of desire, interest, and experience in education. However, Goodman's focus on charging teachers with the task of assuring that the "relevant equipment" for learning was present in students rearranges the teacher-student relationship.[15] The physician-teacher, restores their patient's "relevant equipment" by inducing need, desire, curiosity, or fantasy in students. This metaphor offers a compelling interpretation of the bond between teacher and student as one rooted in vulnerability. The physician metaphor also identifies the task of educating as being like the task of medicine: the restoration of health.

This metaphor, as we continue to see, obscures certain dimensions of teaching. Here, the student plays the most notable role in any of the metaphors explored in this paper, but it is not insignificant that the role is one of frailty, weakness, or infirmity. In general, the symbolic asymmetry of doctor and patient is one where the doctor possesses special insight into the human body, and the patient is one whose body or mind has failed in some way. This metaphor, therefore, reasserts the asymmetry between student and teacher that so troubled Freire in the banking model. Additionally, this metaphor inspires many questions about the content of education without providing a clear answer, because medicine itself lacks answers to the same questions. For instance, Goodman suggests that the mental health professional exists to enable a capacity for "need, desire, curiosity, or fantasy," and it would seem that these capacities are identified by patient whim.[16] Whether medicine is a practice with aims determined by doctors, who make definite claims about human health, or by patients, who demand of physicians the medications, procedures, or treatments that suit their "desire," is not answered by medicine itself. The contested role of the doctor in her own field limits the potency of this metaphor as it illuminates the relationship between students and teachers.

While the teacher as prophet, liberator, text, and physician each hail from the work of notable educational theorists, my final metaphor emerges in the contemporary educational scene as a form of self-deprecation. In this century, it is not uncommon to hear educators bewail their failure to compete with the allure of students' devices and pastimes, leading some teachers to imagine themselves as entertainers whose draw is simply less powerful than the virtual world that students inhabit. Of the metaphors offered in this paper, the teacher-entertainer is certainly the bleakest.

Teachers College Press, 2009).

[14] Fenstermacher & Soltis, *Approaches to Teaching,* 28.

[15] Fenstermacher & Soltis, 28.

[16] Fenstermacher & Soltis, 28.

Pessimism aside, what does such a metaphor suggest about the teacher-student relationship? With respect to human connection and vulnerability, this metaphor presents, arguably, the most alienated relationship. Even the banker makes eye contact with her clients. The entertainer, however, relates to an audience as consumers relate to vendors. The teacher who entertains to entice attention must outperform the many and various opportunities for stimulation that remain just swipes away. This metaphor places a unique charge on the teacher, as educators who adopt this view cannot help but blame themselves for the failures of their students. Other metaphors offer the teacher some plausible deniability. For instance, it has been said that a prophet has no honor in their hometown. Or, in medicine, we know that even the greatest physician cannot heal every patient. However, in the realm of entertainment we find a strongly meritocratic image. The performer singing for an empty room must lack some talent or charismatic feature. Likewise, the teacher whose students fail has no one to blame but herself. Therefore, this metaphor easily leads to an interpretation of classroom life where gamification is a norm, cartoonish teacher personalities are encouraged, and negative feedback to students is all but taboo.

This metaphor is not kind to learners, either. Under this aspect, the student is a mere consumer, once again reduced to the position of a receiver in a financial exchange. While students may have some agency in this metaphor to choose their preferred entertainer, the student does not emerge as an active participant when the pedagogical relationship is imagined as that of an entertainer to her fans. While some entertainers, and perhaps some teachers, may succeed in ways that justify this image, it should be noted that the impact of this metaphor on educators has little to be said for it.

The analysis of five educational metaphors above should not be misinterpreted as an attempt to disparage or endorse some particular image over others. That is not the aim of this paper. However, the educational theorist might note that the possibilities and limitations of each of these metaphors gives rise to various educational programs. Briefly, I will note several approaches to education that explicitly or implicitly affirm elements of one or more of these educational metaphors to show that each arrangement offers utility in some circumstance.

First, I wish to return to Freire and the liberatory educator. The methods of the teacher inspired by Freire reject instructional designs that might replicate the errors of the banking model. For Freire, this means an approach to educating that involves "problem-posing" rather than information depositing.[17] By posing problems to students, the teacher-as-liberator brings to the eyes of her students the injustice of their context. Posing to students the problems of their condition, the liberator teacher "embodies communication," Freire says, rather than hierarchy, oppression, or asymmetry.[18] The conventional classroom teacher

[17] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 79.
[18] Freire, 79.

generally embodies principles innate to the banking model; for instance, direct instruction reinforces the perception that the teacher—and by extension, social elites—possess a credential and legitimate claim to elitism that the students lack. Problem-posing, however, in the form of sharing provocative narratives or political materials to students assures that the students do not fall into the trap of replicating the same hierarchies that oppress them. Evidently, selecting the liberatory metaphor for oneself has direct consequences, if not for curricula, at least for pedagogical methods.

Conversely, one can imagine other educational contexts that embrace the teacher-as-text analogy. If one considers the dynamics of teachers and students in relationships forged in religious, spiritual, or otherwise communitarian contexts, we find that the teacher and student often relate to one another in the mode Rabbi Heschel describes. For instance, in a conversation with ecologist Wendell Berry, the poet Gary Snyder describes his perception of the distinctiveness of eastern spirituality and turns quickly to textual language. To Snyder, one of the less noted but profound differences between western and eastern forms of religious life has to do with how one describes their own religious identity. Snyder states that a western Presbyterian or Muslim tends to describe their religious identity in terms of their creeds i.e. a Reformed Jew, Sunni Muslim, Roman Catholic, etc.[19] However, Snyder notes that practitioners of eastern religions tend to describe their identities not in terms of confessional stances, but with the following formula: "I follow the teachings of…"[20] This subtle difference betrays a remarkable philosophical conviction regarding the nature of pedagogical relationships. Extrapolating from Snyder's statement, while the western religious person identifies the texts that shape their faith—in the form of creeds, charters, or scriptures—the eastern religious person has substituted the teacher for the text itself. In other words, while not precisely a K-12 classroom, it would seem that in at least certain iterations of religious practice, the text metaphor rings loudly.

Finally, it would only be fitting to acknowledge that there are educational programs that elect not to engage with the figurative challenges of relating teachers and students. Anarchist approaches to education, for example, challenge conventional notions of a teacher's authority to such an extent that it is difficult to articulate a metaphor that captures the relationship at all. In an entirely anarchic educational regime, one could imagine that there is simply no teacher-student relationship to capture with words. Left to her own devices, the student and the teacher are one as the student explores the world, or chooses not to, entirely by her own volition. One can survey *Deschooling Society,* admittedly a work that may not explicitly adopt the concept of anarchic education, and struggle to identify the teacher in the regime imagined by Illich.[21] On the other

[19] Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder, "Distant Neighbors: Wendell Berry & Gary Snyder," YouTube, May 20, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjB6UqLVrwU.
[20] Berry & Snyder, "Distant Neighbors."
[21] Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London, UK: Marion Boyars, 2012).

hand, Judith Suissa's work on anarchist education shows that non-coercive forms of authority can reimagine teachers and students in anarchist terms without dissolving the relationship altogether.[22]

Upon considering these options, the philosopher of education may revel in the contradictions that our language around teachers involves. But what of teachers? Some teachers propel themselves through decades of education on the fuel of a single metaphor. For leagues of educators, the prospect of serving as a Deweyan prophet brought their talents into the classroom and inspired decades of labor toward the building of a better society. However, I insist that we must remember the educator who cannot remain content in one of these figurative identities. In light of the paradoxes of seeing oneself as a prophet and a physician and an entertainer, what does philosophy of education offer to the teacher who wants to understand in approachable and figurative terms the nature of her profession?

I propose that the problem of metaphorical contradiction should not lead educators to despair. Instead, the conceptual issues I have raised here present an opportunity for a deeply mystical revitalization of education. The educator who attempts to transform at every moment from prophet to text and back again as the circumstance demands may soon find herself regretting ever adopting an analogous identity. Though these metaphors remain flexible and complementary, I have shown in this paper that these common devices lack portability across contexts. Therefore, as teachers seek stable concepts of their work and relationships, they are likely to find metaphorical language unsatisfactory. So, I say: negate the metaphors. To some, the metaphors we have analyzed above retain personal utility and meaning. However, for many educators, the demands of education are simply too great to sustain any ecology of figurative devices. I, therefore, propose an apophatic renewal in philosophy of education.

Apophatic modes of thought seek understanding through negation. In Christian theology, the mystic who seeks to understand the nature of God initially proposes that the Deity is good, infinite, beautiful, etc. However, contemplative figures in late antiquity found that these terms, elements of mere human speech, could not sufficiently capture the unknowable divine. The result was apophatic theology; mystics turned to theological language that preferred to make negative statements about God rather than assertions. In this way, the weakness of human language became an advantage. Rather than affirm, "God is good," the apophatic mystic finds deeper truths in the negation, "God is not good." In the practices of apophatic mysticism, one proceeds through affirmations and negations to approach an unspoken synthesis: "God is a father, God is not a father. God is beauty, God is not beauty." Every affirmation is enriched by a corresponding denial.

[22] Judith Suissa, "Anarchism and Education," *The Anarchist Library*, January 9, 2009, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/judith-suissa-anarchism-and-education#toc24.

The apophatic teacher may find herself languishing after a difficult day in the classroom. Must she insist that she consider herself a prophet? I suggest that she will find philosophical clarity and personal catharsis if she adopts an apophatic mode: "Today, I was *not* a prophet." The teacher who cannot purchase the attention of dozens of adolescents at once might remind himself, "Remember, I am *not* an entertainer." In this, the poetic dimension of the educational metaphor will bend toward the apophatic, where both the philosopher and the pedagogue may find satisfaction.

Though metaphors may not solve the problem of articulating the ineffable, they reveal discrete aspects of one of the central mysteries of education. Namely, the relationship born between the student and teacher. For many, these relationships define our lives, form our desires, and reveal us to ourselves. The elements of analysis that I offered here may be of use to theorists who wish to consider educational relationships under other aspects e.g., teachers as friends, parents, etc. These metaphors may, like those studied in these pages, further illuminate the unique modes of alienation, intimacy, or imitation represented by the teacher-student relation. Or, perhaps, these and other metaphors will reveal new dimensions of the pedagogical relationship in terms not yet introduced. In those instances, an apophatic turn will again demonstrate the transcendence of education beyond speech, such that no distance of object to referent can capture the marvel of a pedagogue and her pupil.

The failure of language leads mystics to seek the divine in an apophatic mode. Likewise, the failure of various educational metaphors may lead teachers to similarly deny these tropes in order to articulate their own pedagogical identity more profoundly. Teachers will better understand themselves and their work not only by claiming all metaphors applicable to their profession, but also by denying these. Every affirmation, as I have said, is enriched by its denial.

By noting the ways these metaphors succeed and fail in capturing the teacher-student relationship, I have aimed to show not the inadequacy of these analogies, but the breadth and depth of the experience of education in life such that it would exist almost beyond the reach of figurative language. That breadth and depth may, however, lead philosophers of education to see the limits of language, not as horizons to be overcome, but as reminders of a finitude that, by negating, we reveal an unspeakable truth about the mystery of education.

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

ATTENDING TO EACH *OTHER*: IDENTITY AND CLIMATE CATASTROPHE

Brad Rowe
Flagler College

Identity makes us all one.
–R. W. Emerson[1]

INTRODUCTION

Today I want to turn our attention to an interpretation of identity that invites us to rethink our relationships with each other and with Earth. First, I will briefly discuss recent work by our OVPES colleagues, Lauren Bialystok and Bryan Warnick, to provide some background and initial framing of key educational questions related to identity and climate change. Then, I will discuss several essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson to elucidate a concept of identity rooted in a Transcendentalist metaphysics. As a way to show how this concept of identity spans generations of the American literary tradition, I discuss Alice Walker's collection of essays, *Living by the Word*, to illustrate what identity looks like when the human self is deeply connected to the nonhuman other. As far as I see it, there is little hope for educating our way out of impending climate catastrophe if our conceptions of identity remain predominantly human-centric, limiting identity to metaphysical and ethical worldviews void of inter-species identification.

IDENTITY: VARIETIES AND MEANINGS

Both Lauren and Bryan have helped me reconsider what I believe should be critical issues for educators' attention today—identity and climate change. Let's start with identity. I recommend reading Lauren's article, "Political and Metaphysical: Reflections on Identity, Education, and Justice," for a more thorough discussion and analysis of the various philosophical, moral, and political meanings of identity and its educational implications.[2] In this section, I do not offer an adequate review of Lauren's work, nor do I directly take up or critique her argument. In simply trying to make some connections between

[1] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," *Emerson: Essays and Poems* (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1996), 548.
[2] Lauren Bialystok, "Political and Metaphysical: Reflections on Identity, Education, and Justice," *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 27 (2020): 153-69.

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

identity and climate change, I am picking up on one strand of thought Lauren left with when she wrote "education for and about identity will not take the meaning or importance of any identity as a foregone conclusion."[3] If Lauren's work has taught me anything, it is that we need more invitations to rethink, disrupt, complicate, and dialogue about what we mean when we employ the concept and use the term, identity.

What do you think of when you hear the word, *identity*? I think of the answer to the question "who am I?" In responding to this question, I could disclose personality traits and characteristics—self-descriptors that I believe represent who I am. I could also refer you to the various markers of my social positionality—socio-economic class, race, gender, sexuality, religion, geographic location, etc. The answer to who I am or how I identify is at once social, political, cultural, spatial, temporal, and existential; there are seemingly endless ways to respond to the question of who I am depending on, well, my identity. While one would certainly be right to say that identity is complex, to say it is fluid or constructed is not so straightforward, for that depends on one's philosophical orientation. As Lauren discusses, identity has been philosophized in both essentialist terms, i.e., the self is discovered, and in constructivist terms, i.e., identity is fluid, negotiated, and self-declarative (I identify as "x" today, and "x" can change with time). Whether constructed or discovered, no matter how we account for identity, "there is an attempt," as Lauren puts it, "to pin down something that is inherently unpinnable."[4] While today's discussion of identity might make things even more unpinnable—soon Emerson will talk of identity as "one hidden stuff"—my hope is to channel the momentum that identity is currently wielding in our public discourse and institutions to make inroads into ecological education in a time of climate catastrophe. Doing so allows us to better attend to the philosophical meanings of identity rather than continuing to allow identity to be used, as Lauren writes, "as an inert, end-of-discussion stand-in for more complex argument."[5]

Emerson asserted that "along with the civil and metaphysical history of man, another history goes daily forward,—that of the external [natural] world,—in which he is not less strictly implicated… his life is intertwined with the whole chain of organic and inorganic being."[6] With the social and political meanings of identity, there exists a biological and ecological dimension to what it means to be a human being living in the world. Lauren writes: "While it is usually wise to leave metaphysics out of public deliberations and focus on liberal equality, we have a deep need to know what makes us who we are and to be seen as the people we take ourselves to be."[7] I agree. And while too often overlooked, the ecological quality of our identity is as equally important to know what makes us who we

[3] Bialystok, "Political and Metaphysical," 166.
[4] Bialystok, 156.
[5] Bialystok, 159.
[6] Emerson, "History," 253-54.
[7] Bialystok, "Political and Metaphysical," 166.

are as the social, cultural, and political—particularly if we are being sincere about what makes us human and also if we are being sincere in our claims to effectively respond to climate crises. With that said, several of our colleagues have done some great work aiming to *ecologize* philosophy of education,[8] and today I ask us to think about what it might mean to try to ecologize identity. So, a question I propose: do our current conceptions of identity distance us from the planet and thus potential solutions to the manifold disasters of climate change that require a deeper identification with the natural world?

EDUCATIONAL ACTIVISM AND CLIMATE CHANGE

During the 2023 meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society, Bryan Warnick delivered a provocative and gripping paper entitled, "Educational Temptations at the End of the Word."[9] Early in the paper, Bryan details the "unprecedented reports of wildfires, floods, droughts, and heat waves to the disappearance of glaciers and arctic ice, to rising levels of acidity in the oceans, to the quickly melting permafrost" to "widespread crop failure and hunger."[10] Listening closely, I felt simultaneously disheartened and moved, as Bryan proceeded to develop several educational responses to the "social and environmental collapse" that will inevitably accompany climate change.[11] My initial reception of the paper was pessimistic, probably due to Bryan pointing out that it might be too late, that we have sabotaged the planet to the point where educating to "save the planet" is highly unlikely, and that it makes better sense to try to prepare future generations for the chaos and upheaval, through, as he terms it, "apocalyptic education"—a more unified, adaptive educational activism that prioritizes, among other values, solidarity and interconnectedness.[12] It is in this mindset, when I sat down to write this talk, that I thought to myself: What is more important for educators' attention than education at the world's end?

Part of what drew me into Bryan's discussion of education at the end of the world is the ambitious scope of a project that encompasses *all* of us. When all of humanity is at stake, when our borrowed time on this planet comes close to its end, we will have to come together in some meaningful way. At the end of the day—at the end of the world—it's a species-level problem that requires a

---

[8] See, for example, Leanne Holland, "Going Remote: Ecofeminist Education for the Reluctantly Contained," *GroundWorks* (June 2021): 1-7; Clarence Joldersma, "Earth Juts into World: An Earth Ethics for Ecologizing Philosophy of Education," *Educational Theory* 36, no. 4 (2017): 399-415; and Annie Schultz, "Publics of Animacy: Ecologizing Democratic Education," *Philosophy of Education* 79, no 2 (in press).

[9] Bryan Warnick, "Educational Temptations at the End of the World," *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 2 (2023): 1-13.

[10] Warnick, "Educational Temptations," 1-2.

[11] Warnick, 3.

[12] Warnick, 3.

species-level solution. Today, I want to take things one step further and suggest that climate catastrophe is an *inter*-species problem that requires humans to think more ecologically across species lines by extending conceptions of human identity to the nonhuman other. Bryan is right to suggest that any practical solutions we might come up with to address climate change could be hamstrung by "a metaphysics of stasis," the view that things in our world will remain as they are.[13] I agree and would add that a climate solution is not possible under a metaphysics of stasis that continues to sharply delineate the nonhuman world as categorically other—the others we depend on for food, water, air, and shelter are doomed, as we are, if we cannot see their existence in our identity, if we cannot see that interdependency spans across species boundaries. Now, while it is not explicitly named as such, there is, I believe, room for a formulation of inter-species identity when Bryan writes:

> The educational temptation is to help students to embrace the heightened awareness of the moment, to allow the possibility of imminent demise to trigger a new appreciation for the booming, buzzing experience of the world. The coming apocalypse should encourage new perceptions, new ways of being aware, and provide the impetus to both cherish human relationships and enjoy the wonders of the planet.[14]

What would a concept of identity look like that did not disunite us from our entanglements and relationships with the natural world? What would it mean to think about a concept of identity as a unifying force of interconnectedness in our time of identity-based division, discord, and polarization?

TRANSCENDENTAL IDENTITY

To frame a discussion on Emerson's thought on identity, I want to first say a few words about Transcendentalism—the philosophical context from which Emerson's conception of identity emerges. While Emerson was central to the nineteenth-century American Transcendental movement, he was not too fond of the term "Transcendentalism." He preferred the term "Idealism," suggesting that Transcendentalism is simply "Idealism as it appears in 1842," drawing attention to Kant's influence and the "intuitions of the mind itself," or the Transcendental forms.[15] For today, as I use the terms "Transcendentalism" or "Idealism," I'm referring to a general system of metaphysics that assumes nature is comprised of, and the externalized form of, a higher spiritual reality (depending on the version of idealism, this could be Mind or Soul, both terms

[13] Warnick, "Educational Temptations," 1.
[14] Warnick, 8.
[15] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Transcendentalist," *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 98, 103.

Emerson uses at various points to refer to the same spiritual reality). For the Transcendentalist, nature is the incarnation of spirit, and access to the divine occurs through introspection: divinity beyond nature is revealed through communion with nature. This is the transcendentalist metaphysics that underpins identity for Emerson.

Perhaps this is a step too far in the direction of a hazy "woo woo" mysticism. Maybe. But "mysticism" is a word; as is "oneness" and "interconnectedness." And you know the state of being these words attempt to convey: when everything feels as though it is held together by something that is not you or any human, as you feel so small while the world seems so large and connected—on your hike, on the lake, on the river, in the forest. As Emerson's intellectual biographer Robert Richardson articulates it:

> If this is mysticism, it is mysticism of a commonly occurring and easily accepted sort. The aim of the mystic is to attain a feeling of oneness with the divine. Experiences of the kind Emerson here describes have happened to nearly everyone who has ever sat beneath a tree on a fine clear day and looked at the world with a sense of momentary peace and a feeling, however transient, of being at one with it.[16]

For Emerson, the term *identity* is used to express a metaphysical concept of oneness or unity. Etymologically speaking, this use of the term parallels the original Latin, *idem* ("the same"), and also sixteenth-century French, *identite*, ("sameness" or "quality of being identical"). In contrast to identity or oneness, Emerson frequently uses the terms variety, difference, or diversity. Identity is the "one stuff," as Emerson puts it, "to serve up" the "dream-like variety" of the world.[17] Rather than an assemblage of social constructions that make up the self, identity in this transcendentalist formulation is a singularity—think of identity as more of a *what* than a *who*. Identity—not *my* identity, but simply identity—is more akin to a Platonic form, a philosophical perception of oneness. Emerson frames it this way: "the perception of identity unites all things and explains one by another, and the most rare and strange is equally facile as the most common. But if the mind live only in particulars, and see only difference…then the world addresses to this mind a question it cannot answer, and each new fact tears it in pieces."[18]

There are several essays through which Emerson articulates his interpretation of identity, and in doing so, links Western to Eastern thought. For example, in the essay "Plato," Emerson explores the connections between Platonic idealism and Hinduism, referring to Eastern societies in which "there

---

[16] Robert Richardson, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 1995), 228.
[17] Emerson, "Nature," 547.
[18] Emerson, as quoted in Richardson, *Emerson*, 334.

are minds which incline to dwell in the conception of the fundamental Unity."[19] Hinduism helped Emerson see that unity underlies everything that *appears* fractured, individual, and different, and *that* eternal, immortal spirit is the source of all things that give the impression or illusion of diversity in this (material) world. In the essay "Illusions," Emerson credits Hindu texts for expressing "the liveliest feeling, both of the essential identity, and of that illusion which they conceive variety to be."[20] Identity is not diversity; identity is the wholeness that unifies diversity.

As mentioned, Emerson's Transcendentalism underpins his relational notion of identity. For Emerson, all matter in the physical world emanates from the same universal spirit that unites all—the Over-soul. The Over-soul is the source of Emerson's philosophy of identity and is perhaps best expressed in the essay "The Oversoul." The Over-soul is omnipresent; it is that "within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart" that binds together all that we experience as different or other.[21] "We live in succession, in division, in parts," Emerson writes, but "meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related… We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul."[22] While material and social differences appear everywhere in the physical world, while diversity and change rule our social circumstances, differences come together for Emerson through the consciousness of the underlying, guiding soul, which is manifest in all worldly things. He frames this idea as follows: "Herein is especially apprehended the unity of Nature,—the unity in variety,—which meets us everywhere. All the endless variety of things make an identical impression."[23] The biodiversity of the planet's ecologies and the social diversity of human communities *appear* to us as variety; and all this diversity is evidence of the unity holding the variation together.

Given this formulation, the way we talk of identity today would not make much sense to Emerson, as he would see what we call *social identity* as "the particulars" or "the circumstances" or "the diversity" or "surface variety"—all terms he used to represent the reverse side of the coin of being, with the other side that of unity and oneness; that is, identity. In the essay "Plato," he writes:

> Two cardinal facts lie forever at the base; the one, and the two.—1. Unity, or Identity; and, 2. Variety. We unite all things by perceiving the law which pervades them; by perceiving the superficial differences and the profound resemblances… This

[19] Emerson, "Plato," 300.
[20] Emerson, "Illusions," 413.
[21] Emerson, "Over-soul," 187
[22] Emerson, 187.
[23] Emerson, "Nature," 30.

> very perception of identity or oneness, recognizes the differences of things. Oneness and otherness. It is impossible to speak or to think without embracing both.[24]

But, of course, we do speak in ways that ignore oneness and unity and instead fixate on the differences that divide—one could argue that *identity* is closing in on a synonym for *diversity*, with identity more associated with difference and division than it is with unity and oneness. Emerson, however, was relentless in distinguishing diversity-as-social-fact from identity-as-philosophical-perception (or a transcendental reality). To again quote Emerson's biographer Richardson, "In Emerson's cosmos difference is hell, similarity purgatory. Identity alone constitutes paradise."[25] Identity and unity have become interchangeable terms.

To get a better understanding of the motivations behind this concept of identity as oneness—and to elucidate what oneness means—we'll need to trace the details of Emerson's account of the self and other in the context of the human relationship with the natural world. In his introduction to *Nature*, Emerson regards all of the world as "not me," encompassing everything outside of the self.[26] This binary account of relations—the me/not me, the self/other—changes into a unified account of oneness in subsequent works (essays such as the "Over-Soul," "Circles," "History," "Plato," and "Illusions" reveal Emerson's metaphysics and his interpretation of identity). In a lecture that would be published as "The American Scholar," Emerson replaces the essentially other, "not-me," with a more inclusive *other-me*. He first puts it this way : "The world,— this shadow of the soul, or *other me*, lies wide around."[27] That which was once excluded as other is now included as an extension of the self. While *other* signifies an ontological stranger, *other me* is a joining of self and stranger in which a part of me exists in the other and a part of the other exists in me. Here is the metaphysical relation between the world and a s self-described in terms that make identity more other-oriented, if not wholly transcendental oneness. Identity is something that is shared with all.

Taking the world as "other-me" encourages Emerson to do something uncharacteristic of nineteenth-century humanist writers: contest the binary of human self and animal other. Since the Over-soul is expressed in all life-forms in the biosphere—and is so equally—I cannot entirely separate myself from these other lifeforms. When Emerson writes, "I feel the centipede in me—cayman, carp, eagle and fox,"[28] he is not demarcating and elevating humanity above non-human; he is, rather, *identifying with* the nonhuman that makes up the human,

---

[24] Emerson, "Plato," 300.
[25] Richardson, *Emerson*, 334.
[26] Emerson, "Nature," 10. The expression "not me" is not original to Emerson; he borrowed it from Thomas Carlyle.
[27] Emerson, "The American Scholar," 56.
[28] As quoted in Richardson, *Emerson*, 141-42.

including the "lowliest" of animal life. Further alluding to a deep sense of biological and ecological connection with these nonhuman *other mes,* Emerson posits that we are "only half human."[29] Because of this creaturely imprint, we are not, strictly speaking, *wholly* human—a reminder that humanity necessitates animality. As humanity is comprised of the *immortal* nonhuman soul, so it is the *mortal* nonhuman other. "Every animal of the barnyard, the field, and the forest…has contrived to get a footing and to leave the print of its features and form in some one or other of these upright, heaven-facing speakers."[30]

As a Transcendentalist, Emerson understands humans to be "half human" in both biology and in divinity. The human as half-animal, half-divine is succinctly put when Emerson writes, "I am God in nature; I am a weed by the wall."[31] Proclaiming "I am God in nature," signifies we are divine manifestations living in the world of matter. Proclaiming "I am a weed by the wall," signifies we are the effects of biology, organic life-forms in the world. We are one with the divine as we are one with the plantly and the minute—spiritual and material. Just as the nonhuman is in all, the human is in all. As the Soul beams through human consciousness, an imprint is etched onto all that is nonhuman in the world so that everything contains a part of the human. "Nature is so pervaded with human life," writes Emerson, "that there is something of humanity in all, and in every particular."[32] This is what Emerson called "all in each"—the whole of nature is revealed in each particular form in nature (we'll soon see Alice Walker express a similar idea in her suggestion that "everything is a human being"). The human is uniquely positioned to perceive wholeness as we are the conduit between the celestial and the earthly, representing the inseparability of the world of transcendental unity and the world of diversity. We are the point through which, as Emerson writes, "Being passes into Appearance, and Unity into Variety."[33] In this sense, human beings are not simply *one of,* but *one with*, the billions of diverse life-forms through which the Soul has externalized itself. Be they human or nonhuman, every particular being in the world is connected to the unbroken whole. This intermediary role makes us not completely "human," at least not in the sense we have come to understand human, as set apart from all others. A foot in the spiritual and a foot in the biological makes the human being, as Emerson puts it, "the divine animal who carries us through this world."[34] The self is diffused into the world, bound to all lifeforms and others, but it is not quite correct to call them "others." They are 'other-mes.'

Before moving on, it's a good time to address two potential problems with this transcendental concept of identity. First, do we really want an interpretation of identity that ties human beings so deeply to nature that we are

[29] Emerson, "History," 252.
[30] Emerson, 252.
[31] Emerson, "Circles," 205.
[32] Emerson, "Nature," 42.
[33] Emerson, "The Poet,", 219.
[34] Emerson, 225.

thought of as "half-human"? History is rife with examples of dehumanization operationalized to justify violence toward human populations who were deemed by their oppressors as "not fully human." Secondly, is this way of thinking about identity too, well, identity-blind? That is, does identity as oneness make it easier to gloss over or ignore what we have come to think of as social identity? There is a risk of flattening the varieties of human communities—lumping different persons and groups under the same generic category—which, in turn, fails to account for differences that result in real societal consequences. Keeping these two questions in mind, let's turn to a writer, who not only articulates an interpretation of identity that aligns particularly well with Emerson's Transcendentalism, but who addresses injustices of historically oppressed populations, while simultaneously linking those populations to the nonhuman in a way that brings awareness to human identity as ecological as well as socio-cultural.

Alice Walker, Womanism, and Transcendentalism

As "one of the world's most prolific writers" (Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner for *The Color Purple*), Alice Walker, according to her official website, "continues to travel the world to literally stand on the side of the poor, and the economically, spiritually and politically oppressed."[35] In this section, I want to focus on a consistent thread running through much of Walker's work: a call to not compartmentalize human identity and experience from that of the nonhuman other. As her website states, Walker remains "a staunch defender not only of human rights, but of the rights of all living beings."

Authors Sheron Fraser Burgess, Kiesha Warren-Gordon, David Humphrey, and Kendra Lowery discuss the evolution of Womanist thought in their article, "Scholars of Color Turn to Womanism: Countering Dehumanization in the Academy."[36] Central to the several iterations of Womanism is Alice Walker's literary work, which the authors recognize as fundamental to seeking "to push outside and beyond the established boundaries of approved knowledge."[37] Walker's collection of essays, *Living by the Word* (1988), reflects Walker's Womanist and Earth-based spirituality. When read together, Walker's Womanism and Emerson's Transcendentalism both see the natural world as the incarnation of spirit—fleshly divinity—the same incarnation of spirit they see in human beings. Similar to the Transcendentalists, Walker sees the natural and physical as a means to know spiritual oneness or unity. For example, she sees spirituality, and prayer in particular, as an "active affirmation in the physical world of our inseparableness from the divine; and

[35] See: https://alicewalkersgarden.com/about/.

[36] Sheron Andrea Fraser-Burgess, Kiesha Warren-Gordon, David L. Humphrey, Jr., & Kendra Lowery, "Scholars of Color turn to Womanism: Countering Dehumanization in the Academy, *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53, no. 5 (2021): 505-522.

[37] Fraser-Burgess et al., "Scholars of Color turn to Womanism," 509.

everything, *especially* the physical world, is divine."[38] The essay "Everything is a Human Being," written to celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. and delivered as the keynote address at University of California, Davis, January 15, 1983, gestures toward a radical relation with nature, expressing the idea that all of humanity is expressed in each life-form in the biosphere (similar to the all-in-each idea of Emerson). This ecological relationality is not only a naturalistic or biological claim but also a metaphysical and spiritual claim, aimed at expanding awareness of the wholeness that connects all. As Walker writes, "Our primary connection is to the Earth, our mother and father; regardless of who 'owns' pieces and parts, we, as sister and brother beings to the 'four-leggeds (and the fishes) and the wings of the air, share the whole."[39] Whether recognized as "Transcendental" or "Womanist" or "Indigenous," the point is the identification that underpins an interpretation of identity that de-centers the human without asking us to reduce what it means to be human—and that the nonhuman other is not only a "not me;" the nonhuman other is not a *less-than* "not me." Human beings are intimately bound to, and constituted by, the nonhuman other—so much so that our continued effort to construct boundaries that ignore the qualities of our being that connect us with the Earth, "our most primary connection," as Walker put it, may be what is hindering effective solutions to the climate problem.

Walker sees relation and identification where most of us might see difference and boundary. "I can never *not* know that the chicken I absolutely *saw* is a sister," she writes, "and that her love of her children definitely resembles my love of mine."[40] Now, one might dismiss this as simply sentimental anthropomorphism (attributing human characteristics to nonhuman beings). But what we might be quick to deem anthropomorphizing, we could also deem inter-species identification—identification that leads Walker to consider "trees" and "snakes" as persons, or, as *other-mes*—"clearly these were sick people, or trees."[41] While I could continue with the similarities between Emerson's Transcendentalism and Walker's Womanist spirituality, I want to move to the differences. Unlike Emerson, Walker speaks to the implications of what thinking about identity in this way means for humans who have been historically othered.

As the leading essay of *Living by the Word*, "Am I Blue?" is about, on one level, Walker's relationship with a horse named Blue and, on another level, about the ways humans and animals can either flourish or suffer in relation with each other. In the story, as in much of Walker's work, animals have subjectivities that implicate them in ecologies that require interspecies communication and relation. For instance, eventually humans bring Blue a mate, Brown, or "his partner," as Walker phrases the relation. Before his partner came

---

[38] Alice Walker, "The Universe Responds," *Living by the Word* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1988), 192; italics in original.
[39] Walker, "Everything is a Human Being," 148, *Living by the Word*.
[40] Walker, "Why did the Balinese Chicken Cross the Road?", 172; italics in original.
[41] Walker, "Everything is a Human Being," 140.

along, Blue was lonely and bored, but with "his new friend," Blue had a new peaceful presence "of inalienable horseness."[42] This is when Walker gazes into Blue's eyes and sees in him the look of "unabashed 'this is itness.'"[43] However, after Brown is taken away from Blue (the horses were to breed), Walker says she "dreaded looking into his eyes…But I did look. If I had been born into slavery, and my partner had been sold or killed, my eyes would have looked like that."[44] (Note the comparison to human slavery).

From a standpoint of inter-species identification, Walker compares violence committed against animals with that of human populations with marginalized identities—specifically, women of color, Indigenous Americans, and slaves—as she will often use the term "slavery" or variations of it (e.g., "enslavement") to refer to the exploitative conditions of animals. For instance, Walker says that the essay "Am I Blue?" is about "how humans treat horses and other animals; how hard it is for us to see them as the suffering, fully conscious, *enslaved* beings they are."[45] Upon reading this, we might initially push back and say that using the language of slavery to describe conditions of anyone other than human beings who have literally been enslaved is offensive because it reduces the significance of a uniquely horrendous form of violence for the particular group that was actually enslaved. Walker, of course, is acutely aware of the slaver's logic that assumes that slaves, compared to whites of European descent, are like animals, and therefore "beasts" or "savages," categorically other and thus inherently inferior. Walker, however, contests a fundamental premise humans use to dehumanize each other: the nonhuman as categorically different and inferior. So, instead of trying to reverse the association between animals and oppressed humans—in other words, stop comparing humans to animals because humans are not animals and should not be treated as such—Walker sees the association as a way to compel her readers to diagnose the general pattern of enslavement itself: selecting, herding, breeding, maiming, and subjugating *others* who are perceived as units of production.

Walker brings this inter-species identification into the classroom as a pedagogical exercise, asking her students to try to "understand what it must feel like to be a slave," and to ask if they had ever "been treated 'like dirt.'"[46] Now, "dirt" is not an abstract metaphor in this pedagogical exercise; rather, "dirt" refers to the literal soil, its abuse and damaged condition. Compelling her students to rethink their identity as something not separate from the planet, she answers for them: The polluted air you breath, "the atmosphere also breathes;" the contaminated, poisonous food you eat, "the Earth has eaten;" the carcinogens you'll internalize and die from, the soil and water have also died from—"as the

[42] Walker, "Am I Blue?", 6.
[43] Walker, 7.
[44] Walker, 7.
[45] Walker, "The Universe Responds," 188; Italics added.
[46] Walker, "Everything is a Human Being," 146.

Earth is treated 'like dirt,'" Walker concludes, "so are we all treated."[47] She concludes the lesson about what it must have been like to be a slave by suggesting to her students that women, people of color, the poor are considered the "n****r of the world." But she doesn't stop there. Human beings mistreat the dirt, and that mistreatment is tantamount to dehumanization—or, put more emphatically: the "Earth is enslaved," Walker continues, the "Earth itself has become the n****r of the world."[48]

Earlier I asked if this account of identity would further marginalize the marginalized? Walker shows that this does not have to be the case. Her repeated comparisons between animals and humans are offensive *if* human identity is something unquestionably assumed as separate and above the nonhuman; yet the comparisons make sense if human identity is unified with nonhuman. If we fail to take account for a metaphysical shift and continue to isolate the social human from the biospheric human, then, yes, we are likely to agree that "half human" remains a dehumanizing way to think about identity. But if we account for the shift in metaphysics—Transcendental metaphysics or Walker's Womanism—then "half human" recognizes the human self in the nonhuman other: everything is a human being, and the world is other-me.

CONCLUSION: THE ABSURDITY OF PUTTING (SOME) IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

Both Walker and Emerson focus on the divine oneness that is manifest in all living beings—a call to a recognition of wholeness and an identification with the planet. Influenced by spiritualities and philosophies beyond their own culture, they *ecologize* human identity, compelling us to think more holistically about connections with all others who appear categorically other. In their conceptions of identity, it is a problem that "the environment" is unrelated to our social identities.

I don't know where this interpretation of identity would get us institutionally, in educational practice or policy. While acknowledging that human beings have a deep desire to know who we are, there is good reason why Lauren said that it is probably wise not to bring metaphysics into public deliberations on identity and education. In the new culturally responsive teacher preparation standards, my former state of residence, Illinois, left metaphysics out of the standards but still required students to "recognize how their identity (race/ethnicity, national origin, language, sex and gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical/developmental/emotional ability, socioeconomic class, religion, etc.) affects their perspectives and beliefs about pedagogy and students."[49] The document then proposes how to measure the learning of this

---

[47] Walker, "Everything is a Human Being," 147.
[48] Walker, 147.
[49] Illinois State Board of Education, "Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards," July 2022: TITLE 23: EDUCATION AND CULTURAL RESOURCES (isbe.net).

identity-based standard. Emerson wrote that the Transcendentalist "believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power… in inspiration, and in ecstasy."[50] Best of luck to the department of education committee tasked with devising a standard on Transcendental identity! But if so, perhaps it would read, *students will recognize that they are divine manifestations of the Over-soul (as are all Earthly beings) and thus share identity with all life-forms, human and nonhuman*. The question of how to put this into practice leads down the path of absurdity. If identity, as a Transcendental form of oneness is too obscure, too disjointed from the entrenched way we think about social identity in our institutions—the Illinois State Board of Education way—can we at least move identity in the direction of a relational concept, even if we never arrive at transcendental oneness? Can we begin to think of identity as less of an answer to the question "who am I?" and more an answer to the question "with whom and what do I relate?"

We have little hope for saving the planet—more realistically, decelerating the destruction—if we fail to think beyond our current notions of identity, which are simply too anthropo-centric and too egocentric. In his book, *We are the Weather*, Jonathan Safran Foer writes, "To save the planet, we need the opposite of a selfie."[51] Given human dependency and interconnection with others, identity, as currently conceptualized, seems like the metaphysical equivalent of a selfie—a self-aggrandizing display that rejects what it means to live with others in ecosystems on planet Earth. Identity is far more relational and ecological—other-mes are everywhere. The version of identity explored today helps move away from a "selfie" concept of identity and shifts our attention to an other-oriented concept of identity. The question remains: Which *others* are we willing to fold into identity?

[50] Emerson, "The Transcendentalist," 101.

[51] Jonathan Safron-Foer, *We are the Weather: Saving the Planet Begins at Breakfast* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 38.

RESPONSE TO PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

RIVERS AS BLOOD, MOUNTAINS AS BONES: A RESPONSE TO BRAD ROWE

Bryan R. Warnick
The Ohio State University

I respond to Brad's paper from two different philosophical perspectives. First, I respond from the perspective of the philosophical imagination and, second, from the perspective of critical analysis. From the perspective of imagination, I find myself deeply inspired, even moved. This isn't so much a paper but a hymn to a global, universal solidarity. In my mind, the underlying vision of a connected humanity is both hauntingly beautiful and desperately missing. I'm reminded of Plato's symposium and Aristophanes' encomium to eros. Aristophanes asks, what is the source of erotic desire, what draws us to other another? He tells a myth: All human beings, in the beginning, were double creatures, two bodies and heads connected. Zeus, in a moment of wrath, commands that each creature be cut in two, each to live a separate existence. This original unity is the source of human yearning and explains why we are so passionately connected to certain human beings. After being severed, the sides that were previously connected yearn and search for each other, and only feel complete in each other's presence. Aristophanes says:

> And when one of them meets with his other half, the actual half of himself…the pair are lost in an amazement of love and friendship and intimacy, and one will not be out of the other's sight, as I may say, even for a moment: these are the people who pass their whole lives together; yet they could not explain what they desire of one another.[1]

He goes on to comment on the healing that takes place when people find their other halves: "So ancient is the desire of one another which is implanted in us, reuniting our original nature, making one of two, and healing the state of man."[2]

This myth, we know, greatly intrigued Ralph Waldo Emerson, who also sensed that we wander around the world disconnected and incomplete. Maybe part of what we are seeking in this erotic state, however, is not simply a soul mate, but an *oversoul* mate. There is talk of a loneliness crisis in America, of an even deeper sense of alienation from each other and from ourselves. It would not

---

[1] Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1600/1600-h/1600-h.htm.
[2] Plato, *Symposium*.

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

surprise Emerson that this loneliness only grows as we become more and more disconnected from the natural world. We wander around, yearning for connection, and miss that part of what we seek is a connection to the natural world around us. Rowe recognizes this, and he might suggest that environmental devastation and the epidemic of loneliness might stem from this common flawed vision of ourselves as separate and disconnected from the ecologies around us. I believe, with Brad, that there is some deep and important truth about oneness buried within nature. I cannot give an argument for it, but, in my imagination, I too have this sense of binding identity. I am a lover of the natural world, of root and branch and things that grow, particularly of mountains and rivers. On a mountain stream, I feel the flowing water as if it were the blood coursing through my veins, and, in the spines of the mountains, I find the very stuff of my bones. This vision is deeply satisfying to my philosophical imagination.

When I take on a critical lens, however, certain questions arise. I present them here briefly, hoping Rowe can help me reconcile my imagination with my critical thought. Rowe suggests that fostering this feeling of deep identification, of oneness, is a possible mitigation of the climate crisis. This presents several questions:

First, is this feeling of oneness necessary to motivate students to take climate change seriously? Maybe not. We can, after all, make a strong case on self-interest alone. Even if people do not give a damn for anything living and breathing on God's green earth, even if they look with apathy on the extinction of organisms and on the decimation of biodiversity, global climate change is still going to hit them like a runaway truck. Even this sense of self-interest, however, has been difficult to arouse. To push Rowe a bit, then, my first question would be: What unique forms of climate action does a sense of oneness inspire, which are not available from self-interest?

Second, what is the ethical relationship with nature that an identity of oneness is supposed to achieve? Martin Buber says the fundamental ethical relationship is an "I" and "Thou" relationship, an encounter with a radically different "Other."[3] Subsuming the "Thou" under the "I" is not an ethical achievement; rather, it is an act of violence. Put another way, we might recognize that the spirit Emerson wants to inspire in his talk of oneness is one of deep and abiding respect. But what is the basis of that respect? It seems he is saying that we should respect and care about the Other because it is part of me. Ethics becomes self-love, in effect. Is self-love, however, the proper ethical relationship?

Third, relatedly, what might we lose with this feeling of oneness? If we consider ourselves one with everything around us, does that assume that the world has nothing to teach us, since a teaching relationship must imply difference? If we say to someone else, "We are really the same, you and I," aren't

[3] Martin Buber and Asher D. Biemann, *The Martin Buber Reader: Essential Writings* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

we sounding a bit presumptuous? Such a sentiment assumes that we already know the other in a way that is questionable. But it also assumes that we have nothing to learn from the other. It precludes a pedagogical relationship. It removes the possibly of tutelage of nature.

Fourth, a problem Rowe recognizes, how could one teach for oneness? Not all might have a disposition to feel this way. William James talks about the importance of certain emotions in philosophy. Some people, he says, have a "passion for parsimony," who love to see theoretical unifications (Spinoza is offered an example), while others have "a passion for distinguishing," whose joy is in finding distinctions (Hume is an example). The best philosophy balances these two things. James, for his part, thought that the passion of unification, by itself, leads to "barren trusims"—for him, the key question is not, how is everything unified, but rather "where is unity found."[4] Whatever the case, some people seem inclined to see the world in this unified way, while others do not. Is this sentiment even something that is educable? It may not be. My worry is that, if we see this disposition as our salvation from climate disaster, and if educating for this disposition is uncertain, indirect, and slow moving, then we are doomed. (This is a problem with most of our educational interventions in climate change.)

As I ask these questions, I recognize that this is as much a debate within myself as it is with Rowe. These are the questions where analysis leads. At the same time, in my imagination, my attraction to Rowe's idea continues unabated.

[4] William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press), 60.

RESPONSE TO PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Lauren Bialystok
University of Toronto

A close friend told me recently that her boyfriend, who suffers from chronic back pain, has taken up the practice of "grounding." I'd never heard of it. Screwing her face into the most diplomatic expression she could muster, she told me that he walks around outside barefoot to soak up healing electrons from the Earth's surface.

"Grounding" sounds like something Emerson would have liked. To quote Rowe, "Perhaps this is a step too far in the direction of a hazy 'woo woo' mysticism."[1] Indeed. But Brad puts his finger on something urgent when he argues that our ability to respond to the climate crisis may depend on checking our metaphysics. If our conception of identity is so narrow and anthropocentric that we can't conceive of Nature as anything but "not-me," there is little hope of summoning the requisite attention to stop the planet from burning.

Since Brad uses as a prompt my own work on identity, which has been unabashedly human—and Euro-centric—in orientation—, I will say here briefly how I think our accounts are compatible and where I would still resist a view of identity that he describes as "ecologized." First, I want to agree enthusiastically that we need conceptions of identity that are more expansive, dynamic, and relational than what either the rationalist tradition or contemporary political discourse offers. I would never want or expect my liberal critique of identity politics to stand in for an analysis of how human identity is related to climate or to other species, especially at this pivotal juncture. Moreover, I have been absolutely moved to reconfigure my own identity through connection with a non-human other (exhibit A: my late dog, Darwin).

However, I am skeptical of moving from a certain humility about individual human identity all the way to transcendentalism. The part of Emerson that gives me pause is not the part about identifying with nature so much as the part about effacing distinctions between identities altogether. As Brad says, on this view, there are no "others," only "other mes."[2] Identity subsumes everything and everyone. This is a metaphysically extreme view, and one that elides politically important details.

It we're going to scramble the standard modern understanding of identity and the rigid binaries it creates, I would rather go existentialist than transcendentalist. In the Hegelian tradition that culminates in Sartre, there is difference *in* identity; we're not even one with ourselves, let alone one with

[1] Brad Rowe, "Attending to Each *Other*: Identity and Climate Catastrophe," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024): 52.
[2] Rowe, "Attending to Each *Other*," 55.

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

everything else. The person who is notionally contained in a given body is infused with freedom and nothingness. Or, to express some of the same intuitions in a more analytic way: we have multiple identities, always defined against a backdrop of diversity, whether internal or external. I am a Canadian when I go through US customs. I am a philosopher when I visit the History Department. The question of identity is always relative. We have to make the cut in different places depending on the context. And sometimes the "ecological quality of our identity" is *not* "equally as important…as the social, cultural, political."[3] When anti-trans legislators shut down recognition of gender diversity in schools, it is a uniquely human dimension of identity that deserves attention.

I'm reluctant, then, to revise our concept of identity in a way that yields only similes. We are distinct from the Earth and we are distinct from each other. This shouldn't prevent us from acting on climate change. And, of course, poetic notions of oneness with nature can be inspiring. Be as Spinozan as you want. But it's not going to cure your back pain.

[3] Rowe, 50.

LOVING DEMOCRACY AS A PEDAGOGICAL PROBLEM: THE CRISIS IN CIVIC EDUCATION AS A FORGETTING OF EROS

Kerry Burch
Northern Illinois University

While the project of consolidating democracy into a durable and highly esteemed value in American culture has always been difficult to sustain, especially within the public schools, the struggle now assumes the character of a grave and inescapable need. Given the authoritarian and fascist resurgence across the globe, democracy and its accompanying values seem in retreat both abroad and in the United States.[1] One telling index of this national retreat is that a critical mass of Americans, nearly half the electorate, have embraced the illusion of Donald Trump's Big Lie that he won the 2020 presidential election, and "by a landslide" no less. This preposterous claim can usefully be interpreted as an instance in which all too many Americans have developed a passion to ignore what might be called reality, the truth, and the rule of law.[2] Perhaps one way to frame the upcoming 2024 election is to view it as the momentous point at which Americans shall decide who and what they affectively love more: Donald Trump or the principle of democracy.

The argument here is that the core problem with American democracy today is that not enough people in the country genuinely love democracy, especially young people. This lack of affection means they are disconnected from democracy's moral and spiritual essence. This emotional disconnection can be interpreted as the ultimate source of the nation's democratic malaise. One significant cause of this felt disconnection from democracy, arguably, is that not enough Americans could be said to "know" what democracy is in the first place. A false, externalized image of democracy is something impossible to love. So, the first step, preliminarily, would be for teachers to worry less about teaching *about* the democratic procedures and to pay more attention to how their students might learn to *be* democratic. Even if this fundamental Deweyan aim was met, however, democracy would still be conceptually orphaned without a corresponding love concept. To recover a viable sense of democracy's moral and spiritual essence, I contend, we need to think about furnishing democracy with a

[1] While the literature on this subject is growing fast, two key works are relevant here: Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die,* New York: Broadway Books, 2018; and Sophia Rosenfeld, *Democracy and Truth: A Short History*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019.

[2] For a superb overview of the ways in which ignorance operates in contemporary times, see Jennifer Logue, "Teaching Ignorance: On the Importance of Developing Psychoanalytic Sensibilities in Education," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 50, no. 3 (2019): 105-114.

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

love concept, such as Eros.[3] Certainly, Trumpism as a cultural phenomenon reflects no lack of affectation and emotional power in relation to a certain set of values; the problem is that Trump lovers are patently detached from any recognizable democratic values or aims.

With this background in mind, the first section of the paper develops a "Socratized Eros" as a form of love uniquely suited to promote democratic forms of cultural life. By employing three key Platonic heuristics, I further outline what it would mean to integrate a concept of Eros into contemporary pedagogical practice. In the second section, I draw upon a set of democratic theorists to highlight specific moral and spiritual dimensions of democracy. A synthesis of these thinkers' insights permits us to reconfigure democracy as a secular religious project in need of an erotic love discourse. Finally, I utilize the Eros concept and the appearance-reality distinction in Plato's allegory of the cave for the purpose of reinterpreting the Declaration of Independence as a journey of civic transformation.

Socratic Eros and the Necessary "Corruption" of Youth

To meet the challenges posed by democracy's crisis of legitimacy while also recovering a sense of Eros, I suggest that teachers should consider tapping into the West's critical philosophical origins strikingly expressed in three of Plato's dialogues: the *Apology*, the allegory of the cave in the *Republic,* and in Diotima's tutelage of Socrates in the *Symposium*.

I want to suggest that Diotima's oft-cited ladder of love, whereby "she"[4] describes to Socrates the progressive education of ever higher expressions of Eros—from loving one beautiful body to loving all expressions of physical beauty, to "pregnant souls" giving birth to beautiful ideas about social justice, finally to the idea of the good itself—provides a blueprint that maps the psychic terrain of transformation which Eros is known for eliciting. Surely Plato understood as well as anyone that the energies of Eros manifest in human beings could also "go south," as it were, in calamitous and destructive ways. If "educated" in the right way, however, Eros is theorized by Plato as the power and energy that magnetically draws us ahead toward images of the good, the true and the beautiful. This is why Socrates remarks in the *Symposium* that "human nature will not easily find a better helper than Eros."[5]

---

[3] I made this argument decades ago yet it still merits further development given new threats to democracy. Kerry T. Burch, *Eros as the Educational Principle of Democracy*, New York: Peter Lang, 2000.

[4] Susan Hawthorne argues that Diotima was an actual woman and not simply a product of Plato's fictive imagination. See Susan Hawthorne, "Diotima Speaks Through the Body" in *Engendering Origins: Critical Feminist Readings in Plato and Aristotle*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994) 83-89.

[5] *Sym* 212c. William Cobb, *The Symposium and the Phaedrus: Plato's Erotic Dialogues* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986).

When Diotima's discourse regarding the psychic buoyancy of Eros is applied to the poetic drama in the allegory of the cave, we cannot help but note the cave-dwellers' erotic ascent from the shackles of illusion and ignorance toward the glimmers of light that symbolize the desire for knowledge and wisdom. We should also recognize that the escaped prisoner decides to return to his former oppressive domicile, despite clear risks to his life. The mortal danger the escapee is said to face upon his return to the cave is directly linked to his purpose for returning—to bring a philosophical orientation to those who've been habituated to an artificially contrived sense of reality. The escapee's return to the cave thus mimics Socrates himself wandering the streets of Athens prodding people to give an account of their lives. Not only did these fictional and historical events help launch the West's critical tradition, it also appears that the Socratic practice of philosophy reflects a highly admirable "therapeutic" form of pedagogy that could be implemented today (a theme developed in subsequent sections).[6]

To put the matter in uncomfortably brief terms, the appearance-reality distinction that Plato introduces in the cave allegory, coupled with the analytical distinction he makes in relation to an individual's transformation of consciousness from the realm of becoming to that of being, fit together conceptually through the binding agency of Eros. In Plato's theory, Eros serves to hold together (as a third term) the tension between appearance and reality, between the realms of becoming and that of being. In the erotic zenith passages in the *Symposium* (210a-212a), Diotima demonstrates how the questioning energies of Eros can be "educated" upward, toward a state of being in which persons desire connection to and identification with a perceived good. Similarly, in the cave allegory, Plato's *periagoge,* or "turning around of the soul" passage, represents a form of pedagogy that classicist Werner Jaeger defines as a "*spiritual ascent*."[7] Echoing this conception, we can interpret the movement out of the cave as an internal, psychic reorientation, whereby one unfastens their identifications to the appetitive or spirited domains of the psyche and turns around to refasten their identification onto the reasoning part of the soul. The intent here is to emphasize the centrality of Eros to Plato's theory of education *as* enlightenment, as a consciously chosen "redirection" of a soul's aim toward that which is perceived as truer and thus more desirable. Eros knows no completion, yet curiously relies on the *idea* and *feeling* and *yearning* for completion as one of its motive forces.

One of the most prominent features that links democratic culture to Eros is that both forms are ontologically constituted by the human capacity for questioning. Specifically, learning to question the meaning of things, learning to

---

[6] For a wonderful yet largely overlooked interpretation of the "therapeutic" value of Platonic philosophy, see Robert E. Cushman, *Therapeia: Plato's Conception of Philosophy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1958/2007).

[7] See Werner Jaeger*, Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture,* vol. 2., *In Search of a Divine Centre* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 192.

judge and to choose and to make distinctions, represents a type of inquiry in line with the Greek etymology of *critical*.[8] Indeed, the promise of democratic culture lies in its seemingly built-in capacities for revision; or, put in slightly different terms, democracy's promise resides in its *moral stance* which privileges as desirable the human capacities for revision.

Cornelius Castoriadis, in his incisive interpretation of the wellsprings of democratic culture, points out that philosophy and democracy share the characteristic of being regimes predicated on questioning. He writes: "Democracy, by its name already, produces questions and problems. It is not accidental that its birth coincides with the birth of this limitless question that is philosophy."[9] Yes, by its name already democracy produces questions such as, who are the people? Who belongs to the people? How to conceive of power and organize it? A brief review of the trajectory of U.S. history tells us that such questions have played a generative role in transforming democratic ideals into tangible realities. Castoriadis clearly intends to celebrate democracy's etymology as a precious gift of perpetual renewal; he emphatically does not lament democracy's etymology for the sticky predicaments it always seems to pose. It is significant, in addition, that C.D.C. Reeve informs us that the noun *Eros* ("love") and the verb *erotan* ("to ask questions") seem etymologically connected.[10] To extrapolate on the conceptual affinities between democracy and philosophy as related cultural regimes of questioning, let us recall the indictment of Socrates for corrupting the youth of Athens.

On those occasions in which I have taught the *Apology* to undergraduates, I find that they are quick to see through the charge of "corruption" leveled at Socrates by Athens' official authorities. They realize there was nothing corrupt about Socrates walking around Athens asking everyone he met, rich or poor, young or old, man or woman, citizen or foreigner, probing questions about their lives. Upon reflection students also recognize the unfortunate fact that the five hundred jurors who condemned Socrates to death for having the audacity to question conventional truths, were not acting so much as democratic citizens, but rather as already corrupted Athenians untethered from democratic values. In crucial respects, it appears that the plight of Socrates in 399 B.C. is not unlike our own plight in 2024. Can democratic publics prove wise enough to value the spirit of questioning so that its practitioners are celebrated instead of reviled or murdered? Can teachers promote the spirit of questioning even if, by doing so, they cause "anxiety" in their students? Will a critical mass of Americans come to regard Trump's big lie as a dangerous shadow on the wall?

Although the word "Eros" is not explicitly stated in the *Apology*, I would submit that the Socratic ethic of "taking care of the soul," on prominent

---

8 "Critical," Wiktionary, accessed May 1, 2024, en.wiktionary.org/wiki/critical.
9 Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Problem of Democracy Today," *Democracy & Nature* 3 (1989), 21-22.
10 See C.D.C. Reeve, *Plato on Love* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2006), xix-xx.

display throughout the text, is itself a deeply erotic activity rooted in a spirit of questioning. As Michel Foucault and Cornel West have observed, this Socratic ethic, which includes being willing to give an honest account of one's life and beliefs, is an erotic activity par excellence. Below, West's image of the interrogation of self and society can be seen to inspire erotic ascents out of the cave:

> The Socratic love of wisdom holds not only that the unexamined life is not worth living (*Apology* 38a) but also that to be human and a democratic citizen requires that one muster the courage to think critically for oneself. This love of wisdom is a perennial pursuit into the dark corners of one's own soul, the night alleys of one's society, and the back roads of the world in order to grasp the deep truths about one's soul, society, and world.[11]

Here, Socratic pedagogy is framed as an inquiry whereby soul, society, and world are interrogated holistically. In short, taking care of the soul is not a solipsistic affair. It involves making judgements about one's relation to society and to the world. Such judgements are impossible to make absent some image of the good or truth to serve as a basis for judgement. In looking for ways to theorize Eros and to help educate its sublime powers in contemporary contexts, we might think about creatively adapting the Socratic pedagogy suggested here for the purpose of intelligently "corrupting" America's youth. That is, to create classroom situations in which our student's ideas and beliefs about themselves and society, through the practice of *parrhesia* (defined as frank speech and speaking truth to power),[12] are transformed into sites of discussion and critical analysis. Such processes of inquiry would go a long distance in establishing the experiential soil necessary for erotic expression and growth.

American Democracy in Need of a Love Discourse

When Jane Addams, in her book *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets,* theorizes the emotional and experiential lives of the immigrant youth in Chicago—describing their *questing,* their *yearning,* their *lambent flames of civic righteousness*, their *cargos of democratic aspirations*—she could have been referring to their expressions of, and capacities for, Eros.[13] But this omission is no criticism of Addams. Let's recall, in a similar fashion, that Dewey never once utters the word Eros in any of his writings; yet, as Jim Garrison tacitly recognized in his fantastic 1997 book, *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire in the Art of Teaching*, authors or teachers don't necessarily have to formally invoke the four

[11] Cornel West, "Putting on Our Democratic Armor" in *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism,* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 208. For a fuller account of *parrhesia* as a Socratic practice, see Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the College De France*, *1983-1984* (New York: Picador, 2008).

[12] West, "Putting on Our Democratic Armor," 209-110.

[13] Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 1909/2016).

letter word "Eros" to symbolically capture its manifestations, or to appreciate its virtues as a unique form of love.[14]

Yet, in my opinion, the *discursive* forgetting of Eros has had, and will continue to have, the effect of hastening its *experiential* forgetting, with severe consequences for whether citizens learn to love democracy or not.[15] There is no guarantee, of course, that if all teachers were equipped with a theoretical grasp of Eros—including a grasp of its emancipatory vocabulary centered around the spirit of questioning—they would thereby *necessarily* foster knowledge quests, and *necessarily* make education suddenly brim with new meaning for their students. A mere introduction to the concept by itself means little if it's not accompanied by further investigation and discussion. Still, I would much prefer that our young teachers come to know the Eros concept rather than not come to know it.

I argue that Eros, understood as a kind of democratic moral and philosophical compass—or pedagogical North Star, if you will—can guide teachers to move in the right direction. And what direction would that be, one might ask? As was discussed in the previous section, a recovery of Eros would mean a recovery of the spirit of questioning and this, in turn, would mean a recovery of the critical importance of the etymology of education, "to draw out." That is, to draw out not finished pieces of knowledge, but to draw out a range of human capacities: desires to know, desires to connect to an image of wholeness, for example. For these reasons, then, a recovery of Eros would be directly connected to the privileging of philosophy, civics, the arts and humanities, as these curricular traditions specialize in drawing out human capacities for critical inquiry, for empathy, and for independent thought generally. These virtues are among Eros's stepchildren.

Significantly, Dewey recognized that not enough Americans loved democracy. In his 1929 essay, "A House Divided Against Itself," he takes up this absence of loving as a pedagogical problem. Echoing Addams' observation that "democracy no longer stirs the blood of American youth," Dewey identified the ideal of equality as the "genuinely spiritual element" of our tradition. Let's pause a moment on this point; namely, that the genuinely spiritual element of American democracy is equality, and that our democratic identity is tied to equality, to the extent to which we bestow value on it. Dewey notes that this spiritual element hasn't entirely disappeared, but

> …its promise as a new *moral* and *religious* outlook has not been attained. It has not become the well-spring of a new intellectual consensus, it is not (even unconsciously) the vital source of any distinctive and shared philosophy. It directs our politics only

[14] Jim Garrison, *Dewey and Eros: Wisdom and Desire in Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).
[15] This opinion is rooted in my book, *Eros as the Educational Principle of Democracy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), which offers a genealogy of the eros concept, from ancient Greece to the present times.

> spasmodically, and while it has generously provided schools it does not control their aims or their methods (my emphasis).[16]

Dewey wants Americans to conceive of democracy as a secular religious project that contains corresponding moral and spiritual elements. However, he also recognized that the reality in the 1920s was that most Americans had internalized a mechanical, procedural, thin conception of democracy. This problem persists today with a vengeance.

Readers of this journal, no doubt, already recognize that Americans have historically been conditioned to "know" democracy as something *outside* themselves, an epistemic and curricular bias which a priori renders democracy a mere sliver of one's existence. For this reason, it's not surprising that most Americans fail to see that "being democratic" is as much a faith and act of devotion and "personal way of life," as it is for someone to be a devout Buddhist, Muslim, Methodist or Rastafarian. A religious life of course typically permeates a person's whole being—not mere slivers of it. Religions typically generate intense devotions and intense emotional commitments and, in doing so, constitute powerful meaning narratives.

Dewey observed that Americans have genuinely valued democracy "only spasmodically." Of course, valuing democracy on a spasmodic basis, as we see today, can only produce bleak and increasingly tenuous democratic futures. This recognition raises the question: *Why hasn't American democracy produced a meaningful love discourse to give point and direction to its moral and spiritual aspirations?* Democracy would benefit greatly if it had recourse to some species of love discourse, such as Eros, to lend intelligibility to its values and moral aspirations. Eros could give democracy the energy and passionate symbol of love that it needs, while democracy could give Eros the proper direction and moral compass that it needs.

If we want to increase the possibility that young Americans will develop lived *affections* for democracy, lived *affections* for the principle of equality, and lived *affections* for empathizing and learning from others, perhaps the time has come to reconfigure Eros as a first principle capable of uniting these vitally necessary aims. Eros is unique in its ability as a powerful concept and experience to traverse the inter-penetrated domains of philosophy, education, and democracy. These religious, spiritual, and erotic resonances of democracy were suggested by philosopher of education Boyd Bode in 1949, when he declared: "Democracy is to me a way of life and a *gospel for the salvation of the world*" (my emphasis).[17] Bode adds, in line with Dewey and others, that the moral element in democracy cannot be rooted in metaphysical claims, as conventional religious-based moralities, but primarily in an experimental, perpetually unfinished method for solving social problems.

---

[16] John Dewey, "A House Divided Against Itself" in *Individualism Old and New* (New York: Promethius Books, 1929), 9.

[17] Boyd Bode, Address to the 4th Annual Bode Conference, Ohio State University, Summer 1949. I want to thank Tom Falk for bringing this passage to my attention.

Steven C. Rockefeller's magisterial volume on Dewey's religious faith and democratic humanism also demonstrates that his entire career can be regarded as an extension of the Socratic philosophical project. Rockefeller observes:

> Using a Platonic metaphor and adopting a characteristic prophetic perspective, Dewey described the task of philosophy in 1946 as "the act of midwifery": "There is no phase of life, educational, economic, political, religious, in which inquiry may not aid in bringing to birth that world which is as yet unborn.[18]

In this passage, Dewey does not attempt to explain, or name, the mysterious force that lies behind the reconstructive telos of "bringing ideas to birth." But were he to do so, he could have invoked Eros as that birthing force. Considering these myriad associations, then, it seems reasonable to advance the proposition that Eros can usefully be understood as a secular form of love intriguingly aligned with the democratic ontology of critical revision. One additional way of theorizing Eros in relation to democracy is to reference the critical theorists who authored the classic work, *The Authoritarian Personality*. After their exhaustive study of Americans in the cold war period, they wrote: "If fear and destructiveness are the major emotional sources of fascism, Eros belongs mainly to democracy."[19]

Since the opposite of *fear* and *destructiveness* may be construed as, say, *love* and *peaceful creation*, their formulation reinforces the revisionary features of Eros outlined in this essay. Reimagined along these lines, Eros can serve as a potent counterpoint to the dominant values upholding both neoliberal and fascist ideologies. Moreover, the recovery of Eros and its theoretical development as a first principle would help to stimulate and draw-out those sublime "cargoes of democratic aspiration" teeming in millions of our bewildered yet still buoyant youth.

An Eros-Informed Interpretation of the Declaration of Independence as a Journey of Civic Transformation

In a spirit of democratic experimentalism, the task in this final section is to explore the ways in which teachers might utilize Plato's concept of Eros for the purpose of interpreting anew the Declaration of Independence. Such a project is fully rooted in the Socratic self and civic interrogation that was previously highlighted and aptly described by Cornel West. As West contends, such a Socratic truth-seeking pedagogy would bring democratic benefits to both the individual and to the larger society. In what follows, I explore how the document's long second sentence—what Danielle Allen boldly called "the most

---

[18] Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism*, (New York: Columbia University Press), 552.
[19] T. Adorno, E. Frenkel-Brunswik, D. Levinson, and R. Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.,1950), 976.

important sentence in American history"—can be rendered even more meaningful when viewed from an Eros-informed standpoint.[20]

Allen is correct, in my opinion, to identify this long yet elegant formulation as the most important sentence in United States history. It is accurately identified as such when we recognize that its five clauses have functioned cumulatively as the prime generators of democratic change within the American experience. Taken together, the clauses represent the democratic moral heart *and* experimental method bequeathed to the nation in ideal form. It tells Americans the ways in which they can go about putting into practice their marvelous democratic ideals, particularly when the government isn't putting them into practice through law or public policy. While most of us are passably familiar with the Declaration's words, this doesn't mean we have given sufficient thought to what Allen calls the "beautiful optimism" implicit in the philosophical and intellectual demands the document places on its citizens:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed; that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its Foundation of such Principles and organizing its Powers in such Form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.[21]

For good reason, Allen insists that this sentence must be interpreted as a whole. *Not* to interpret it in this way would be tantamount to asserting a set of sparkling democratic principles but to do so as mere abstractions, as empty slogans, because they would be disconnected from the document's "critical action" clause. Here, the "alter and abolish" clause can be interpreted as the critical action component of the Declaration since it's the vehicle through which ideals written on paper are to be transformed into empirical realities. Allen emphasizes that this clause, sometimes dubbed the "right to revolution," assumes that citizens can and must make critical judgements about whether the government is acting in ways consistent with its stated purposes (that of securing the human rights and moral values expressed in the first clause). If citizens, upon critical analysis of their lived situations, determine that the government is not upholding those rights, or if the government says it's upholding those rights, but is judged not to be, those citizens are assumed to possess the power, capacity,

---

[20] Danielle Allen, "How Americans Misunderstand the Declaration of Independence," Youtube, November 2, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqiFMiQeXNQ.

[21] Danielle Allen, "Beautiful Optimism," in *Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2014), 183-188.

and willingness to innovate novel cultural and legal forms to compel the government to harmonize itself with its founding principles. Social justice educators would therefore do well to explicitly design their pedagogies in ways that would exercise and cultivate those skills, values, attitudes, and moral capacities that the Declaration requires of its democratic citizens.

Put in slightly more philosophical terms, then, citizens are called upon to mobilize their capacities for critical judgement, especially in our digitalized and propaganda-infused social environments; they are called upon to make epistemic and moral distinctions between what is real and what is not, between what is right and what is wrong in relation to their personal and social worlds. In doing so, the Declaration asks citizens to exercise their philosophical capacities for wisdom and reason in order to give birth to new forms and to new ideas—all for the purpose of moving toward the vindication of the Declaration's promise. The activation of such high-level competencies are rather "big asks" for fallible and imperfect human beings, but the Declaration optimistically holds that we're up to it.

Based on this description, we can begin to appreciate how the core ethical challenges posed by the Declaration recapitulate in broad outline the core ethical challenges posed by the allegory of the cave. For within the cave's poetics, we first see the philosophy-inspired critical intervention of citizens in their inherited, illusion-laden worlds; we then see their subsequent disenchantment with this inherited world rooted in a newfound sense of truth, which we see is a necessary first step in being able to imagine their erotic ascents out of the cave toward images of a truer and better world. While "truth" is not explicitly mentioned in the Declaration, one's coming to have a sense of a truth is made profoundly implicit and necessary within its overall argument. In turn, the vital return to the cave could be likened today to symbolize individuals who display renewed commitments to actualizing the Declaration's first principles in public via the alter and abolish clause.

Let us further experiment with bringing the allegory of the cave into conversation with the Declaration, with special attention on the priority it places on citizens to act critically and creatively when reason demands.

We could speculate that the ideal of equality could be seen as the symbolic equivalent of Plato's Sun: A universal form which never waxes or wanes, and that ought to be contemplated and revered as the basis for a just, democratic society. Such contemplation, however, would eventually raise questions about how to define the scope and application of equality as a basis for making judgements about its status and role in American society. How should this abstract moral principle be institutionalized in concrete terms? Questions abound. For example, let's consider those individuals ensnared in the worst consequences of public-school inequality. Could we say that their unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness is violated, if their largely civic-less public educations transform them into de facto non-citizens, denying them the possibility of civic selfhood and thus impeding their pursuit of happiness? Or, if we were to examine equality from another angle, we might ask, does the

Electoral College, in its repudiation of majority rule, serve as a long-term guarantor of inequality? These questions and countless other open-ended thought exercises could represent opportunities to enhance our students' understanding of equality as a foundational moral principle. Engaging such questions in a sustained manner would likely produce a better crop of equality-literate and equality-conscious citizens. It would also likely have the effect of raising the symbolic currency of equality as a value. As young citizens are asked to contemplate the ideal of equality and to gauge whether, or to what extent, it is operative or institutionalized across the many fronts of American society, they will invariably confront the realization that the ideal falls short of actual reality in many, but perhaps not in all, dimensions of American life.

As young citizens encounter the contradictions that emerge when comparing the ideal versus the reality of equality in American society, such inquiries will tend to generate heightened states of internal tension. *These internal tensions are what propel new knowledge quests into existence*. If students were to experience the Declaration anew in this manner and attempt to make education out of the nation's now fecund contradictions and moral ambiguities—including how their own personal contradictions may be entangled with the nation's—the ignition of Socratic Eros would be at hand. Therefore, one advantage of adapting an Eros-informed interpretation of the Declaration is that it would encourage Americans to reframe their founding document as an invitation to embark on journeys of personal and civic transformation.

THINKING WITH SCHOOL LEADERS: WHAT CAN PHILOSOPHERS OFFER?

Michael G. Gunzenhauser
University of Pittsburgh

Philosophers of education may imagine their work has great relevance to people trying to lead K-12 schools. In our current context, it would seem philosophers of education are sorely needed. Standardized assessments maintain their hold on curriculum and instruction, differentially affecting schools whether they are the targets of accountability programs (who can never quite achieve the test score results to avoid being targeted for takeover or replacement) or the competitive winners (who have to repeat their test score dominance in perpetuity, lest they lose public support). We can now add to those struggles the political backlash against long-deferred efforts to address issues of equity, inclusion, and racial justice. Pennsylvania is not Florida, but parts might as well be. In my area, some districts have forbidden instruction in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) or removed library books in response to parent complaints. Nearly all school leaders in my area are facing some degree of backlash from parents and/or their school boards as they attempt to address educational inequities in their schools.

Considering the pressures that school leaders face for test score accountability and constraints on their equity practice, I argue that philosophers have an important role to play in thinking with school leaders about how best to respond to largely individualistic pressures for standardized practice. In this paper, I name some underlying philosophical concerns that are at issue and address ways leaders can identify their core commitments, stand strong in the face of pressures, and work toward greater collective responsibility for more equitable and liberatory educational opportunities for students.

THE PROBLEMS OF SCHOOL LEADERS

As research has documented well, the job of a school leader has become very difficult, whether the leader is a principal, an assistant principal, a district administrator, or a district superintendent. Compliance work has long taken on outsized proportion to their other responsibilities, and poorly resourced schools feel the pinch acutely. Accountability pressures have rewritten the guidance on teacher supervision and led to greater use and misuse of data. These pressures reinforce standardization and fairness understood as equal treatment. Measurement and the ability to compare proliferates competition among schools and school districts (including competition for resources with charter schools, cyber schools, and homeschooling). While political pressure on leadership practice has always been part of the job, school leaders more recently have to contend with state-level actors intent on curtailing even the most tepid liberatory practices and the disorganized organizing throughout the country by groups such

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

as Moms for Liberty (in the summer of 2023 named an extremist group by the Southern Poverty Law Center).[1]

Political pressure varies in intensity depending on location. I live in an urban county in Pennsylvania in a vaguely center-left political pocket with right and far-right sentiment on the edges of the county and in the surrounding counties. With so many school districts in close proximity, people often relocate to situate themselves in school politics they can stand, whether that means escaping intolerance, chasing higher average test scores, accessing more privileged opportunities, seeking cheaper school taxes, or freely embracing white supremacy.

Since the murder of George Floyd in 2020, districts have responded to the call for more racially and socially responsive educational practices. In some cases, leaders have sought systemic change and moved closer to what we might call "liberatory education," educational approaches that provide educational opportunities that defy the racially and culturally limited dominant approaches to education encouraged by competition-based accountability systems and associated practices of standardization. Especially for school leaders contributing to systemic change, there's quite a bit of work to do, as school leaders are in the position to act on a daily basis to implement governmental policies that radically limit the possibilities of teachers and students to do the work of liberatory education.

In recent conversations, school leaders tell of mostly disorganized resistance to their equity and justice work.[2] Some white parents are resisting equity work in a local urban charter school near me, for instance, pushing back against disciplinary practices they find insufficient for ensuring the safety of their children. Suburban parents have sometimes organized their resistance to curricular choices; in many schools, individual parental complaints have led to their children being excused from certain lessons. In others, new slates of school board candidates have been elected to police library shelves for perceived decency of materials, targeting mostly race- and LGBTQ-related materials. Leaders are relying upon support from their school boards to keep individual complaints from becoming organized protests in a mostly successful attempt to keep parents from changing their curricula. While some leaders have left positions because their equity efforts were not supported, most leaders who have been able to maintain their equity work face periodic doubts by teachers that they can and should continue to do the work. In many cases, leaders are eager for partners to help them grow their work and think through the challenges they face.

---

[1] See Southern Poverty Law Center, "Moms for Liberty," (2023), https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/moms-liberty.

[2] Sierra Stern, Osly J. Flores, & Michael G. Gunzenhauser, "Taking Up the Call for Racial Justice: The Conditions of Relationality for Equity Leadership" (Paper presentation, Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Philadelphia, PA, April 14, 2024).

PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

As a potential partner in school leader practice, philosophy of education is indeed largely absent. While it is largely absent from school leader preparation and professional development, one place to find philosophy is in the social theory that sometimes informs equity and justice practice. A more prevalent place is in the moral leadership discourse, mostly from ethical theorists arguing for the centrality of moral leadership.[3] Care and caring have found their way into national educational leadership standards, and there is now a greater emphasis on justice, fairness, and equity. More recently there has been recognition that race is important, although acknowledging the existence of racism and leaders' contribution to its perpetuation is still outside the scope of those standards, despite the extensive research on culturally responsive and race-conscious leadership practice.[4] Most promising, researchers such as Lisa Bass and Noelle Witherspoon Arnold have integrated race-consciousness and caring ethics.[5]

To help school leaders with their efforts to make their schools more liberatory, especially within current contexts, philosophers have at least four areas in which they can engage with school leaders. Those issues include the caring trap, the standardization of students, the destabilization of professionalism, and the narrowing of educational aims. I take each in turn toward a general view of how philosophers of education can more effectively think with school leaders for a more collective, liberatory education. As I explain more below, these issues expose some strong cultural themes of competition,

---

[3] Joan P. Shapiro & Steven J. Gross, *Ethical Educational Leadership in Turbulent Times: (Re)solving Moral Dilemmas,* 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013); Joan P. Shapiro & Jacqueline A. Stefkovich, J.A, *Ethical Leadership and Decision Making in Education: Applying Theoretical Perspectives to Complex Dilemmas,* 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011); Robert J. Starratt, *Ethical leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004); Robert J. Starratt, "Ethics and Social Justice: Strangers Passing in the Night?" in Ira Bogotch & Carolyn M. Shields (eds.), *International Handbook of Educational Leadership and Social (In)justice* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2014): 67-80.

[4] Bradley W. Davis, Mark A. Gooden, & Donna J. Micheaux, "Colorblind Leadership: A Critical Race Theory Analysis of the ISLLC and ELCC Standards," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (2015): 1-31.

[5] See Lisa Bass, "Fostering an Ethic of Care in Leadership: A Conversation with Five African American Women," *Advances in Developing Human Resources* 11, no. 5 (2009): 619-632; Lisa Bass, "When Care Trumps Justice: The Operationalization of Black Feminist Caring in Educational Leadership," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 25, no. 1 (2012): 73-87; Lisa Bass, "Black Male Leaders Care Too: An Introduction to Black Masculine Caring in Educational Leadership," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2020): 353-395; Lisa Bass, ed., *Black Mask-ulinity: A Framework for Black Masculine Caring* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2016); Arnold's work includes Noelle Witherspoon & Bruce M. Arnold, "Pastoral Care: Notions of Caring and the Black Female Principal," *The Journal of Negro Education* 79, no. 3 (2010): 220-232.

standardization, and individualization that have made school leadership increasingly difficult and have greatly constrained the possibilities of public education.

First Issue: Don't Get Caught in the Caring Trap

The emphasis on caring in relation to school leadership practice is not surprising, and most school leadership discourse follows the same arguments that philosopher of education Kenneth Strike made about the importance of balancing concern for care with concerns for justice. Among the exceptions are Bass and Arnold, who dig more deeply into care theory from Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings[6] and attend to the numerous critiques and expansion of that earlier care theory advanced by key feminist and womanist authors.[7] Bass has delved into both Black feminist and Black masculinist caring in school leadership, and that important work has been influential in my collaborative work, in which we have looked at the impersonal caring that results from benign neglect, misplaced empathy, or race-evasive educational practices.[8]

As Black feminist critiques of caring have shown us, the white savior mentality or the Messiah complex can mask what is essentially impersonal caring—extending to students what one believes to be what they need without knowing what they actually want and need.[9] Impersonal caring is a double problem: it fails to serve students, and it wears out teachers whose efforts at caring are not received by students. Teachers may then perceive students as

---

[6] Carol Gilligan, "Woman's Place in Man's Life Cycle," *Harvard Educational Review* 49, no. 4 (1979): 431–446; Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

[7] Angela Valenzuela, *Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1999); Audrey Thompson, A., "Caring and Colortalk: Childhood Innocence in White and Black," in Vanessa Siddle-Walker & John R. Snarey, eds., *Race-ing Moral Formation: African American Perspectives on Care and Justice* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2004): 23-37; Vanessa Siddle Walker & Renata H. Tompkins, "Caring in the Past: The Case of a Southern Segregated African American School," in Vanessa Siddle-Walker & John R. Snarey, eds., *Race-ing Moral Formation: African American Perspectives on Care and Justice* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2004): 77-92; Sheron A. Fraser-Burgess, "Accountability and Troubling the Caring Ideal in the Classroom: A Call to Teacher Citizenry," *Educational Studies* 56, no. 5 (2020): 456-481; Andrea D. Green, A.D., "In a Different Room: Toward an African American Woman's Ethic of Care and Justice," in Vanessa Siddle-Walker & John R. Snarey, eds., *Race-ing Moral Formation: African American Perspectives on Care and Justice* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2004): 55-71.

[8] Michael G. Gunzenhauser, Osly J. Flores, & Michael W. Quigley, "Race-Conscious Ethics in School Leadership: From Impersonal Caring to Critical Responsibility," *Teachers College Record* 123, no. 2 (2021): 1-40.

[9] Lorraine Code, *Rhetorical spaces: Essays on gendered locations* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995).

ungrateful for their efforts at caring. Instead, teachers need to work toward more genuine caring, starting with a historically situated and context-specific understanding of students' needs and interests.

However, there are systemic barriers to genuine caring. Philosopher of education Chris Higgins, echoing Maxine Greene, argues that the freedom-seeking teacher is the one best able to teach.[10] Higgins argues that the teacher needs to maintain their personhood; otherwise, the students' needs completely dominate. The trend of declining teacher freedom coincides with the emergence of feminist and feminine ethics of caring, so it may not be a surprise that the downside of caring has emerged in its adoption as a philosophical basis for practice. If teachers have declining freedom, the danger is that self-sacrifice and martyrdom become the mark of caring. As Higgins argues, the problem with an overemphasis on the individual in ethics is that it tends to have a goal of maintaining the innocence of the individual. This situation makes teachers out as martyrs, making them difficult to criticize. In other words, it's difficult to understand how teachers can actually be in a position to genuinely care for students if much of what they do is decided for them. Without careful attention to the cultivation of caring, we have in other words set up teachers to be martyred.

Philosophers can think with school leaders about how best to foster the widespread impulse of caring for students without it overtaxing and exhausting teachers. They can help teachers see that the expectation of caring can be a dangerous trap. Teachers should certainly be expected to continue to learn about the needs and interests of their students in order to care for them in ways that actually serve them. If genuine caring is to be a foundation of moral leadership, leaders need to help teachers enact that caring, which may require removing barriers and changing practices that get in the way.

Second Issue: Know Students, Don't Standardize Them

A main way to remove barriers to genuine caring is for leaders to appreciate the related issue of the standardization of students through adoption of norms that all students are supposed to adhere to, along with the establishment of categories of deviation to place students that don't fit the norm. Channeling Michel Foucault, philosopher Thomas Popkewitz blew the whistle on educational reforms decades ahead of most people's appreciation of his reading of the changing social organization of education.[11]

In 1991, among Popkewitz's arguments was recognition for how teachers' participation in the development of curriculum standards was orchestrated to give the impression that their professional knowledge is respected if not essential. Responsibility for the authorship of curriculum standards is

[10] Chris Higgins, C., *The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice* (Chichester, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).
[11] Thomas S. Popkewitz, *A Political Sociology of Educational Reform: Power/Knowledge in Teaching, Teacher Education and Research* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1991).

disembodied and diffused when it is subsequently returned to teachers to implement. The interest in setting high standards (and making them available to all) shifts to an interest in standardization.[12] Teachers' standardized practice is transferred, then, to standardized performance expectations of their students.

In his more recent work, Popkewitz addresses the pursuit of practical knowledge in educational research and its desire to make education more inclusive.[13] Consistent with the kind of governmentality we experience now, the sciences powerfully define the desired persons that our reform efforts attempt to instantiate ("the potentialities of society and people that research is to actualize"[14]). That process, Popkewitz argues, works against its very purpose:

> [P]aradoxically, the universalizing distinctions of the child's "well-being" are produced through the objectifications of populations that inscribe desires of redemption and rescue: the abjected qualities of the fragile families and lacking in the capabilities or psychological characteristics to succeed.[15]

And so, the sources of knowledge that are most prized for informing teacher practice are themselves logically flawed in their base assumptions. This rather sophisticated take-down of standardization invites critique of what he refers to as the erasures of differences to only reinscribe them. Popkewitz invites consideration of alternative approaches (which he doesn't explicitly name, but that's for those of us who work with school leaders to figure out), and in the meantime, "criticism that cuts into what seems self-evident."[16]

Other larger issues are things like mandatory state assessments and the constructions of educated persons embedded in Popkewitz's critiques. To the extent that schools reify these constructions, the collective autonomy of the school is compromised. Higgins' teacher is seeking freedom within a confined space, having to be concerned about how well their students are going to do on standardized measures.

Thinking with school leaders, philosophers of education can help explore the distinctions between high standards and standardization. They can help question forms of assessment that insist upon rigid consequences for students falling short, such as removing them from arts instruction and enrichment activities for extra test preparation. Philosophers can help leaders understand the value of discretion in policy implementation and the avoidance of additional surveillance that's neither required nor necessary for students' educational aspirations. Leaders further can question definitions of proficiency,

---

[12] Scott Thompson, "The Authentic Standards Movement and Its Evil Twin," *Phi Delta Kappan* 82, no. 5 (2001): 358-362.

[13] Thomas S. Popkewitz, "The Paradoxes of Practical Research: The Good Intentions of Inclusion that Exclude and Abject," *European Educational Research Journal* 19, no. 4 (2020): 271-288.

[14] Popkewitz, "The Paradoxes of Practical Research," 271.

[15] Popkewitz, "The Paradoxes of Practical Research," 281.

[16] Popkewitz, "The Paradoxes of Practical Research," 283.

standard pacing of instruction, and the constraints built into having to adopt wholesale curriculum products rather than building the capacity of teachers to create curriculum.

Third Issue: Insist on the Liberatory Aims of Education and Teaching

Along with standardizing students is the concern with how high-stakes accountability policies now in effect nationally for two decades have effectively narrowed the curriculum in public schools, emphasizing tested areas. The narrowing of curriculum both narrows the aims of education and constrains the practice of teaching. Interest in teaching as a profession has narrowed precipitously in the last generation, exacerbated now by the stresses of Covid-era teaching and expanding student mental health needs.

Around the time that national-level educational reform first started to take hold in the 1980s, philosophers of education were wise to the dangers of the various reforms that had begun to attract widespread support among policymakers. Among the many philosophers of education commenting about this phenomenon at the time, Maxine Greene predicted the narrowed attention to educational aims coming from 1980s concerns.[17] At the time, Greene argued that reforms were making the work of the teacher increasingly prescriptive; the teacher was becoming a deliverer of instruction rather than a learner and inquirer. The basis for Higgins' view already mentioned, the pursuit of freedom of the teacher, Greene argued, is a precondition of their ability to provide educational experiences for students to do the same. Greene was one of many educational theorists arguing for the importance of education for freedom and liberation. Philosophy of education, once a staple in teacher education but derided by reforms as being too theoretical, subsequently lost its place in the curriculum in favor of concern for greater content area expertise (especially but not limited to secondary education) and more instrumental concerns for skill development for classroom management and delivery of standards-based curriculum. School leaders who went through such teacher education programs are routinely surprised in my classes when presented with ideas that bring their instrumental goals into question. For them, liberatory education is radically different from how they have been taught.

To help with the issues of narrowed aims of education and teaching, philosophers of education can help school leaders attend to the stated and unstated aims of education in their schools, to develop a vision for the role of the teacher in guiding students in pursuit of those aims, to engage communities in the practice of identifying preferred aims, and to create curriculum to achieve it. To get at the core issues for why we are experiencing a shortage of teachers, school leaders need partners to think about how deeply engrained social expectations of education and teaching have changed.

---

[17] Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1988).

FOURTH ISSUE: MAKE PROFESSIONALISM COLLECTIVE

An underlying concern throughout this paper has been the encroachment by standardization on the decision making of the individual teacher. Accountability systems attempt to identify effective teachers and reward them for their seeming success in eliciting higher than average achievement. These systems incentivize individual teachers to improve as many of their students' individual performances as possible. Such individualistic approaches to school reform have dominated for so long, it may be difficult for leaders to imagine alternatives.

The development of these reforms found support in the move to raise professional expectations of teachers. Historian David Labaree expressed concern for the predictable consequences of the move to professionalize teaching in the 1980s and 1990s through initiatives such as the Holmes Group, which aimed to lead the field by moving teacher certification into graduate programs.[18] In his conceptually rich genealogical essay, Labaree predicted in 1992 the paradoxical devolution of teacher professionalism that would arise from calls for greater professionalization of teaching. Labaree remarked that professionalization required solidification of specialized knowledge, which would need to occur as a first step. That happened: teacher educators built power and credibility, took greater control of standards and curriculum, and effectively decreased the autonomy of individual teachers. In practice, this work eliminated the expectation that teachers would need to make very many curricular and instructional decisions at all. Whatever autonomy teachers derived from implementations of progressivist education became less normal, less prominent, and less desirable.

As an alternative to all the individualization and coming standardization, philosophers at this time typically advocated for progressivist principles and more substantively rational practices that resisted the acceptance of new levels of control.[19] One of the more fully articulated views on the matter was provided by philosopher of education Kenneth Strike, who in a series of pieces addressed the specific challenges of school governance and bureaucratic control of schools by legislatures.[20] Within the discourse about professionalism

---

[18] David F. Labaree, "Power, Knowledge, and the Rationalization of Teaching: A Genealogy of the Movement to Professionalize Teaching," *Harvard Educational Review* 62, no. 2 (1992): 123–155.

[19] John I. Goodlad, Roger Soder, & Kenneth A. Sirotnik, K.A., eds., *The Moral Dimensions of Teaching* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1990).

[20] Kenneth A. Strike, "Is Teaching a Profession: How Would We Know?" *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education* 4, no. 1 (1990): 91-117; Kenneth A. Strike, "The Legal and Moral Responsibility of Teachers," in John I. Goodlad, Rogert Soder, & Kenneth A. Sirotnik, eds., *The Moral Dimension of Teaching* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1990): 188-223; Kenneth A. Strike, "Professionalism, Democracy, and Discursive Communities: Normative Reflections on Restructuring," *American Educational Research Journal,* 30, no. 2 (1993): 255-275; Kenneth A. Strike, Emil J.

in circulation at the time, Strike was interested in the relations between democratic control, autonomy, and professional judgment. Strike articulated a special role for teachers as "first among equals" who should initiate school policy and participate in deliberative spaces along with students (in a junior role), parents, and the school board (as representatives of the larger community).

Particularly relevant for Strike's argument is that teachers should not have ultimate authority about curriculum and educational aims (as they would if schools were to be ruled by philosopher kings).[21] Strike argues for a combination of John Locke's "consent of the governed" and Jurgen Habermas' "speech communities" to position the teacher within a local deliberative community. With some respect for the autonomy of the teacher but a more collective notion of decision-making ability, the teacher's special knowledge is honored, along with attention to varied and all opinions. Elsewhere Strike refers to this as "collective autonomy," arguing that school communities should maintain autonomy, free from undue influences of larger legislative authorities.

Wise to the limitations of the ideal speech situation, Strike is attentive to what we would now call minoritized views. While consensus is the arbiter in the ideal speech situation, deliberation need not always lead to consensus, but rather some notion of the sovereignty of the people through the decisions of the school board, who might have an arbitration role. The opportunity for marginalized (and marginalizing) viewpoints to be expressed in school board meetings, in the principal's office, by parents mostly, and by students, seems to be the model. The school board remains the ultimate arbiter. What seems missing from what Strike puts forward is accounting for influence from the outside to come leaking into the situation.

Outside influences leak into the deliberative process in educational communities in at least two ways. One is the introduction of reactionary discourses that reinforce dominant perspectives, especially now with the anti-critical race theory movement. These influences are coming not only directly from complaining individuals, but nationally organized efforts to ban certain texts. More insidiously, these seem to be geared toward self-disciplining teachers not wanting to risk controversy. These national discourses seem intended to overwhelm more local, deliberative public spaces and to intimidate rather than inform collective decision making. Leaders may need help to identify when communities can be led to be more inclusive, and sometimes the most an equity-focused leader can do is name the damage being done by excluding others and constraining opportunities.

Philosophers can think with school leaders about the kind of collective responsibility for education that Strike and others offered as alternatives to the more individualistic approaches to education that reform efforts have led us to believe are necessary for systemic improvement. Leaders need tools for leaning

---

Haller, & Jonas F. Soltis, *The Ethics of School Administration* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1988).

[21] Strike, "Professionalism, Democracy, and Discursive Communities."

into parent and community interests in asserting responsibility for education. Rather than being nostalgic for some lost moment when teachers were autonomous decision makers, leaders need to clarify the roles that all members of communities have for asserting responsibility and working for collective decision making about professional decisions. Philosophers can work with leaders to see the conceptual import of such collective efforts to work against the fundamental constraints of the profession. Indeed, some current advocates for school-based educational reform have returned to these collective notions, including the work on collaborative professionalism by Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan[22] and some of the applications of improvement science for systemic reform by Jill Perry, Anthony Bryk, and Brandi Hinnant-Crawford.[23]

Conclusion

With an approach that encourages school leaders to become more firmly grounded in the philosophical concepts that guide their most important commitments, philosophers of education can think with school leaders on these four core issues and other applied concerns that may arise as important in particular settings. I offer here an approach that encourages philosophers to take seriously the current issues that school leaders face as philosophical conflicts. Leaders are working against powerful cultural themes that dominate education policy with standardization and individualization, furthering inequities and imposing colonial, patriarchal, and white supremacist concerns. Philosophical approaches can help by fostering collective, liberatory practices.

The arguments for liberatory education are promising, yet they invite philosophical elaboration. Beyond the critique that leadership practice often lacks philosophical grounding, one way that philosophers of education can engage with school leaders (and those preparing to be school leaders, if we are to take on the opportunities presented to us) is to help leaders argue persuasively for their beliefs about the right aims of education, their professional ethics, and their beliefs in the importance of understanding the life experiences of others.

I imagine a philosopher of education's project as a way *to think with* leaders who are capable and committed leaders. I should make explicit the recurrent assumption that a philosopher's school leader partner has interest in making education more equitable for their students. Importantly, a school leader should know what they believe is valuable, just, and meaningful and should be

---

[22] Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan, *Professional Capital: Transforming Teachers in Every School* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2012).

[23] Jill A. Perry, Debby Zambo, & Robert Crow, *The Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice: A Guide for Faculty, Committee Members, and Their Students* (Gorham, ME: Myers Education Press, 2020); Anthony Bryk, Louis M. Gomez, Alicia Grunow, & Paul G. LeMahieu, *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2015); Brandi N. Hinnant-Crawford, *Improvement Science in Education: A Primer* (Gorham, ME: Myers Education Press, 2020).

interested in collaborating with others in their communities about these beliefs and values, even if they might have difficulty expressing them or not fully know how to act upon them. If they are not interested in that work, they have challenges a philosopher of education is not likely to be able to help them with.

LIBRARY HOLDINGS, "DIVISIVE CONCEPTS," AND PARENTAL RIGHTS

Bryan Warnick
The Ohio State University

Over the past several years, there have been numerous legislative attempts to limit discussion of race and gender/sexuality in K-12 schools and higher education in the name of parental rights.[1] As I write this, sixteen states have banned the teaching of "Critical Race Theory" (CRT) and additional legislation is being considered in twenty-two other states.[2] Common legislative language includes prohibitions on teaching students that one racial group "bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex" or that students from certain racial groups should feel "discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress."[3] Such bans are commonly justified on the grounds of parental rights: as the primary caregivers, parents should control what students are taught about racial issues. Parents, it is said, should be able to "opt their children out" of what they consider to be "racially discriminatory instruction."[4] With respect to gender and sexuality, Florida's "Parental Rights in Education Act" (HB 1557) stipulates that "classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur" in the early grades. Additionally, groups such as Moms For Liberty are seeking to ban books in school libraries, also under a justification of parental rights.[5] The targeted books tend to deal with LGBTQ or racial issues. As part of both initiatives, there is also a concern to provide parents

---

[1] Katie Reilly, "Republicans are Increasingly Targeting 'Divisive Concepts' at Colleges and Universities," *Time* (March 29, 2022): https://time.com/6162489 /divisive-concepts-colleges/; Terry Gross, "From Slavery to Socialism, New Legislation Restricts What Teachers Can Discuss," *NPR* (February 3, 2022): https://www.npr.org/2022/02/03/1077878538/legislation-restricts-what-teachers-can-discuss.

[2] See an updated list at: https://wisevoter.com/state-rankings/states-that-have-banned-critical-race-theory/

[3] Eesha Pendharkar, "Legal Challenges to 'Divisive Concepts' Laws: an Update," *Education Week* (October 17, 2022): Legal Challenges to 'Divisive Concepts' Laws: an Update (edweek.org)

[4] Jonathan Butcher and Lindsey Burke, "Protecting Children and Families with Parents' Bills of Rights," The Heritage Foundation (April 11, 2022): https://www.heritage.org/education/report/protecting-children-and-families-parents-bills-rights

[5] Julie Page, "You've got us all wrong. Moms for Liberty isn't about banning books," *The News and Observer* (Dec. 28, 2022): https://www.newsobserver.com/opinion/article270200227.html#storylink=cpy

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

access to school information. This information relates to curricular transparency and all "mental health" changes relating to students.

What should we make of attempts to limit discussion of racial injustice and gender identity in schools, and to limit parent access to curricular information, from a parents' rights perspective? To better understand this question, we need to be clear about the reasons why we (rightly) give parents a large amount of discretion in making educational decisions. I will argue that parents' rights grow out of the sacrificial labor that parents provide to their children. The right that grows out of this sacrificial labor is best conceived as a "right to invite." I will argue that, while this right is indeed substantial, it comes with certain inherent limitations. I then will examine the scope of the right to invite, together with its limitations, to determine whether parental rights can be extended to the curricular bans mentioned above and to limitations of library holdings.

Some may find that such a rational analysis is beside the point, claiming that the invocation of "parents' rights" is made in bad faith. This is not an abstract debate about rights, they might worry, but is a cover for racist or transphobic opinions, or is being used as a political tool to undermine public education. It is worth stating from the onset that there is, in fact, a subtext to many arguments about parents' rights—they are not always what they appear to be. Still, I think we should disagree with this as an overly broad generalization: while many proponents of parents' rights use the language as a cover for hate, this is surely not *always* the case. There are people who legitimately wonder where to draw the line in questions of parental authority. To excuse ourselves from trying to engage with their arguments is to hold an overly myopic, truncated, and condescending view of one's fellow citizens.

The Basis of Parental Rights

There are two popular arguments for empowering parents to make educational decisions.[6] First, there are child-centered arguments: It benefits the child to be cared for by a small, consistent group of adults who know them very well. Parents usually know best the personal histories of their children. They usually know best what their children like, want, need, and fear. They also usually have a personal concern for the child that no one else does. This intimate knowledge and unique concern that parents have for their children suggests that parents are well placed to make educational decisions. If, instead of parents, the caretakers were an ever-changing group of strangers, or government bureaucrats, or even professional educators, the knowledge of the individual child would be less, and the concern would not be as uniquely personal. In these cases, the educational decisions would be either less optimal or (in some cases) disastrous.

[6] Discussion of these positions can be found in David Archard, *Children: Rights and Childhood* (London, UK: Routledge, 1993) and James G. Dwyer, *Religious Schools v. Children's Rights* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

According to this argument, it benefits children to give parents educational rights.

Second, there are parent-centered arguments. According to these arguments, parenting is part of what makes for a meaningful human life. How we judge our lives is partly determined by how well we play this role. Also, part of what makes life meaningful is the possibility of a shared life with others. We want to be around people who share our enthusiasms and passions, to say nothing of our deepest beliefs and values. Giving parents a chance for this shared life, for these relationship goods, is why we give parents the right to make many educational decisions. Education, after all, is how shared passions, beliefs, and values most often develop. Parents should be given the tools that they need to succeed at the project of parenting as they conceive of it. If a positive self-concept is shaped, in part, by success in parenting, then parents should have rights to make the educational decisions they need to actualize their vision of success.

Both the child-centered and the parent-centered arguments have to do with maximizing certain interests. Both hold great power and recognize important moral truths about the parent-child relationship. But there are several theoretical questions that these arguments cannot answer adequately, questions where the implied answer seems counter to moral intuitions. Some of the most important questions surround historical examples and thought experiments related to the redistribution of children. There are historical cases, for example, where infants have been forcibly taken away from birth families and given to adoptive parents, often for political purposes (this happened during the so-called "Dirty War" in Argentina in the 1980s and is currently being perpetuated by Russia in the Russo-Ukrainian War). In many cases of such infant displacement, we can imagine that the infant comes to be fully loved and fully known by the adoptive family. The child may grow without any knowledge of their past abduction. In such cases, the child's educational interests would be fully served. Surely, however, a moral travesty has occurred when infants are forcibly removed from families. The child-centered arguments cannot explain what has gone wrong since the child's interests are fully met.

We can also imagine cases where childless couples would be better parents—and make better educational choices—than actual parents. Such childless couples might be unable to have children, and thus be prevented from having the relationship goods and shared intimacy with children. Why shouldn't we redistribute children away from ineffective biological parents? Why not give the infants to childless couples who desperately want children (maximizing the parent-centered interests) and who would be demonstrably better parents (maximizing child-centered interests)? This would seem to maximize the interests of everybody, parents and children alike. Here again, though, forcible redistribution of children in this fashion seems to go strongly against moral intuitions.

To respond adequately to the problem of forcible redistribution, I have argued, the justification for parental rights cannot solely be based on the *interests* that are served.[7] The argument must not be solely forward-looking, but must also be backward-looking. It is about what parents *deserve* for what they have already done. The biological parents have invested their work, their pain, their discomfort in bearing, birthing, and raising the child. They have invested their "sacrificial labor." Because of this investment, we cannot take children away from parents even though it might serve certain interests. It is only in cases where that sacrificial labor is lacking (in cases of serious neglect) or where parent action actively and intentionally harms the child (in cases of abuse) that the state is justified in removing children from parents.

With respect to parenting, the sacrificial labor is given in hopes of building a meaningful relationship with the child. Relationships are linked to shared interests and values.[8] This relational hope is ultimately, I believe, why the labor or parenting should translate into a right to make educational decisions: because parents labor in hopes of relationships, and because relationships are linked to shared passions, beliefs, and values, then parents should be given wide discretion to make educational decisions to create this shared life.[9] This includes the discretion to make sub-optimal educational decisions. Thus, although it may benefit children or childless couples to forcibly redistribute children, it violates the respect we should have for sacrificial labor of parenting, starting initially with the biological parents.

I think the best way to describe the rights of parents is in terms of a "right to invite," which honors the hope of shared values and experiences behind the sacrificial labor of parenting.[10] The right is best framed as an "invitation," as we will see, because it allows for the future agency of children. After all, an invitation is not a destiny; it can be accepted or rejected. The state provides no guarantee that the children will accept the parental invitation, and in some cases, it may even hope that the children do not. Also, an invitation is usually an expression of a desire toward a shared experience, which captures the relationship goods that parenting aspires toward. Parents should be protected in making invitations to their children into a shared life. Parenting is the ability to make certain invitations into a shared experience. The discretion that is granted here is fairly substantive. It would allow parents to immerse their children into a

[7] Bryan R. Warnick, "Parental Authority Over Education and the Right to Invite," *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 1 (2014): 53–71.
[8] Of course, parents who want their children to be clones of themselves are being short-sighted and perhaps pathological. Joy can be found in differences as well as similarities (See Andrew Solomon, *Far from the Tree: Parents, Children and the Search for Identity* [New York, NY: Scribner, 2012]). However, at least some degree of shared values, beliefs, experiences, and activities is, undeniably, part of rich human relationships.
[9] This discretion includes the ability to remove themselves completely from the decision-making by giving a child up for adoption.
[10] Warnick, "Parental Authority Over Education."

particular belief system (baptizing them, for example, or requiring that they attend a particular church) since it is only through participation that one can fully understand the invitation that is being offered.

Schools respect the right to invite by refraining from indoctrination. This involves both a negative and a positive obligation. First, negatively, schools cannot construct curricula or activities with the purpose of countering or degrading the reasonable beliefs and cultures of families, nor can schools explicitly single out any reasonable forms of life as being superior to others. Second, positively, schools should give due recognition to all reasonable cultures and belief systems of the students within the schools.[11] That is, schools should provide positive curricular representations, acknowledge different cultural and religious holidays, and so forth. Schools are responsible to give families space to invite children into a shared family life, without active and intentional hostility.

This right, while substantial, is limited by what I have called the "autonomy proviso." The autonomy proviso is suggested by the notion of sacrificial labor from which the right to invite emerges. The right to invite is built on honoring and recognizing the sacrificial labor of parenting. There is nothing unusual about this; society often attempts to honor different forms of work and sacrifice, depending on the "sphere of justice" in which the practice is situated.[12] Sometimes, in the military realm, monuments are built to those who give their lives in war, while in the economic realm, work is rewarded with income. What makes a sacrifice worthy of social recognition? For one thing, sacrificial labor worth recognizing is labor on behalf of another, and that is wanted and chosen. After all, someone who paints my house without my permission does not earn a payment—this would be more an act of vandalism than sacrificial labor. The ability to choose the labor that is performed on our behalf is one precondition to the value of that labor. The complication here is that children do not have the ability to choose, initially, the labor that is exerted on their behalf. They cannot reject the sacrificial labor of their parents or the educational discretion that parents are given because of it. Over time, however, they can come to develop the ability to choose, and we honor this future agency by helping them to develop

---

[11] "Reasonable" should be taken in the Rawlsian sense of belief systems that recognize others as "free and equal" in the public realm and that agree to fair terms of social cooperation (John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* [New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996]). Beliefs that teach hatred, denigration, or discrimination against fellow citizens are not reasonable in this sense. I acknowledge, but cannot here address, the complexity involved in applying this principle. Also, to be sure, the very fact of education implies that some forms of life will be designated as "better" than other forms of life. Education teaches us, for example, that it is better to be literate than not. This is an unavoidable part of education. The point here is that school should not actively or intentionally denigrate or try to remove students from the reasonable forms of life that are present in the community.

[12] Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1983).

autonomy. The state has an obligation to help children to eventually choose the value of the labor that is exercised in their behalf.

What this means is that, while schools cannot indoctrinate children into the preferred views of the state, families (whatever the law may say) do not have the moral right to indoctrinate their children into their own preferred views. That is, families cannot limit the exposure of their children to only the views of the family. Families have a right to invite, but they do not have a right to make this the *only* invitation that children receive. Schools have an obligation to show that there are a number of possibilities, a number of inviting options. Schools are a principal way in which students experience invitations to lives outside of what their parents believe. The general idea behind the autonomy proviso is that schools should invite students to access the "Great Sphere," beyond the invitation of their parents.[13]

Problems with Invoking Parents' Rights

What does this all have to do with legislative attempts to limit curricula or library holdings in the name of parents' rights? The right to invite and the autonomy proviso both have important implications. It should be noted, initially, that this legislation exists within a context of family pluralism. In most schools, families will have different beliefs, values, and practices. One aspect of a curriculum might cohere with the beliefs of one family, while challenging the beliefs of another. Invoking parents' rights to limit library holdings or the curriculum assumes that all parents agree about the invitations that they want to offer. In this sense, asking for these types of restrictions is very different from asking for one's own children to be excused from certain lessons or textbooks. These curricular and library limitations not only change the invitations that are offered to one's own children, but to all children. Invoking parents' rights to support such restrictions is presumptuous. Some parents, after all, might want their children exposed to troubling racial history and to sex education from early on, and to impose restrictions on these subjects is to ignore the desires of these parents. The scope of these limitations makes them much more problematic, and they are problematic precisely from the perspective of parental rights. They assume certain parents matter more than others.

There are, of course, dominant ideologies that are circulating in American society. Some communities might have strong support for certain restrictions on curriculum and library holdings. Even if all families agree on the invitations they want to offer, however, limitations on curriculum and library holdings would still conflict with the autonomy proviso. The conflict exists in the two areas of social concern related to these two political activities.

First, consider curricula related to gender and sexuality. As I indicated, part of the recent activism we are seeing in education is an attempt to limit discussion of these topics (the piece of legislation out of Florida was nicknamed

[13] Eamonn Callan, "The Great Sphere: Education against Servility," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 31, no. 2 (1997): 221–232.

the "don't say gay" bill). Under the framework of the right to invite, and particularly under the autonomy proviso, restrictions on the topic of gender and sexuality are problematic. The autonomy proviso stipulates that schools have a responsibility to expose children to different forms of social life. One of the most important ways that schools can reveal alternatives is precisely in the domain of family life. Families, by their nature, set precedents in personal relationships, particularly around gender roles and sexuality. In whatever way the family is constructed, it will enact and exemplify from the very beginning what it means to play various family/gendered/social roles. Since these relationships are constantly modeled, constantly placed before the children, they set strong precedents. Because the intense nature of family life tips the scale toward one particular way of being as a family, toward one particular invitation, then schools have a special responsibility to reveal and validate alternative patterns of reasonable family relationships. Hence the need for schools to "say gay."

Second, what about the efforts to restrict discussion or library holdings related to race relations and the more problematic sides of American history? One might say that learning about racial history has little to do with fostering student autonomy—it doesn't seem to necessarily be an invitation to live a certain way. We should recognize, however, that individual choices are always made against the background of cultural context and community history. This background shapes how children come to think of their life possibilities. For example, this background shapes perceptions of the sort of professions that are open to someone "like me." Occupational choice has much to do with one's self-concept and the set of choices that seem like realistic options. Walter Feinberg calls this the issue of "standing"—the impression of where one stands in the social order.[14] Students need to understand history to understand their "standing," and they need to understand how their "standing" is constructed to find their way in the world. That is, students need to know why the social order is constructed in certain ways and how that construction might limit their own views of themselves. The challenge, then, is not simply learning that someone "like me" can be doctor, but also to help them understand why they may not personally know many black doctors—it is not about natural ability or intelligence, they might come to understand, but historical oppression and discrimination. This realization may open doors of self-understanding and new possibilities. The home environment may not supply this necessary context. The autonomy proviso requires that schools provide it, to show students that different ways of living are possible. Curricular restrictions on the topic of racial discrimination, then, would not be permitted.

[14] Walter Feinberg, *On Higher Ground: Education and the Case for Affirmative Action* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1998).

WHAT PARENTS MAY REASONABLY REQUEST

The right to invite does have some implications that protect parents' rights to shape the education of their children in ways related to these political activities, if only tenuously. First, part of a vision that parents have is for their children to have a particular sort of childhood. Future shared lives are shaped in part by past shared memories. There is an intersection between the sort of childhood we want to provide our children and certain notions of childhood innocence. Many families believe in a particular vision of childhood in which the child is protected from thinking about certain issues and concerns of the "adult world." This view should be honored, to some extent. To point to a fanciful and glib example, if a school held a session called "thinking critically about Santa Claus" for elementary school students, it might be infringing on this right. This is not because parents want their children to believe in Santa Claus as adults, but because they want to share experiences as a family in the present, to create certain types of shared memories, and to carry on certain traditions. These are not unreasonable desires. This means that age-appropriateness is indeed a valid concern, and schools should be sensitive to concerns on this topic that are voiced by parents. There comes a time, of course, when this protectiveness reaches its limits and starts to encroach on the boundaries of the "autonomy proviso." Age-appropriateness is a complex topic and has to do with timing of knowledge as it relates to children's wellbeing, with the maturity of a particular child, with social norms about what children know and when, and so forth. Some curricular restrictions in the early grades, however, could be justified on parental rights on the grounds of age-appropriateness.

Second, as part of the right to invite, schools have a responsibility to not indoctrinate. As part of this responsibility, schools have an obligation to provide respectful representations of different family backgrounds in the curriculum. While the traditional family structure, for example, cannot be the *only* structure discussed or represented, the traditional family structure should be present as one possible valid model of family life. Likewise, abstinence should be presented as a valid choice in sex education, among other choices, since many parents will be teaching that at home. Exclusion of such representations should be considered a violation of the family's right to invite. Failure to include positive representations of the values held by families indicates a hostility to those norms.

This point was made by Eamon Callan in his commentary on the federal court decision in *Mozert v. Hawkins*.[15] The Mozert families, recall, were seeking exemption from what they regarded as a wrongheaded and hostile Holt reading series. Callan disagrees with most of the arguments of the families in that case. He concedes, however, that they had one important point to make: there were zero positive representations of any protestant Christians in the Holt series, even while religious diversity was a primary theme of the readings. The parents'

[15] Mozert v. Hawkins, 827 F.2d 1058 (6th Cir. 1987).

argument, he writes, was "not about the evils of reflection on diversity but the alleged failure to initiate such reflection in a context where the way of life which the parents and their children shared was given due respect and recognition."[16] Parents cannot seek to censor alternative positions, Callan suggests, but they can ask for respectful treatment of their beliefs. In some ways, the parents should have sought to *add* books to the curriculum rather than taking them away.

What might this mean for racial history? Certainly, the right to invite does not justify any censorship of the ugly truths of American history. Schools must teach truth, and they must find age-appropriate ways to teach it, even from early on. Nor would it justify banning certain ways of understanding social reality in favor of parents' rights. The autonomy proviso prevents this. Students must be given access to a wide variety of perspectives when it comes to understanding their social lives. At the same time, schools cannot provide only one way of approaching social reality, even one as powerful as those embodied in critical approaches—here, one might make rough distinction between the facts of history, which are what they are, and a particular theoretical interpretation of those facts.[17] Suppose a school did adopt CRT as the only theory of social reality presented to students, that only this was taught and it permeated all aspects of the curriculum—even all library books conformed to this perspective. Such a school would be in violation of the right to invite, and, for that matter, probably the autonomy proviso as well. It would be indoctrinatory. This would hold for any school dominated by a singular political or social perspective.

In this section, I have discussed ways in which the parental right to invite might give parents certain valid complaints under certain conditions. Of course, these conditions are very different from what the Moms for Liberty imagines that they are. In thought experiments, we can abstractly posit a school that lacks all respectful representations of traditional families or heterosexual couples. We can imagine a school that has a singular focus on CRT as the *only* accepted view of social reality. But conjectures hardly justify concerns about what is going on in actual schools. If such schools exist, they would be quite rare. Parental concerns about respectful representations of religion and conservative views may be more justified, but in such cases the legitimate response is not to censor or ban, but to add and enrich. This is what would be necessary to align school practices with the parental right to invite and the autonomy proviso.

What about the demands that schools provide parents with detailed information about curricula? Does the right to invite imply that parents have a right to know the curriculum of the school? I believe that, on this point, the right

[16] Eamonn Callan, *Creating Citizens: Political Education and Liberal Democracy* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1997), 160.

[17] Of course, this distinction is "rough" because social theories determine which facts are chosen to be presented to students and which facts are ignored. A conscientious teacher of history will be aware of how historical narratives are constructed, particularly their own, and show how the facts of history are always multivocal and under-determinative of the overall narratives.

to invite does support a right to know the details of the school curriculum. Families have valid reasons to know what schools are teaching. Parents, as part of their right to invite, are given the opportunity to convince their children to adopt family values, practices, and belief systems. The school curriculum intersects with this project in several ways. Parents may want to support their own invitations with what is being taught in schools. Maybe they are interested in science or health. Knowledge of the school curriculum would allow them to expand or amplify what is being taught. Or, they might be motivated to counter what is being taught in schools. If parents are given the opportunity to argue and convince, then they should be able to share their disagreements with what the school is trying to impart.

The most sensible worry about curricular openness is that it might have a "chilling effect" on curriculum. The result of this will be that schools will avoid anything remotely controversial, to the detriment of a rich education. But it is difficult to know what to make of this worry. First, motivated parents can always find out what is being taught, after all, and an air of secrecy would seem to increase feelings of distrust. A curricular openness will doubtless be exploited by bad-faith actors, of course, but so will the fact that the curriculum is closed off. Second, schools should welcome discussions with parents about the curriculum—parents might have valid input for schools to consider. If teachers are worried that the curriculum will be offensive to family sensibilities, the solution is not to hide it, but to explain it and stand by it, if it is defensible. Again, bad faith actors will cause trouble here, but the solution is not to hide things from parents. It would be up to good-faith actors to counter-mobilize in defense of what is right.

To be sure, curricular openness might encourage some parents to opt out of certain discussions. In theoretical terms, the right to invite would prohibit parents from opting out of topics that they disagree with. Students need to be exposed to beliefs and values beyond what is taught at home. This obligation derives from the autonomy proviso—parents cannot seal off their children from views that run contrary to their own. Recognizing certain non-ideal realities of American schooling, however, suggests a more pragmatic approach. The non-ideal reality is that parents can ultimately opt out of public schooling all together. They can homeschool or send their children to private schools (often now fully supported with state funding). If parents are denied the ability to opt out of certain lessons or certain textbooks, it seems more likely that they will then opt out of public schools entirely. Overall, this would be a *worse* outcome for student autonomy than allowing them to opt out of certain lessons or textbooks. In a public-school environment, after all, they will passively be exposed to many different values and belief systems—much more so than in a homeschool or private school environment. The development of autonomy would be better served by keeping students within the public system. In some sense, the wise educator will meet worried parents where they are. These non-ideal considerations, then, point to approving parent requests to opt out. This should be offered to parents who, knowing the curriculum, demand curricular changes.

School libraries could do something similar, perhaps by maintaining a list of students who need parental permission to check out books. Educators can also respond to concerned parents by adding rather than subtracting, maybe by including more religious or conservative books in the library (books endorsing abstinence education) rather than taking other viewpoints away. To parents who are acting in good faith, this might send the message that the school has heard their concerns.

Conclusion

If we understand parental rights as a right to invite, there is little justification for the recent political initiatives that have arisen on the grounds of parents' rights. Such policies violate the right to invite in assuming that all families want to make a similar invitation. They also may violate the autonomy proviso in preventing certain important, alternative invitations to be offered to students. A right to invite may provide some justification for limitations relating to age-appropriateness and to schools adopting a singular viewpoint. It also suggests that schools have a positive obligation to allow parents to access the curriculum and to provide positive representations of reasonable forms of life within the curriculum. This obligation, however, points schools more toward adding to the curriculum and to libraries rather than subtracting.

POLARIZATION, POLITICS, AND FAMILY VOICE IN SCHOOLS: EXTENDING A FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSIVE FREEDOM TO FAMILY-SCHOOL INTERACTIONS

Thomas Capretta
The Ohio State University

Much has been written regarding student and educator expression in school; however, until recently, family expression seemed to be overlooked in debates on speech and education. Though discussion among education practitioners and researchers on family-school partnerships has continued for over thirty years, thoughtful analysis of interactions between families and schools, including how schools respond to controversial speech, is still required. Codified in federal education law, parental involvement, also commonly referred to as family engagement, is a required school activity for those receiving Title I funds.[1] These requirements emerge from a research base which correlates family-school partnership with benefits for students,[2] families,[3] and teachers.[4] Accordingly, effective family-school partnerships are also linked to improved communication between home and school,[5] and show promise as a strategy to increase family-school collaboration with greater attention to equity.[6]

"Until recently" is an important qualifier because though promising findings linking family-school partnerships and student success warrant family engagement's establishment as an effective improvement strategy, little research exists examining some of the more challenging aspects of family-school interaction. Recent publicized events illustrate the challenges schools face responding to controversial family speech. Throughout the COVID-19

---

[1] No Child Left Behind Act, Pub. L. No. 107-110, § 1118 (2001).; Every Student Succeeds Act, Pub. L. No. 114-95, 129 Stat. 1802 (2015).
[2] Joyce L. Epstein- et al., *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2018).
[3] Ming-E Chen, Jeffrey Alvin Anderson, and Lara Watkins, "Parent perceptions of connectedness in a full service community school project," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 25 (2016): 2268-2278.; Julie O'Donnell, Sandra L. Kirkner, and Nancy Meyer-Adams. "Low-Income, Urban Consumers' Perceptions of Community School Outreach Practices, Desired Services, and Outcomes," *School Community Journal* 18, no. 2 (2008): 147-164.
[4] Beverly A. Perrachione, Vicki J. Rosser, and George J. Petersen, "Why Do They Stay? Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of Job Satisfaction and Retention," *Professional Educator* 32, no. 2 (2008): n2.
[5] Matthew A. Kraftand Shaun M. Dougherty, "The effect of teacher–family communication on student engagement: Evidence from a randomized field experiment," *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness* 6, no. 3 (2013): 199-222.
[6] Ann M. Ishimaru, *Just schools: Building equitable collaborations with families and communities* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2019).

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

pandemic, new dimensions of these interactions emerged. As debates over masking and in-person or virtual schooling raged, a study by the American Psychological Association found that "over 40% of school administrators report[ed] verbal or threatening violence from parents" from July 2020 to June 2021.[7]

Still today, legal battles questioning the balance of power between families and school continue. These legal challenges position schools as institutions that impose their views on students and families without providing adequate opportunities for collaboration on weighty topics.[8] Additionally, families in these proceedings are wary of their children being required to adopt a district-promoted worldview.[9] While these cases are brought by small groups of families and may seem like fringe complaints, their emergence indicates that schools are struggling to engage all families and navigate controversial family-school interactions productively. Compounded by rising political polarization in the United States and the centering of "parent rights" in education, school leaders require a framework through which they can seriously consider families' diverse viewpoints, including those that are controversial, while maintaining a publicly legitimate position from which to respond.

Like primary and secondary schools in the US,[10] considerations around speech on the college campus are ongoing. In *Free Speech on Campus*,[11] Sigal Ben-Porath offers that the college campus's unique values and nature demand unique considerations around speech. In response, Ben-Porath proposes a framework called *Inclusive Freedom,* which centers both equal access and freedom of expression in campus dialogue. Schools could learn from this framework when developing dispositions and strategies for engaging with families. Like colleges, a school's unique positioning in a community demands a thoughtful approach to family speech. In this way, extending Ben-Porath's framework for Inclusive Freedom to family-school interactions, which promotes both free expression and access to ensure the inclusion of diverse viewpoints, seems to benefit the interests of schools, families, and students.[12] By considering the apparent values and nature of schools in relation to this framework, I argue that Inclusive Freedom is a compelling starting point for discussions around managing family-school interactions productively.

---

[7] Susan Dvorak McMahon et al., "Violence against Educators and School Personnel: Crisis during COVID. Technical Report," *American Psychological Association* (2022).

[8] Kaltenbach v. Hilliard City Schools, 2:23-cv-00187, (S.D. Ohio Jan 16, 2023) ECF No. 1.

[9] Parents Defending Education v. Olentangy Local School Dist., 23-3630, (6th Cir. Jul 31, 2023) ECF No. 1.

[10] Primary and secondary schools include kindergarten through 12th grade. In this paper, "school" refers to public primary and secondary schools in the US.

[11] Sigal R. Ben-Porath, *Free speech on campus* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

[12] The term "families" in this paper refers to any adult caretaker in a child's life.

In this paper, I first describe the foundations of Ben-Porath's framework for Inclusive Freedom, presenting the unique contextual factors that require an explicit commitment to managing free speech on college campuses. I will also discuss Inclusive Freedom's grounding in dignitary safety, which may help us imagine some boundaries when considering broad promotion of speech and access. Before considering how Inclusive Freedom applies to family-school interactions, I will make clear how this work responds to timely interests of school leaders. I ultimately argue that a framework for Inclusive Freedom provides enough substance and contextual congruency for schools to consider it as a promising conceptual starting point for negotiating family-school interactions.

EXPLORING BEN-PORATH'S FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSIVE FREEDOM

Ben-Porath's 2017 book, *Free Speech on Campus*, argues for the broad promotion and protection of free speech on college campuses, not because free speech is a core value of academia, but because it is central to the pursuit of those academic values.[13] Here, Ben-Porath makes a distinction between free speech and academic freedom, arguing that though public institutions in particular are bound by the first amendment, it is not a core value to the institution. Rather, academic freedom is a core value, with Ben-Porath noting, "it does both more and less than free speech."[14] While academic freedom does function like free speech in the sense that it protects academics pursuing controversial lines of work, it does not extend the same expansive liberty. Ben-Porath notes that academic freedom "precludes plagiarism or mischaracterization of research results," among other forms of speech that could be defensible under the first amendment.[15] Further, both the first amendment and academic freedom provided little guidance in how we might structure conversations among campus community members, both in and outside the classroom that might maximize the fruitfulness of these liberties. Ben-Porath's position that free speech is in fact not a core value of universities demands an approach to managing speech on campus that goes beyond the constitution.

This should not be taken to mean that promoting an environment of free speech on campus is not important. Pursuing a lofty value like academic freedom requires an openness to challenging ideas and diverse perspectives, which a commitment to free speech facilitates and fosters. Beyond considering free speech in relation to the institution's core values, Ben-Porath also considers free speech in relation to the institution's nature. Colleges are both educational and civic institutions. Universities provide students with diverse academic experiences towards the acquisition of skills and knowledge, while also preparing them to engage in public life through exercises in leadership and the opportunity to engage in a diverse community. The college's unique dual

[13] Ben-Porath, 20.
[14] Ben-Porath, 20.
[15] Ben-Porath, 20.

context, as well as the institution's core values require a commitment to speech that looks different than in the public sphere.

Ben-Porath points out that conversations around free speech are sometimes driven by "extreme positions."[16] While most protests or other expressions of free speech on campuses are carried out peacefully and constructively, publicized and politicized clashes between student groups and speakers, for example, have distilled common talking points about free speech on campus into two views. One view is that some curtailment to speech is necessary to protect students who may be vulnerable due to their marginalized identities. Conversely, there is the view that any curtailment to speech is an intolerable expression of political correctness. Here, Ben-Porath identifies a false binary: that freedom of speech stands at odds with diversity, equity, and inclusion.[17] To address this, Ben-Porath cannot invoke legal claims about free speech. They do not apply neatly when considering context, values, and positioning of colleges and universities. Rather, she proposes something both radical and simple: a framework for Inclusive Freedom*,* centering both equal access and freedom of expression in the college campus's unique context.

Inclusive Freedom is two-pronged. First, free speech should be protected as broadly as possible, as it is necessary to meet the core values of colleges and universities, enable a free and open exchange, and to satisfy their unique context.[18] Second, Inclusive Freedom gives equal weight to the inclusion of all willing and interested participants to this free exchange. In short, free speech should be protected for all, with special attention to any policies, practices, or norms that would cool one's interest or perceived ability to participate.[19] A broad promotion of free speech on campus through the tenants of Inclusive Freedom ensures that students and faculty do not seclude themselves in the security of concurrency and politeness and allows for those impacted by free speech to respond without fear of their position within the campus community. Echoing Justice Louis Brandeis, Ben-Porath reminds us "the only cure for bad speech is more speech."[20]

To employ Inclusive Freedom, a commitment to inclusion and belonging is key. Here, Ben-Porath is right to point out that university considerations regarding free speech are complicated by the fact that, for many students, the campus is their literal home. Presumably, all persons should be entitled to a sense of safety in their homes. Further, many college campuses are increasingly diverse and often are the "most diverse community" many students have experienced in their lives so far.[21] Campus interests like providing a safe home for students, and core institutional values like academic freedom, require

[16] Ben-Porath, 11.
[17] Ben-Porath, 12.
[18] Ben-Porath, 56.
[19] Ben-Porath, 37.
[20] Ben-Porath, 44.
[21] Ben-Porath, 32.

that campus processes for protecting and promoting free speech be informed by the "makeup of the campus student body (and staff)."[22] Even on campuses that do not seem particularly diverse, there are underlying identities or commitments (e.g., religious) that require a college to consider their campus makeup when creating an inclusive space for speech.

At the same time, colleges and universities have a civic commitment to prepare students for the world beyond the campus where they will inevitably be confronted by a diversity of ideas and identities. While colleges and universities should welcome the opportunity to engage with challenging and unconventional speech, they must commit to an on-going dialogue and negotiation with the campus community that results in a process for protecting and promoting speech that is responsive to the identities and positionalities of the individuals that make up the community. Inclusive Freedom will be explored further as a conceptual grounding point for school leaders in their attempts to manage family-school interactions in the below section, "Inclusive Freedom in Schools."

Considering the Limits of Good Speech: Dignitary Harm and Safety

As mentioned earlier, Ben-Porath dismisses the notion that legal limits of free speech suffice when considering harmful speech on the college campus. A shift in perspective, however, can help us parse this further. Free speech is often defended by centering the "autonomy and liberty" of the speaker. Shifting, however, and centering the outcome of speech, we might notice that some speech, including that protected by the first amendment, may undermine the dignity of community members, causing what is called "dignitary harm."[23] Colleges, as academic and civic institutions, have an interest in promoting spaces in which students feel safe as community members. Speech policies should aim to mitigate dignitary harm as it directly cools participation from some identities on campus while requiring those who do engage in campus discourse, nonetheless, to also navigate any doubt cast on their community status. Dignitary harm is especially insidious due to its accumulative impact. Harmful speech, when allowed to fill community discourse, expresses to marginalized community members that their voices will not be properly engaged or heard.[24]

To envision the conditions for dignitary safety on a college campus, we must first try to define some criteria. Considering Ben-Porath's arguments for dignitary safety as a standard for managing speech on campus, these criteria might look like the following:

1. When assessing challenging speech, the dignity of those impacted by speech are centered, not the speaker.
2. The speech must not undermine a member's community status.
3. The speech must not cool a community member's ability to participate.

---

[22] Ben-Porath, 33.
[23] Ben-Porath, 62.
[24] Ben-Porath, 58.

Acknowledging that dignitary harm is not randomly distributed,[25] and often disproportionately impacts already marginalized community members, underscores the importance of a commitment to dignitary safety. Censorship may seem like an appropriate response, especially in consideration of community safety. Censorship especially attempts not grounded in any guiding principle and other efforts that limit freedom, however, produces many predictable and undesirable institutional consequences, such as promoting false equivalencies or attempts to balance diverse viewpoints amongst students, patronizing students in marginalized groups, and responding to harmful speech on their behalf. Some might argue that using dignitary safety as a standard for assessing speech may simply be a new type of censorship, and I can accept this critique. All institutions, however, make ongoing determinations about what is or is not tolerable in their spaces. Dignitary safety offers an alternative to academic freedom and the first amendment emphasizing the rights of the receiver of speech to determine what is tolerable in an academic community. Further, guarding against paternalistic attitudes towards marginalized identities, a primary condition for dignitary safety must be access. Not just access to the space generally, but access that resounds outwardly the unquestionable status of an individual as a community member.

While developing conditions that produce dignitary safety on campus requires ongoing negotiation, institutional flexibility, and responsiveness to the evolving identities and experiences of students, Inclusive Freedom provides two guideposts for shaping policies and practices on campus that do not simply reframe the tension between broad speech protections and protecting the ability of all to participate, but helps us to imagine some lines that could be drawn around the types of speech we tolerate. Policies should seek to minimize the dignitary risk a community member must take to engage in campus discourse, thereby promoting a diverse and robust campus speech environment by inviting more viewpoints. Policies should take seriously the accumulating and cooling nature of dignitary harm by forbidding and acting upon speech that creates harm. By seeking to promote dignitary safety while guided by the two prongs of Inclusive Freedom, we can begin to assess the desirability of one campus speech policy over an alternative.

A Need in U.S. Schools

Summarizing concepts from *Free Speech on Campus,* the management of speech in the campus context is crucial to create a community in which dignitary safety is prioritized at the same time as academic freedom. But why should this type of conceptual undergirding be attractive to school leaders? There are many interested parties in a child's education. While sometimes diminished or forgotten, chief among these parties is their family. Not only do families have a parental interest in education, they have a civic interest as well. Schools have the complex task of creating standards for communication with families in both

[25] Ben-Porath, 58.

formal and informal situations. This task is further complicated by the rise of communication platforms available to schools and the challenge of ensuring access for all families across these selected platforms, not to mention the rise of politicized family-school interactions.

The challenges associated with managing family-school interactions are mounting for practitioners. For example, in October of 2023, while presenting to district family engagement administrators from across the US, I discussed a set of roles that family members can fulfill in family-school interactions beyond simply receiving and providing supports. When I began to discuss families as "initiators" and "co-designers" of initiatives at schools,[26] some were interested, but one participant was suspicious. The administrator expressed how some families want to ban books or change curriculums so certain topics won't be covered in school. She mentioned families who voice misgivings and distaste for events that celebrated cultures beyond the dominant cultural group in the school and held firm to the sentiment that there just is not room for these types of voices in schools. These comments started a rousing conversation in which others shared similar experiences.

This anecdote is just one of dozens. I have been invited to work on countywide projects to discuss "civility" between home and school, as well as invited to discuss this topic with those in higher education and elementary and secondary education. While the conceptual nature of Inclusive Freedom is exasperating to some educators, what is clear is that school administrators have few resources when it comes to managing challenging speech from families. Administrators often lean on legal interpretations of state and federal law when considering how to manage speech. Because these standards are broad and many acknowledge the benefit of dialogue with families, the standards used to determine when speech is intolerable are blurry and inconsistently applied. Emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, this seems like a valuable starting point for how we might respond to divisive issues.

As school life "returns to normal," however, the politicization and polarization of parent rights in schools persist. An analysis of citizen partisanship across a selection of countries over the last four decades found that in the US, the rise in polarization was the steepest.[27] In the wake of George Floyd's murder, statehouses took up the task of legislating "divisive topics" out of classrooms. At the same time, politicians began stumping for "parent rights" in education, pointing to indoctrination as a rallying point for concerned parents. The associated rise of groups like *Moms for Liberty*, a conservative group with over two hundred chapters and enough fundraising prowess to endorse school board members across the country, along with Glenn Youngkin's successful campaign for Governor of Virginia which centered "parent rights" in education in its

[26] Hadley F. Bachman and Barbara J. Boone, "A Multi-Tiered Approach to Family Engagement," *Educational Leadership* 80, no. 1 (2022): 58-62.
[27] Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Cross-country trends in affective polarization," *Review of Economics and Statistics* (2022): 1-60.

platform, have stirred families to engage with their schools from these politicized positions.[28]

This enflamed partisanship has led to conflict. Responses from school officials have ranged from heavy-handed, pressing charges against protesters[29] and adjusting policies for public comment in public meetings,[30] to more passive, allowing meetings and protests to devolve into nothing more than shouting. All these factors complicate the already tenuous relationship between schools and families. Though the current climate may cause dismay, families being engaged in the education of their children is not a bad thing. Effective home-school partnerships can have a positive effect on student outcomes.[31] Correspondingly, students spend most of their time outside of school. It is thus in the interest of all, especially students, that the relationship between home and school is productive. For these reasons, situating Inclusive Freedom as a conceptual starting point for how schools invite and manage family speech seems promising and sustainable.

Inclusive Freedom in Schools

So far, I have described Inclusive Freedom and how it addresses questions regarding expression and inclusion on the college campus. There is also evidence that managing speech between families and schools is a priority concern for many school administrators. Inclusive Freedom offers administrators a standard that is consistent with their legal obligations to assess controversial speech by centering the impact of that speech on the receivers of it. This should illustrate how Inclusive Freedom might serve as a useful starting point from which to work when it comes to discussions of divisive family-school interactions, especially for its promise to promote dignitary safety.

Undoubtedly, a college's values and nature are significantly different than that of a school. That stated, Ben-Porath's point that the broad promotion of speech is supportive of the pursuit of values and consistent with the nature of the college campus provides a test for applicability of Inclusive Freedom to family-school interactions. Considering that different schools develop unique sets of values, and society at large does not agree about the aims of education (or which should be prioritized and when), it is difficult to generalize school-based values past broad strokes like learning and human development. Ben-Porath does offer an interpretation of dignitary safety, which seems like an ascribable value for schools to explore; however, it is unlikely that this is currently championed by many schools. These values may not apply to families when they engage with

[28] Rachel Cohen, "How education culture wars have shaped the midterms," *Vox,* November 4, 2022.
[29] Danika Fears, Danika, "Parent Arrested at Out-of-Control School Board Meeting on News Trans Policy," *The Daily Beast,* June 23, 2021.
[30] Madeline Mitchell, "Judge: Lakota must allow public comment despite school board vote to suspend it," *The Cincinnati Enquirer,* October 17, 2022.
[31] Epstein et al., 2018; Galindo & Sheldon, 2012.

their child's school, but both parties desire the pursuit of these values for their children. Further, a school's unique position in the community requires negotiation and collaboration with students, families, and community members to design and enact an education program that brings these values to life. Inclusive freedom seems to be in service of these ends.

Reflecting on the nature of institutions, Ben-Porath rightly points out that college campuses are unique in that they are both educational and civic. Thinking about family-school interactions, schools are certainly civic spaces. By prioritizing access in concert with broad promotion of expression, Inclusive Freedom seems to support the civic nature of family-school interactions. Schools, however, are also educational in nature. Considering this specific space between schools and families, it is important to note that the nature of these exchanges will not be regularly educative. There is, however, an exchange between parties that seems to benefit from the broad promotion of free speech. In this way, applying Inclusive Freedom in these interactions is desirable to ensure that nondominant family voices are raised, those injured by speech can respond, and so as much information as possible can be exchanged between parties.

The values and nature of schools seem to be supported by Inclusive Freedom, especially when placed in the context of their communities. The demographics and commitments of groups within a given geography evolve over time, and schools are often inclined to deliver education programs that are reflective of community interests. Knowing that the concept, family engagement in education, is growing increasingly politicized and partisan, schools undoubtedly become spaces for divisive conversations to emerge. While the two principles of Inclusive Freedom provide clear guideposts for policy and practice, a focus on ensuring dignitary safety to the greatest degree possible can be what directs policies to both invite speech and be inclusive. By centering dignitary safety as a school value and informing policies with dignitary safety at the center, a culture and context emerges from which educators, as well as families harmed by speech, can respond from a transparent, legitimate, and explicit position. School policies on family-school interaction that have an explicit emphasis on creating conditions for dignitary safety to be experienced by as many families as possible will guide schools towards achieving Inclusive Freedom, while drawing a clearer line for what will be and will not be acceptable in family-school interactions. Additionally, leading with dignitary safety helps to ensure that schools are not overlooking underlying commitments of families and communities that may not be as obvious as skin color. Considering the rise in family-school engagement, including viewpoints seen as controversial, leveraging a framework for Inclusive Freedom guided by dignitary safety is a strong conceptual starting point to ensure inclusive, open, and generative family-school discourse.

CONCLUSION

Family-school engagement is a topic top of mind for many educators. The past few years have provided myriad examples illustrating the undesirable results when schools do not have an effective means for managing controversial speech from families. We cannot shy away from these interactions. Thinking deeply and evolving our understanding of family voice, collaboration, and leadership in schools is necessary for maximizing school success. Evidence from peer-reviewed literature indicates that strong family engagement practices in school benefits students, school staff, and families. While the current perceived rise in family-school interactions can be traced to politics and polarization, schools have always had a responsibility to be responsive to the desires of the families they serve and the communities in which they are situated.

In response to discussions with educators regarding challenges managing controversial speech from families, I offer Ben-Porath's framework for Inclusive Freedom as a conceptual starting point and dignitary safety as a new value to shape with their larger school communities. While I understand the response of outright dismissal when it comes to the controversial speech of a single family or minority of families, responding in this way does not resolve any grievance. Looking back on videos of angry parents being arrested at school board meetings, I often wonder not just about that parent or guardian who now has an irreparable relationship with the school, but all the families that see this action taken and how they are affected by it. No matter what side of a disagreement we might take up, the effects of a public clash will ripple across families and not disintegrate quickly. At the same time, school administrators cannot be paralyzed by these interactions. Using the concept of dignitary safety as the threshold for the type of speech that will be tolerated between families and schools, while simultaneously grounding policy and practice in Inclusive Freedom, allows for growth, provides a path which keeps doors open for trust to be established, and allows for a vision of partnership to persist even when intense disagreements arise.

Guidance is needed on responding to charged family-school interactions. Families will always have an interest in the education of their children and schools will always be faced with how to manage these expressions in a variety of contexts. Policies should already be in place speaking to family-school interactions, and more educators should be receiving professional learning on family engagement and related areas; however, Ben-Porath's work on Inclusive Freedom and dignitary harm provide specific resources for re-envisioning policies and practices that are responsive to the emerging context in which families and schools interact. Inclusive Freedom can inform how school leaders seriously consider families' diverse viewpoints, including those that are controversial, while maintaining a publicly legitimate position from which to respond.

AUTHOR MEETS CRITICS

BOOK OVERVIEW:
PUBLIC EDUCATION IN THE DIGITAL AGE: NEOLIBERALISM, EDTECH, AND THE FUTURE OF OUR SCHOOLS BY MORGAN ANDERSON

In a post-COVID landscape characterized by ongoing developments in artificial intelligence, technology has been firmly positioned as a key feature of both P-12 and higher education. Rather than a set of merely neutral tools, educational technology is bound up with systems of power and ideology that tend to deepen, rather than alleviate, inequality. As such, normative discussions surrounding the ethical, philosophical, and pedagogical implications associated with such technologies warrant the ongoing attention of philosophers of education. In *Public Education in the Digital Age: Neoliberalism, EdTech, and the Future of Our Schools*, author Morgan Anderson calls for a critical reassessment of the relationship between education and technology as we navigate our increasingly digital educational landscape.

Chapter 1, "Public Education in the Digital Age," explores the problematic relationship between education and technology. It outlines the current landscape of educational policy and practice in the digital age and argues that contemporary educational practices are characterized by a creeping "technophilia." Here the distinction is drawn between "technology" and "technophilia" to underscore that the central concern throughout is not necessarily with technology itself, but rather the problematic *relationship* between schooling and technology. Chapter 1 explores the ways in which the ontology of the human subject is shifting as a result of the imposition of technology into nearly all aspects of everyday life in order to highlight the need for educational scholars and practitioners to consider the pedagogical, philosophical, and ethical implications of the current role of technology in schools.

Chapter 2, "The Technological Restructuring of Public Education," argues that technology currently functions as an ideological and discursive system of power that currently goes relatively unchallenged in both P-12 schools and higher education. Building on the groundwork of critical scholars in the field who have detailed the neoliberal restructuring of public schools, this chapter suggests that technology has been the central conduit through which such reforms have been made possible. It explores the ways in which techno-rational approaches to schooling fit squarely in the positivist paradigm, conceptualizing knowledge as discrete, neutral units of data to be delivered to students with maximum efficiency by teachers who have become reduced to managerial subjects and, increasingly, I.T. help. It discusses the ways educational policy is influenced by members of the Silicon Valley elite, and the ways in which the

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

techno-ethos of Silicon Valley exerts its ideology of techno-rationality onto various aspects of public life, especially public schools. Educational technology companies are able to capitalize off of public disinvestment in schools by brokering "school-business partnerships," which allows such companies to treat public schools as captive markets and ensure indefinite revenue streams as schools pay for the costs associated with maintaining technological equipment. It then provides detailed examples of what scholars have called "digital education governance," and argues that the project of technophilia is rooted in discursive control. By successfully conflating technology with concepts such as "innovation" and "progress," "educational" technology companies rhetorically justify the uncritical infusion of technology into every aspect of teaching and learning. Lastly, building on the work of scholars who have explored the relationship between crisis and capitalism, Chapter 2 introduces the concept "disaster techno-capitalism" as a way to offer an analysis of the ways in which we have already seen the rapid expansion of educational technology into the infrastructure of P-12 and higher education during the COVID-19 crisis. Taking the lead from the work of scholars such as Kenneth Saltman, Kristen Buras, and Henry Giroux, who have described the ways in which disaster capitalism has preyed on public education for decades, Chapter 2 extends this line of thinking to make sense of the ways in which the adoption of EdTech has accelerated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chapter 3, "How Did We Get Here? Tracing Digital Education Policy," provides a critical policy analysis as a way of tracing key educational technology initiatives at federal, state, and local levels over the last several decades. In this chapter, the current EdTech landscape is positioned in historical context by tracing the emergence of technophilia as an ideology through several decades of educational reform. It argues that the discourse of social justice has been hijacked by technology policy and provides a discussion of a key example: the case of the "digital divide." Building on arguments made in Chapter 2 regarding discursive control, this discussion illustrates that the "digital divide" can be best understood as a manufactured crisis that primarily benefits corporate entities.

Chapter 4, "Towards Humanization: Public Education in the Digital Age," turns to the tradition of critical pedagogy as an entry point for both understanding technology as a system of power and confronting the dehumanizing aims of EdTech. It explores some of the rightful critiques of critical pedagogy as a discipline and argues for its relevance in the digital age. The chapter concludes by exploring two central tenets of critical pedagogy—humanization and dialogue—and discusses how they are at direct odds with the techno-rationality of EdTech. Lastly, this chapter explores examples of what humanizing pedagogy might look like in the digital age.

Chapter 5, "Resisting Technophilia," offers additional entry points for resisting technological creep in education. It argues that educators might be able to draw some valuable lessons from the Luddite movement of the early nineteenth century and explores the ways in which educators might rehabilitate

aspects of the Luddite movement in the digital age. Particularly, it notes that educators ought to be particularly concerned with the automation of teaching tasks through technology—trends that warrant further consideration in light of recent developments in Artificial Intelligence. The book concludes by discussing the ways in which the discursive control of technophilia must be challenged rhetorically by developing counter-lexicons, or alternative ways of talking about technology. The ubiquity of phrases such as "technological advancements" or "technological progress" underscore the discursive control of technophilia—we simply lack the language to discuss changes in technology that do not already imply that such changes are beneficial.

The book seeks to contribute to normative discussions surrounding the ethical, philosophical, and pedagogical entanglements associated with technology and advocates for a critical reevaluation of the relationship between technology and education as we imagine the future of schooling.

RESISTING TECHNOPHILIA, RECONCILING HUMANIZATION: A LUDDITE'S LAMENT

Erin C. Scussel
Blackburn College

Morgan Anderson's shrewd approach to analyzing the neoliberal influence of the EdTech industry on educational spaces was serendipitously timed. It marked the pivot (to use a pandemic era term) back to in-person learning from over a year of virtual, hybrid, and modified attempts at conducting schooling over virtual platforms. The book's release also marks the phenomenon of record usage and free, unfettered access to large language models (LLMs) and artificial intelligence (AI). ChatGPT, an AI LLM, reached 100 million users just two months after its launch, beating Twitter for the fastest-growing consumer application in history.[1] Along with the advent of LLMs and AI come new concerns amongst educators about the impact of technology on their classrooms and students. However, not all educators show the same critical concern posed by Anderson.

Literature about technology is often centered around how it improves engagement and is therefore a means to higher student achievement. In schools, educators are encouraged to use technology to increase student engagement on the notion that increased engagement will inherently lead to better academic outcomes. Yet, as Anderson points out, "research indicates that high levels of screen time dulls critical thinking, increases passivity, and prevents sustained attention."[2] Relying on machines and screens to direct our thinking presents a shift in the depth and form of knowledge humans construct. That is, an overreliance on machines, digital applications, and screens shifts the way humans experience the world. Experiences that lend themselves to risk and making mistakes are replaced in favor of predictable, efficient, calculable, controlled guidance, because the belief is the latter is somehow better. Anderson states her concern "lies with the widely shared assumption that the centrality of technology in human life is inevitable and therefore beneficial."[3]

As Anderson argues, critical pedagogy presents a lens for examining the impact of EdTech on fostering authentic epistemic curiosity and student

[1] Bianke Neethling, "ChatGPT Breaks Record with 100 Million Users—and Investors Come Flocking," accessed September 17, 2023, https://dailyinvestor.com/world/8520/chatgpt-breaks-record-with-100-million-users-and-investors-come-flocking/.
[2] Morgan Anderson, *Public Education in the Digital Age: Neoliberalism, EdTech, and the Future of Our Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 25.
[3] Anderson, *Public Education in the Digital Age*,15

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

agency. Consider literacy software programs like Accelerated Reader (AR) by Renaissance. Their website advertises that the program will give teachers the ability to "motivate, monitor, and manage students' independent reading practice." The program advertises the "choice" of more than 200,000 books, "ensuring students never run out of choices."[4] AR operates on the condition that a student selects and reads an e-book, takes a quiz, and earns points. Teachers are provided with data, which Renaissance suggests is being used for progress monitoring. Algorithms based on student data provide suggestions for books that are on their "level." Based on those particularities of the program, there is little room for student agency when they are being monitored and guided by a teacher and an algorithm. Despite research showing there is no statistically significant indication of improved reading scores or motivation to read,[5] schools continue to purchase AR and educators continue to use it in their classrooms. It is contradictory to claim AR supports independent reading practices if the program relies on a dependent authority figure to motivate, monitor, and manage.

Anderson also explores the issue of technophilia, a world-view that "all new technology is inherently positive and beneficial to human life."[6] Consider here two examples of technophilia related to Large Language Models (LLMs) like ChatGPT. First, a webinar panel from Harvard Graduate School of Education that encourages teachers to "geek out" with AI and ChatGPT as a means to empower students and improve interactions between teachers and students. Second, a graduate course that advertised it will provide instruction on using ChatGPT for theory development and application to "end the struggle with developing theoretical frameworks."[7] In both examples, the message suggests that using digital tools to do the work is empowering and relieves the student from having to struggle through thinking. I am inclined to question the juxtaposition of artificial intelligence in educational spaces and whether it may be worthwhile to define *authentic* intelligence.

As Anderson argues, education scholars and practitioners must contend with the ways in which technology such as asynchronous classes, learning management systems, packaged software programs, and artificial intelligence influences the humanity of teaching and learning. She claims, "the ontology of the human subject is shifting as we interact with technology more frequently and

---

[4] "Accelerated Reader: Motivating Independent Reading," Accelerated Reading Program, accessed November 29, 2023, https://www.renaissance.com/products/accelerated-reader/explore/.

[5] For more research on the effectiveness of Accelerated Reader see: SuHua Huang, "A Mixed Method Study of the Effectiveness of the Accelerated Reader Program on Middle School Students' Reading Achievement and Motivation," *Reading Horizons* 51, no. 3 (January 12, 2011): 229–46; and Lynn Schroeder, "Teacher Perceptions of the Goals and Effectiveness of Accelerated Reader" (PhD diss, Oklahoma State University, 2022).

[6] Anderson, *Public Education in the Digital Age*, 14.

[7] Email communication sent to EPS_PhD_Students@Listserv.gsu.edu on behalf of Damien Lawrence, May 11, 2023.

in different ways."[8] While technology may afford us the opportunity to conveniently extend our connections to each other across space and time, with facilitated modalities of communication, we must also be aware of how technology degrades human experiences.

I agree with Anderson that to reconcile the humanization of education scholars and practitioners must resist neoliberalism and technophilia. Anderson contends that "neoliberal rationality views technology—even if only implicitly—as a way to overcome human action in order to increase efficiency, accountability, and control."[9] Rather, resistance to neoliberal ideology might begin with deeper inquiry into the matters of what epistemic implications arise when teaching and learning is impeded by technophilia and the inclination to rely on digital mechanisms. I argue this can be accomplished by giving more attention to two points Anderson touches on in her work: (1) that the corporeality of human connections and epistemic location matter and (2) that authentically human teaching and learning experiences are messy, not efficient; risky, not accountable; and free, not controlled.

First, the particularities of shared learning spaces, as Aristotle would affirm, define the ontology of the epistemic location. One particularity of the typical in-person schooling schema is the corporeality, or physical embodiment, of the classroom space. Lauren Freeman contends that Aristotelian *phronesis*, or prudency of wisdom, relies on universals as well as particularities of humans as agents, including habits, experiences, and observations. Freeman explains that when we exist in-the-world with others, we learn how to "be virtuous and how to flourish by actually being virtuous and flourishing. As a way of being-in-the-world, *phronesis* is a disposition that emerges gradually on the basis of habituating oneself to the particularities of living in the world."[10] In other words, co-existing in a physically shared space designated for teaching and learning prudently habituates both teachers and students to the particularities of teaching and learning. Lorraine Code argues that an epistemological position originating from within the ecological situations and interconnectedness of knowers and knowings "departs radically from inquiry directed toward analyzing discrete, disparate beings, events, and items in the world."[11] For example, in discussion board forums, student responses are directed by their discrete experiences, under a controlled set of conditions, far removed from the organic interconnectedness of face-to-face verbal discussions in a shared space of teaching and learning. As Anderson points out, students are engaged in passive output, merely meeting the

[8] Anderson, *Public Education in the Digital Age,*19.
[9] Anderson, 96.
[10] Lauren Freeman, "*Metontology,* Moral Particularism, and the 'Art of Existing:' A Dialogue Between Heidegger, Aristotle, and Bernard Williams," *Continental Philosophy Review* 43 (November 2010), 562.
[11] Lorraine Code, *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location*, (Oxford University Press, 2006), 6.

requirements to post *x* number of times and respond to a classmate's post *x* number of times "substantively." Code's argument implies, and Anderson would agree, that an asynchronous platform for completing coursework is a departure, a radical one, from the teaching and learning that exists within the ecology of in-person learning. Replicating the universality of in-person instruction over a virtual format proves challenging, or even impossible.

Second, EdTech products deliver a user experience that restricts the human capacity to indulge our native and necessary ignorance. Robert Proctor and Stuart Firestein frame ignorance as native to the human condition and necessary for inquiry.[12] Of the same essence, ignorance is a valuable resource, but not a resource that can be packaged and sold to consumers. Rather, ignorance is a resource humans ontologically possess. Yet humans, in general, lack the proclivity to appreciate and be comfortable with our ignorance; and I argue this is so because being ignorant is inherently uncomfortable. Deron Boyles explains that *elenchus* (refutation to elicit truth) is always linked to *aporia* (striving for answers, imperfect at best). One must go through *elenchus* to achieve *aporia*.[13] Even the notion that one must endure the struggle of elenchus, only to achieve an answer that is imperfect at best feels futile. This futility, however, is the inherent fallibility of knowledge. Gert Biesta maintains that knowledge is fallible, and with fallibility comes inherent uncertainty, and risk.[14] Biesta contends that the desire to make education risk-free denies the reality that in schools, teachers are engaging with real human beings, and any "fix" educational technology advertises is not simple and comes with a cost. Consider a previous example of a graduate course that advertises students will learn how to use artificial intelligence to end their struggle with developing theoretical frameworks. Boyles and Biesta might agree that using technology as such does not end any struggle because the only end to a struggle is to have gone through the struggle, not to eliminate it all together. There is no technology that can substitute the risk associated with *elenchus* and achieved aporia. The neoliberal EdTech industry, however, operates under the belief that education can, and must be, risk-free, "fixed," and controlled.

Finally, while attending to Anderson's points, I was reminded of Socrates and how he was ardently opposed to written language. He maintained that written words were inferior to oral language, and he posited that written language posed a risk to individual intellect and the internalization of knowledge. He believed that the role of oral language positioned knowers as moral and virtuous. Written language gave humans the opportunity to read, and reading, too, positions knowers as moral and virtuous. Oral language is not the only valuable form of communicating and sharing knowledge, yet it is a necessary

[12] Robert N. Proctor and Londa Schiebinger, eds., *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, 1st edition (Stanford University Press, 2008); Stuart Firestein, *Ignorance: How It Drives Science* (Oxford University Press, 2012).
[13] Deron Boyles, email communication, August 22nd, 2023.
[14] Gert J.J. Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

particularity of literacy. Socrates' opposition to having his work written down may have been in vain; however, his caution proves warranted. I argue the same cautious and critical mindset is useful for educators grappling with the influence of technology on the integrity of *intellect* and the *internalization of knowledge*. Socrates may lament with those of us self-proclaimed luddite-lights that technophilia and the uncritical adoption of EdTech may pose a risk to human virtue. Do we, as humans, risk the detriment of knowledge when technology, artificial intelligence in particular, acts as a mediator between the knower and the known?

AUTHOR MEETS CRITICS

WHAT'S SO DIFFERENT ABOUT THE 'DIGITAL AGE'?

Kip Kline
Lewis University

Right at the turn of the Twenty-First Century, as the most junior member of a high school English department, I had my first and only experience with a textbook adoption process. I've repressed the memory to the point that I'm not able to recall the publisher of the text that was being pitched in this story. I do, however, remember my colleagues and I being wined and dined before a presentation of the magical nature of the company's text/s. Not only did these texts cover all the appropriate curricula but the most fantastic part of this company's offerings was in, what we called in those days, its "teacher aides." Every kind of review, assessment, enrichment, and so on was included in each teacher's edition's accompanying CD-ROM. That is, the company was attempting to sell us on how much teacher work was already done and pre-packaged for us. I was incensed and vowed never to take part in another of these pitches. It was an insult to my intelligence and professional status, indeed to the teaching profession itself. How did this company know ahead of time what only I could determine for my students in my classroom?

I suspect author Morgan Anderson would have reacted similarly based on the polemics (and I say this in a complimentary sense as a fan of polemical writing) of her recent book, *Public Education in the Digital Age: Neoliberalism, EdTech, and the Future of Our Schools*.[1] These days, of course, technological developments have gone beyond CD-ROM teacher's aides and beyond encroaching on the professionalism of teachers (though they still do this). In her book, Anderson argues that the rise of the contemporary EdTech industry has shaped institutional education both materially and, more importantly, *ideologically*. That is, she claims that "technology" produces a certain kind of subject and shapes the student/teacher relationship in undesirable ways. Additionally, Anderson is centrally concerned with the "dearth of normative discussions surrounding the priority that technology should have in schools" (and, I take her to mean, in higher education as well).[2] In short, *Public Education in the Digital Age* is a book about ethics, or the lack of any fact-value distinctions in the way educational institutions take up new technologies and the discourse that the EdTech sector has engendered for itself.

[1] Morgan Anderson, *Public Education in the Digital Age: Neoliberalism, EdTech, and the Future of Our Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2023).
[2] Anderson, *Public Education in the Digital Age,* 13.

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

Anderson's project in *Public Education in the Digital Age* is ambitious. The set of assumptions as well as assumed practices operating in educational institutions around the use of "technology" is a staggering foe. Not only does she make a case for challenging those assumptions, but she also puts "technophilia" —a term she sets apart from "technology" and defined as "a worldview that sees all new technology as inherently positive and beneficial for human life"—[3] in context of more totalizing phenomena such as capitalism and "neoliberalism." She does all of this quite successfully though she does admit that a full discussion of some of the contextual backdrops she broaches are beyond the scope of her work. The arguments in the book that land the best are related to the call for more (or, perhaps, any) normative conversations about the adoption and use of technology in schools and universities.

I very much appreciate the way Anderson introduces not just the content of the book but also her style. She says that readers will likely note her tone is "blunt" and "adversarial" and this is how she intends it. I myself am drawn to blunt and adversarial writing, so perhaps it is easy for me to accept this unapologetic announcement of her style. But I also think the project itself calls for such an approach. It is difficult to imagine successfully confronting such an entrenched ideological status quo as "technophilia," as Anderson puts it, in educational spaces (to say nothing of a critique of capitalism or neoliberalism) with measured language or without, perhaps, some hyperbole. That said, this style has potential pitfalls baked in and below I identify some instances of this in *Public Education in the Digital Age.*

In the first chapter, Anderson sketches out the landscape of education in the "digital age." This is where she defines "technophilia" and asserts its epiphenomenal relationship to "neoliberalism." She gives examples of how "technophilia" plays out in P-12 schools as well as universities. She notes that the language we use to describe gadgetry in our current historical moment reveals the "technophilic" worldview (e.g., "smartphones") and claims that these gadgets have "replaced our brains in performing many basic, everyday functions. Tasks such as simple math … to the act of peering out the window to decide if one needs a raincoat are now activities we instinctively outsource to a device."[4] In my view, this example may not quite get to the point. Certainly, well before smartphones of the digital age were the devices to which these simple tasks were outsourced, we used machines like calculators and radios to perform simple math and figure out if it's raining or going to rain. The "digital age" and/or smartphones do seem to have unique and ill impacts on human subjectivity, but I'm not sure if those impacts are fully captured by the example of using the weather app to see if it's raining.

Anderson does a masterful job in the first chapter of locating a nexus of forces that have created the enabling grounds for "technophilia" in education.

[3] Anderson, 14.
[4] Anderson, 9.

First, she claims, "the hegemonic discourse of innovation that has engulfed educational policy in recent years rhetorically justifies the constant and often uncritical adaptation of new technologies."[5] This aptly describes my own 20-plus years of experience with and knowledge of both P-12 schools and universities. As Anderson argues, there is rarely, if ever, any intellectual or dispositional approach to new educational gadgetry, software, etc., that includes a shred of criticality, skepticism, or even curiosity about the impact of adopting such technology for "educational" use. This, then, is paired with the phenomenon of "education scholars and practitioners" being "seduced into finding 'what works,'" and we arrive at "technophilia" in schools.[6]

In Chapter 2, Anderson connects "technophilia" in education to what she calls a "culture of positivism." This culture, she argues, is pervasive in schools and unfortunately means "Questions of epistemology—what ought to lie at the center of the project of education—are jettisoned entirely as knowledge is reduced to transferable, bite-sized commodities."[7] Here, she launches attacks on virtual platforms that are ubiquitous in higher education (e.g., LMSs and the company Quality Matters that purports to assist instructors with guidelines for constructing online courses). She also uses the phrase "technological creep" here and other places in the book to describe the steady movement of more and more adoption of gadgets, etc. in educational institutions. I want to add to and possibly complicate Anderson's arguments about technological creep in education in the following way. I wonder if what is ultimately steadily increasing is appetite and desire for more and greater convenience. In other words, there's a convenience creep that is either the same thing as technological creep or is its epiphenomenal partner. Convenience was almost certainly the impetus for my high school English department colleagues to "ooooo" and "ahhh" over the teacher aide CD-ROM that the publishing company sold us. I would also describe the propensity for any number of university faculty members to clamor for more Zoom meetings instead of in-person gatherings as convenience creep before I would describe it as technology creep.

Also, Anderson's comments about Quality Matters may need to be troubled or at least extended a bit. She says that it is "utilized at colleges and universities across the country to prescribe for faculty what constitutes high-quality instruction in online modalities" and that this kind of thing is part of the reduction of knowledge into "bite-sized commodities."[8] As an overall critique of the limitations of online courses, this seems right. But the role of Quality Matters in this criticism is less clear to me. I am wholly convinced of the inferiority of an education delivered online versus a face-to-face experience, but in my role as an academic dean, I have witnessed online classes designed by those who used the guidance of Quality Matters next to those that were not, and

[5] Anderson, 14.
[6] Anderson, 15.
[7] Anderson, 45.
[8] Anderson, 45.

the former were decidedly more engaging than the latter. Of course, this is entirely anecdotal, but I believe it does raise questions about the locus of Anderson's argument. In what ways does the author think Quality Matters makes the online modality worse than it already is?

Anderson's Chapter 3 makes an important contribution to the body of critical work on technology in education. Her critical policy analysis of major federal technology initiatives in the U.S. over the past 50 years or so works well to situate her arguments about "technophilia" in education. Later in this same chapter, she shifts to a critique of the framing of the "digital divide" discourse. She says that this framing has happened "in such a way that positions technology companies as benevolent entities promoting social justice education" and that such a "*manufactured* crisis" ends up benefitting the "new technology elite, while doing relatively little to change the educational reality of our most marginalized students."[9] This is a nuanced and indispensable point in the overall discourse on technology and education. Anderson acknowledges there is real disadvantage, indeed real *educational* disadvantage, when young people do not have access to certain technologies. But it is all too common, even for critical pedagogues and critical scholars, to keep the discourse on the level of technology access, foreclosing on the possibility of using it as a springboard to address structural inequalities and the underlying conditions for the lack of access to EdTech. Furthermore, as Anderson astutely points out, keeping the discourse at the level of tech access (i.e., "digital divide") amounts to manufacturing a crisis that the tech companies can then heroically solve.

Anderson offers critical pedagogy, in Chapter 4, as a theoretical groundwork for pushing back on the tide of "technophilia" and dehumanization in education. She is quick to point out some pertinent critiques of critical pedagogy as well as acknowledge that the wide and varied use and invocation of "critical pedagogy" may render its use tenuous. However, she takes up critical pedagogy because she finds it "uniquely positioned with the potential to confront and disrupt the systems of power bound up with the creeping culture of technophilia."[10] Anderson's particular brand of critical pedagogy centers on "humanization, dialogue, and the co-construction of knowledge."[11] Additionally, this brand of critical pedagogy allows Anderson to maintain a "cautious optimism" about the ability of schools to positively change society.

In the last chapter, Anderson offers some suggestions for resistance to technophilia. This chapter is my personal favorite and, I think, makes the most unique contribution to the anti-tech literature. She is reluctant, apropos of being a philosopher, to offer any possible practical solutions, but she does provide us with what she refers to as "possible inroads for pushing back against the culture of technophilia."[12]

[9] Anderson, 73.
[10] Anderson, 95.
[11] Anderson.
[12] Anderson, 124.

She begins with a short historical treatment of Luddism and ultimately extracts some lessons for our contemporary moment from the "legacy of the Luddites." First, she points out that summoning the courage to fight the replacement of human labor with machines or "technology" is not the only lesson to be learned from the Luddites of the Nineteenth Century. We can also take from them the specific strategy of *sabotage*. Here, Anderson gets specific. "If so inclined, they [teachers] might deliberately leave communal carts of tablets or laptops unplugged overnight, turn a blind eye to a child who is engaging in behavior that is likely to damage a piece of equipment, or 'accidentally' damage or destroy equipment."[13] Sabotage, *indeed*, and boldly suggested. But clearly no bolder than throwing a clog into a cotton-weaving machine as the original Luddites did. That said, turning a blind eye to or passively contributing to the destruction of school property is likely further than the majority of teachers—even those who stridently oppose the uncritical accumulation of ed tech—are willing to go.

She makes two other broad categories of suggestion for pushing back against "technophilia." The first one is to value (and change) the language used around technology use in education. Resistance, she claims, "requires a reassessment of the language we use to discuss teaching and learning that challenges taken for granted assumptions about the role of technology in schools."[14] This may not quite pack the punch of encouraging teachers to break gadgets in their schools, but it seems a worthy candidate for helping to fight against what Anderson calls "digital fatalism" and has, perhaps, more efficacy. She draws again on critical pedagogy by suggesting the practice of counter storytelling for challenging the discourses of those in power (here, EdTech narratives). Lastly, Anderson offers the use of dystopias/dystopian literature as a means of challenging the culture of "technophilia." Perhaps the most convincing approach, though, is buried in a quote from Lewis Mumford's *The Myth of the Machine*. Here Mumford offers a "steady withdrawal of interest."[15] Of course, the trick is in convincing enough education practitioners and scholars to let the gadgets increasingly collect dust.

In summary Anderson says, "technology has become a totalizing aspect of education policy and practice that serves corporate interests while undermining the intellectual and professional autonomy of educators" and that her book is "a call for normative discussions surrounding what we in education ought to do about it."[16] This is a worthwhile project and Anderson articulates it well and with style. *Public Education in the Digital Age: Neoliberalism, EdTech and the Future of Our Schools* makes a significant and unique contribution to the discourse around the use of technology in educational institutions. It is, in a sense, its own object lesson.

---

[13] Anderson, 134.
[14] Anderson, 136.
[15] Anderson.
[16] Anderson, 143.

I have two broad categorical critiques of the book and I offer these as a kindred spirit who is (I think) as concerned as the author about "technophilia," though I am decidedly not "cautiously optimistic," as Anderson claims to be. First, there seems to be a bit of wandering in terms of the object of critique. "Technophilia" is always only the epiphenomenon and never the phenomenon itself. It is attached to a series of outright phenomena—neoliberalism, capitalism, positivism—but it never stands on its own as a phenomenon. Perhaps this is just the way it is. Perhaps "technophilia" just is epiphenomenal? But this leads to some awkward moments in the book such as referring to Teach for America as an example of "technological creep," when it seems obvious that TFA exists as a product of neoliberalism/capitalism/positivism. In other words, there may be some passages where the author confuses the epiphenomenon ("technophilia") with the phenomenon (neoliberalism or capitalism).

Finally, I kept wanting to know what is different "in the digital age." Educational institutions were imagining and pursuing technology, automation, gadgetry, and machinery even well before Elroy was learning from his robot teacher at the Little Dipper School on *The Jetsons*. Audrey Watters's recent book, *Teaching Machines*, details the history of Sidney Pressey's automatic teacher machine from the 1920s, B.F. Skinner's individualized teaching machine of the 1950s, Simon Ramo's "push button classes" in the late 1950s, and Norman Crowder's "Auto Tutor" machine from the same era.[17] This raises questions about Anderson's use of the word "now" or phrases like "particularly in the last decade." My argument is not that there isn't anything different about "the digital age" or that there isn't anything happening in the EdTech space that is particular to the last decade. I am not convinced, though, that the book establishes either. These critiques aside, *Public Education in the Digital Age* is an important book and makes a significant contribution to the field of philosophy of education, generally, and the literature critiquing the use of technology in education in particular.

[17] Audrey Watters, *Teaching Machines: The History of Personalized Learning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021).

PROBLEMATIZING THE DIGITAL SUBJECT IN THE AGE OF EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

Austin Pickup
Aurora University

INTRODUCTION

In *Public Education in the Digital Age*, Morgan Anderson turns our attention toward the uncritical embrace of technology happening across the P-20 educational landscape. While technology increasingly inundates our daily life, the discourses of technological inevitability and progress also continue to frame our cultural imaginary. Schools, from kindergarten to higher education, play a pivotal role in reinforcing this discourse, as they have long been fertile markets for technological profit and representations of social problems in need of technological solutions. Such discourses fit into what Audrey Watters refers to as the "teleology of ed tech," of which, she writes,

> There is a certain inevitability to the way in which educational technology is pitched and packaged. One has no choice but to accept that schooling – and society at large – will become more technological, more "data-fied," more computerized, more automated. Resistance to this fate has kept education chained to its moribund methods, so we're told…. Even if, as the popular narrative would have it, the school system has remained unchanged for centuries, the digital classroom is imminent, and the computational future for teaching and learning is inescapable.[1]

Due to such discourses, not only are schools pressured to buy, implement, and structure their educational practices around, and through, technology, but they are often prevented from any critical questions or evaluations of these technologies. "It's here to stay, so it must be used," is a common refrain. Anderson is rightly concerned with this state of affairs and, in particular, critiques the ascendancy of technology in education for its evasion of normative analysis. For example, she writes,

> Remaining absent from the dominant discourse surrounding technology in schools are critical examinations of how modern technologies impact human subjectivity, the ways schools should address these changes, and how the influx of technology in schools is the direct result of corporate

[1] Audrey Watters, *Teaching Machines: The History of Personalized Learning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), 11.

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

influence, undermining the professional and intellectual autonomy of teachers, as well as exploiting captive markets.[2]

Part of the reason for the absence of ethical appraisal of technology is due to the presumption of its neutral status and the attitude of "technophilia," which Anderson contrasts with technology in and of itself. Technophilia, as she describes it, "is a world-view that sees all new technology as inherently positive and beneficial to human life."[3] Thus, to be technological is interchangeable with being progressive, forward-thinking, innovative, etc., while not being technological is synonymous with being regressive and obsolete. Anderson points out that this attitude persists even if technology does not functionally change much. She provides the example of the so-called "Smart Board" being implemented in classrooms across the country at significant expense despite the fact that they get used in ways that are functionally equivalent to whiteboards or chalkboards. Anderson continues by explaining that our technophilic reality is inseparable from the broader neoliberal restructuring of life, in which public institutions, such as schools, are recast as markets, teaching and learning is commodified into a product (often marketed as a financial investment, in the case of higher education), and educational purposes are essentially reducible to future workforce preparation. This is a result of both decades of educational policymaking embracing school privatization and technology, as well as corporate engineering of schools, especially the infiltration of Silicon Valley tech elites, such as Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg, more recently.

Anderson succeeds by subjecting the discourse of technology in education to this critical appraisal and historical analysis, but also by considering possibilities for imagining alternatives. Pointing to the tradition of critical pedagogy, she argues that technology seeks to overcome that which makes us human, and that invoking traditions that move us toward humanization is critical for resisting the EdTech takeover. As such, she offers inspiration from the Luddite movement of the 1800s, the development of counter-lexicons to neoliberal technological discourse, and learning through dystopia as ways in which technophilia might be resisted and humanizing alternatives imagined.

While Anderson's book largely focuses on the technology problem in education at a broad level, critiquing technophilia as an ideology and tracing its emergence through education policy and neoliberal reform, she also considers the effects of technology at narrower levels. In particular, I find the impact of technology and technophilia on subjectivity to be the most compelling and critical issue at stake here, what Anderson refers to as the "technological restructuring of the human subject." Of this, she writes, "Because education is a fundamentally human endeavor, education scholars and practitioners must contend with the ways in which technology is influencing the ontology of the

---

[2] Morgan Anderson, *Public Education in the Digital Age: Neoliberalism, EdTech, and the Future of Our Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 13.

[3] Anderson, 14.

human subject."[4] It is here that my paper will focus, as part of the normative discussion that Anderson directs us to is the type of humans that are being made by technology and what we are capitulating to in our uncritical embrace of technology. However, it should be considered that the modern, sophisticated technology that we are most often concerned with is conducive to, and only possible through, an ontological conception of the human already constructed in generations past -- thus, critical genealogical analyses of this social construction of the subject is a vital piece of resisting educational technophilia.

TECHNOLOGY AND THE SUBJECT

According to Ian Hacking, certain kinds of people are produced, rather than represented, by the various classifications used to order social reality, a process he refers to as *dynamic nominalism*. He writes, "the claim is not that there was a kind of person who came increasingly to be recognized by bureaucrats or by students of human nature but rather that a kind of person came into being at the same time as the kind itself was being invented."[5] Anderson does not follow this trail specifically in her discussion of the technological restructuring of the human subject, but it is evident, perhaps most succinctly, in her summary of the "digital native" concept. Despite a lack of empirical evidence for this concept, she explains that it is

> reflected in education policy and practice that assumes that technology is *necessary* for educating the current generation of students. In this way, the technological restructuring of the human subject is not a natural, teleological process but instead the direct result of exposure to, and reliance on, machines.[6]

In other words, the embrace of technology is not a neutral instrumental practice, but an ontological restructuring which frames the categories and identities with which we engage the world. Technology in education has become so ubiquitous that it is presumed to be necessary to engage, even in illogical or unrecognized ways. This has been particularly relevant in my personal and professional life of late, and I will share some brief examples to illustrate not only the prevalence of technology in education, but also the ways in which it reshapes our subjectivity.

One day after picking up my son from school, I was set to begin the standard conversation with him about his day. As he got in the car, he excitedly explained some new and interesting facts about dinosaurs that he had learned. I asked, "Did you learn that today from your teacher?" to which he replied, "No, I learned it in a video during laptop time." I knew that he used computers in school at times, but I was interested to know if this was a special activity, or a normal part of his day. I asked, "Do you have laptop time in your regular class with your teacher?" He replied, "Yes, and we do laptop time in LRC (learning

---

[4] Anderson, 17.

[5] Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 165.

[6] Anderson, 18.

resource center) in the library." There was a pause for a few moments and then he said, "And, I think in the future, we're going to be using them in music class." My son is in second grade.

Anderson explains that the consistent implementation and engagement with technology throughout the school day, even in spaces where it might seem out of place, such as a second grade music class in my son's case, is a hallmark of twenty-first century schooling. Despite the ways in which technology may fundamentally reshape education and the relation between student and teacher, its ubiquitous use extends well beyond the second grade classroom. And this has occurred in part due to the uncritical embrace of technology by educators themselves. As Anderson notes, educators have sacrificed much of their professionalism and autonomy to the "altar of technology" through an accommodationist stance. She explains, for example, that while teacher preparation programs should offer coursework developing deep theoretical inquiry into the challenges of things like neoliberal education, colleges of education are much more likely to acculturate educators "into uncritically infusing technology into their practice, rather than embracing the pedagogical, ethical, and philosophical implications of technology in the classroom."[7]

Such an accommodationist approach to technology was recently demonstrated in my own college at a recent meeting to discuss the development of a statement regarding student use of artificial intelligence (AI)/ChatGPT. While several faculty offered that they had either not thought much about it, or that they had already had discussions with students on the topic, others quickly articulated the need to use and embrace these tools in the classroom for reasons such as the following: the presumption that students will be expected to use such tools in their future jobs, that we must model effective use of such tools for students, or that we must reshape our classroom activities and practices by using them in order to avoid the possibility that students will cheat with AI. And, of course, there was the tried and true "it's not going away, so we have to learn how to use it." These were preliminary conversations, but were meant to eventually result in some sort of vague statement or guidance on AI use in the classroom. Unbeknownst to us, however, a preliminary draft of a statement had already been developed to begin the process. In keeping with some of the expressed sentiments of technological embrace and demonstrating use of AI, it was shared with us that ChatGPT was used to develop an initial draft based on the prompt, "Write a policy statement for the College of Education and Social Work about Artificial Intelligence." In defining the characteristics of AI, the ChatGPT output mentioned that "the elimination of human discernment is an additional 'perk' of AI." It also stated that guidance of engagement with artificial intelligence technologies is part of being a "forward-thinking institution committed to excellence, innovation, and ethical practice." The irony in this case is that normative human judgments are being made to determine that there are ethical

[7] Anderson, 132.

implications worthy of a statement in the first place, but we turn to the machine, rather than our own thoughtful inquiry, to produce the statement (one, which, coincidentally, notes that eliminating human discernment is good). Too often, ironies such as these are lost on us, even in our concern over technology. As a result, educators themselves are reshaping their work and identities in view of the belief that technology is inevitable.

Anderson also gives particular attention to the ubiquitous use of Learning Management Systems (LMS) across higher education and how, despite the common belief that they are merely a neutral instrument, they powerfully re-shape our pedagogical relationships and identities. She explains that common elements in LMS such as mandatory discussion forums, digital submission of assignments and instructor feedback, and the monitoring of student activity are all representative of a deep pedagogical shift brought on by use of these systems.[8] This point resonates with me in particular as the doctoral programs in which I teach were all moved to asynchronous formats two years ago. Despite the administrative belief that this is merely another “modality,” a term which has unfortunately become a major part of my vocabulary in recent years, this shift has fundamentally altered both my pedagogical and professional subjectivity. Beyond the obvious point that I do not actually see or meet my students outside of digital communication (except for the very few who attend Zoom sessions which are required to be optional), online courses can only be structured in a way conducive to what we might term educational commodification. Courses are “built” months in advance and posted (few changes can occur even on a semester-by-semester basis once the “master course shell” is built) prior to the course going “live.” Ironically, to promote student engagement, every course is required to include a discussion forum each week. Each course is built on weekly pacing through modules, which amount to the collection of assignments/activities/readings that, once accomplished, move students to the next step. As each course is built, the instructor must use a “course calculator” to ascribe a literal time amount to each assigned task per weekly module and meet a minimum number of hours to justify credit requirements. Finally, each course builder is assigned to an instructional technology consultant who provides guidance and feedback on the online development of the course—importantly, this person is an employee of Wiley, the LMS provider, not the university.

Far from merely being a different mode of instruction, such utilization of technologies reduces the educational experience to hardly anything more than a digital transaction. As an asynchronous instructor, I find that I am not so much teaching as I am managing digital student engagement. Additionally, much of the requirements in place serve to simply ensure that the LMS is consistently utilized. For example, one of our doctoral programs includes an “internship,” that is mostly an independent study where instructional coaching students can develop their own professional project. Explaining to the LMS organizers that, due to its nature as an independent study, it would largely not need the common

[8] Anderson, 42-45.

features of the LMS, I was told that I would still be required to include things like weekly discussion forums, submission of digital assignments, etc.

While these examples illustrate how the technologies we use shape us, work is being done elsewhere that opens the door to more extreme versions of technological and digital subjectivity. One example of this is the potential applications of virtual and augmented reality devices in the educational landscape. Recently, Meta, the parent company of Facebook, has partnered with the virtual reality company VictoryXR to create 3D replicas of higher education campuses, allowing for students to "attend" courses and perform educational tasks via virtual reality software at a corresponding "metaversity." Dozens of higher education institutions in the United States have already partnered with VictoryXR to develop digital metaversities, while the company has also partnered with Inspired Education Group in the UK to provide opportunities with these digital applications to thousands of students.

Recent statements on the application of these technologies at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois, one of Victory XR's partners, are illustrative of how deeply these tools are meant to reshape educational subjectivities. For example, NIU's associate provost for teaching, learning and digital education has argued that virtual reality is the "new horizon in education," while another administrator has explained that when you are immersed in the virtual education environment, "you're not distracted by what's outside the window or who's walking outside the classroom… That's one of the really positive learning outcomes. You're immersed in that environment. You're surrounded by everything that you're trying to learn."[9] These statements align with the goals of virtual reality entrepreneurs who view literal immersion in, as opposed to mere engagement with, digital spaces as the next technological market to be exploited. For example, consider the way that venture capitalist Matthew Ball describes the metaverse concept, a digital space

> placing everyone inside an 'embodied', or 'virtual' or '3D' version of the internet and on a nearly unending basis. In other words, we will constantly be 'within' the internet, rather than have access to it, and within the billions of interconnected computers around us, rather than occasionally reach for them, and alongside all other users and real time.[10]

Such an idea—that through the use of virtual and augmented reality technology, digital avatars, etc., we will, in a real sense, exist inside a digital world—is one that the company Meta is developing various educational applications for. Writing for Meta, Nick Clegg explains, "Metaverse technologies have the potential to transform education. It's happening right now, but to realize the

[9] NIU Today, "Goggles On, Paddles in Hand: NIU serves as pilot 'metaversity' to test VR teaching," November 15, 2022, https://cedu.news.niu.edu/2022/11/15/goggles-on-paddles-in-hand-niu-serves-as-pilot-metaversity-to-test-vr-teaching/.

[10] Matthew Ball, "Framework for the Metaverse," last modified June 29, 2021, https://www.matthewball.vc/all/forwardtothemetaverseprimer.

potential in the years ahead will require educators and policymakers to grasp the opportunities these technologies present."[11]

Transforming students into immersed digital subjects should be quite concerning to educators for a variety of reasons. But, as the statements above indicate, educators are necessary for their implementation, so incessant narratives of technological inevitability construct a framework in which we become willing participants in this digital transformation. Thus, we might be better served to look outside of education for incisive critiques of this impending digital reality. In mainstream pop culture, perhaps no one has represented the alarming nature of this imminent postmodern digital dystopia better than comedian Bo Burnham in his 2021 special *Inside*. Filmed entirely alone during the COVID-19 pandemic, Burnham's special explores themes of social disconnection, mental health, and isolation, while also lamenting the impact of the technological reality imposed upon us by wealthy corporations. During the special, speaking into a microphone while lying on the floor in a depressed state, he says,

> I don't know about you guys, but, um, you know, I've been thinking recently that… that you know, maybe, um, allowing giant digital media corporations to exploit the neurochemical drama of our children for profit… You know, maybe that was, uh… a bad call by us. Maybe… maybe the… the flattening of the entire subjective human experience into a… lifeless exchange of value that benefits nobody, except for, um, you know, a handful of bug-eyed salamanders in Silicon Valley… Maybe that as a… as a way of life forever… maybe that's, um, not good.[12]

And, perhaps more poignantly, in another scene, he facetiously captures the absurdity of increasingly technological experiences brought on by the digitalization championed by Silicon Valley tech entrepreneurs, and capitalized on during the COVID-19 pandemic, by illustrating how our reality is being inverted. Mimicking a stand-up comedy routine where he speaks to an empty room, he says,

> I've learned something over this last year, which is pretty funny…I've learned that real-world, human-to-human, tactile contact will kill you, and that all human interaction, whether it be social, political, spiritual, sexual, or interpersonal, should be contained in the much more safe, much more real, interior digital space. That the outside world, the non-digital world, is merely a theatrical space in which one stages and records content for the much more real, much more vital, digital space.

---

[11] Nick Clegg, "How the Metaverse Can Transform Education," last modified April 12, 2023, https://about.fb.com/news/2023/04/how-the-metaverse-can-transform-education/.
[12] Bo Burnham, *Inside*, directed/performed by Bo Burnham (2021; Los Angeles: Netflix, 2021), Netflix Streaming.

> One should only engage with the outside world as one engages with a coal mine…Suit up, gather what is needed, and return to the surface.[13]

Each of these examples is meant to represent not only the ubiquity of technology in education, but the capitulation to a particular kind of subjectification that makes and shapes us in particular ways. For Anderson, this technological restructuring of the human subject is so problematic because it is de-humanizing. Drawing inspiration from critical pedagogy, she explains that being human is something to be overcome in neoliberal technological restructuring. She writes, "If education ever had an enemy, it might have been ignorance. However, the modern enemy for the neoliberal, techno-rational schooling system is that which makes us human."[14] Going further, she explains, "Neoliberal techno-rationality seeks to eliminate the human elements of education…In other words, in the age of educational technophilia, critical pedagogues are tasked with realizing the goal of humanization in a paradigm that casts human subjectivity as an impediment to progress and innovation."[15]

It is here that I take a slight diversion from Anderson's analysis in my own thinking about our technological present. Michael Apple explains that neoliberalism transforms our very idea of democracy, making it only an economic, rather than political, concept,[16] and, similarly, Wendy Brown explains that neoliberalism "transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic."[17] Much like these authors' analyses of neoliberalism and democracy, it is, perhaps, not that the human is to be "overcome" or eliminated, but rather re-made in the image of digital technology. If this is the case, recovery or rescue of something essentially human which technology takes away may be worthwhile, but stunted, if one considers that technology is already premised on a historically constituted subject. In other words, while technology and technophilia undoubtedly accelerate the restructuring of human subjectivity and move it in frightening new directions, it ultimately capitalizes on a particular subjectivity already "made" and concretized as a response to past problematizations which made technological applications, of which Anderson critiques, possible. Thus, any project aimed at disentangling ourselves from these platforms requires a critical genealogical analysis of how humans have become the subjects that serve as the fuel for technological engineering.

---

[13] Burnham, *Inside*.
[14] Anderson, 100.
[15] Anderson, 100-101.
[16] Michael Apple, *Educating the "Right" Way: Markets, Standards, God, and Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
[17] Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015), 10.

INFORMATIONALIZATION, DIGITALIZATION, SUBJECTIVITY, AND HISTORICAL ONTOLOGY

As Colin Koopman explains in *How We Became our Data*, our modern technology is dependent upon a conception of the subject which emerged in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. This period saw massive growth in administrative bureaucracies tasked with connecting individuals to data, particularly through data formatting. Koopman's key historical examples are the development of birth certificates, credit reporting practices, and psychometric testing. Each of these technologies invented a new kind of subjectivity via the fastening of identities to information and "data," what he terms the "informational person." For Koopman, there are many significant features of this analysis. One is that, far from a neutral practice, the datafication of subjectivity constitutes a political practice, what he calls "infopolitics" and "infopower," that reconstitutes the human subject as knowable and governable through data. Another is that this power develops in the mundane practices of data formatting, such as the emergent practice of ticking a box on a form to fasten one's identity to data and information. Finally, it is that this emergent practice both "canalizes" and "accelerates."[18] It pins us down by tying our subjectivity to information, data, forms, etc., while speeding us up through the connection of these elements to a variety of other comparisons. This is much the way that modern technology functions, such as how a social media profile ties one to a virtual identity, while accelerating connection of the identity to other virtual identities, (mis)information, advertisements, and so on. This neatly formatted, pinned down, and informationalized subject is the conceptual infrastructure of the human upon which modern technology is built and from which it continues to shape us in new ways.

It is during the same general time period that Koopman analyzes that another historical technology became prominent in education. Critical historian of psychology Kurt Danziger explores how these early, we might say EdTech practices, were integral in inventing the psychological subject which not only psychology, but many other social science disciplines, came to ascribe to. As a burgeoning academic field, psychologists needed to prove the practical viability of their emergent science and it was to education that they turned to present what Danziger calls their "marketable methods" of mental measurement. Importantly, the method of psychological testing developed in these years was done to meet the needs of administrative concerns, which yielded a conception of students conducive to such purposes. Danziger explains that the broader vision of psychology championed by American pioneers such as William James and John Dewey was replaced by much narrower, instrumental concerns that could more readily illustrate psychology's practical utility. He writes that this new movement required educational psychologists to "emphasize the passivity of the

[18] Colin Koopman, *How We Became Our Data: A Genealogy of the Informational Person* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

child and to restrict themselves to measured performance rather than wasting precious resources on an exploration of mental processes that had no obvious utility in terms of the goal of choosing the conditions that were most efficient in producing predetermined results."[19] Danziger explains further that psychological research

> had to provide data that were useful in making immediate decisions in restricted administrative contexts. This meant research that yielded comparable quantitative data on the performance of large numbers of individuals under restricted conditions. Excluded was research that went beyond the given human and social parameters within which the administrators had to make their decisions. It was, in other words, technological research that would help in dealing with circumscribed problems defined by currently unquestioned social conditions.[20]

This analysis connects with the culture of positivism which Anderson indicates is foundational to today's educational technologies. If we are concerned with the project of disentangling ourselves from the webs of neoliberal technological restructuring, it follows that part of this critical project is tracing the historical emergence and conditioning of the very subjectivity which makes these technologies sensible and possible today. The preceding relates but a few examples of the ways in which informationalization, datafication, and psychologization have invented a knowable and governable educational subject ready to be exploited via sophisticated corporate technology nearly a century later.

Conclusion

Anderson concludes her book by offering possible alternatives for the "current state of technophilia in education to underscore that my critique is ultimately committed to optimism."[21] The imagining of forward-facing alternatives to the present hegemony of technology is to be commended, as is her spirit of optimism in the face of a seemingly insurmountable challenge. In keeping with my focus, however, I am reminded of Foucault's own characterization of his work in an oft-cited quote. He states, "My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same thing as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and *pessimistic* activism."[22]

---

[19] Kurt Danziger, *Constructing the Subject: Historical Origins of Psychological Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 105.
[20] Danziger, 103.
[21] Anderson, 127.
[22] Michel Foucault, quoted in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 231-232.

Certainly, the optimism inherent in imagining alternative futures is critical to Anderson's call against technophilia, but I would suggest that it be coupled with the type of pessimism Foucault describes insofar as it is directed toward seemingly unassailable elements, like technology, which have indeed become so dangerous in our present. Such an attitude results in a critical historical analysis of ourselves, what Foucault describes as "historical ontology," or the "historical analysis of the limits that are imposed upon us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them."[23] Experimentation with the possibility of going beyond the limits of our technological reality presents a critical educational project for us to consider, and Anderson's work powerfully directs us down this path.

[23] Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage, 2010), 50.

AUTHOR MEETS CRITIC: AUTHOR RESPONSE

TOWARDS AN AGENTIC PESSIMISM: EPISTEMIC STRUGGLE AND DATA-FIED SUBJECTS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Morgan Anderson
University of Northern Iowa

Ongoing cultural shifts surrounding technology in education that have been accelerated and intensified by artificial intelligence (AI) underscore the urgent need for critical, normative scholarship surrounding the relationship between education and technology. No longer is it helpful to frame these trends as merely technological intrusions into educational settings; rather, much of our educational system—both in P-12 and higher education—has entirely reorganized itself around technology. Indeed, as Austin Pickup notes regarding his experience teaching in a graduate program that recently shifted to a fully online asynchronous modality, "I find that I am not so much teaching as much as I am managing digital student engagement."[1]

Pickup's observation is an illustrative example of the trends I outline in *Public Education in the Digital Age: Neoliberalism, EdTech, and the Future of Our Schools*. Namely, that the technological restructuring of education continues to subsume teaching and learning into a "technocratic order,"[2] to use Andrew Feenberg's language, jettisoning the messy elements of human inquiry, subjectivity, and the co-construction of knowledge in favor of essentialized and commodified modes of "content delivery." As further evidenced by Kip Kline's recounting of his experiences undergoing a textbook adoption process nearly twenty-five years ago, techno-solutionism has a well-established history in educational policy and practice.[3] Although the replacement of textbooks with accompanying CD-ROMs featuring pre-packaged curriculum with adaptive learning technologies and chatbot tutors has shifted the contours of the discussion,[4] the underlying philosophical and pedagogical questions remain

[1] Austin Pickup, "Problematizing the Subject in the Age of Educational Technology," *Philosophical Studies in Education* vol. no. (2024), page

[2] Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 17.

[3] For an in-depth treatment of techno-solutionism see Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything Click Here: The Folly of Techno-Solutionism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013).

[4] See, for example, Riddhi A Divanji, Samantha Bindman, Allie Tung, Katharine Chen, Lisa Castaneda, and Mike Scanlon, "A One Stop Shop? Perspectives on the Value of Adaptive Learning Technologies in K-12 Education," *Computers and Education Open* 5, no. 1 (December 2023): 100157 https://doi.org/10.1016/j.caeo.2023.100157 ; See, for example, Natasha Singer, "New A.I. Chatbot Tutors Could Upend Student Learning,"

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

largely unchanged. Despite claims made by EdTech industry leaders attesting to the novelty of AI-powered education, scholars such as Audrey Watters and David Noble have rightly shown that turning to technology to render teaching and learning more efficient is far from a new endeavor.[5] Furthermore, despite decades of such technological interventions, there remains a dearth of evidence to suggest that technologically-mediated instruction improves "learning outcomes," even as they are so problematically conceived. This is because, as I explain in the book, educational policy and practice surrounding technology have not been guided by data or research. Rather, our current relationship to technology has resulted from a convergence of ideological trends driven primarily by the corporatization of education by for-profit companies and the uncritical adoption of edtech across the field.

Across each essay, the authors offer valuable insights and critiques that generate productive friction that has continued to push and refine my thinking on the arguments I set out to make in the book. In what follows, I build upon each contribution and put the responses in conversation with one another in the hopes of pushing our collective thinking around these ideas. Specifically, I build upon Erin Scussel's discussion of the relationship between artificial intelligence, authentic intelligence, and ignorance, Austin Pickup's exploration of the culture of data, and Kip Kline's push for clarification surrounding the various examples I lean on throughout the book.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE ERASURE OF EPISTEMIC STRUGGLE

Since the book's release in early 2023, we have been able to gain additional perspective on the emerging use cases for artificial intelligence in our daily lives and across a variety of industries. A point I reiterate across the book is that part of what makes critical engagement with technology challenging is that it is highly nuanced and contextual. If technology were either all good or all bad, such conversations would be made much easier. As AI becomes increasingly—and more explicitly—integrated into our daily lives, we might consider a variety of applications that we deem useful and positive. However, such assessments of AI's usefulness should not lose sight of issues of power and exploitation. For example, much of the excitement surrounding AI has to do with promises—for certain sectors of the labor market—of streamlining and automating administrative tasks that has the potential to increase overall productivity. What are often lost in such discussions are questions surrounding who stands to benefit from such increases in productivity and why our workloads have become so bloated as to render AI assistance to alleviate pressure so

The New York Times, June 8th, 2023, Khan Academy's AI Tutor Bot Aims to Reshape Learning - The New York Times (nytimes.com).

[5] See David Noble, *Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2003); Audrey Watters, *Teaching Machines: The History of Personalized Learning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021).

alluring. Additionally, as scholars such as Cal Newport have pointed out, developments in digital technology are often utilized to justify *increasing* our overall workload and most often result in simply shifting the nature of daily drudgery rather than eliminating it. For example, when email first became a staple of the workplace, it was celebrated as a means for improving efficiency and productivity by streamlining communication. However, this ease of communication has resulted in many of us being so constantly inundated with emails that it actually disrupts our attention and creates expectations that we are always available to our employers.[6] Furthermore, our orientations around productivity itself and its centrality and value in our lives remain unquestioned.

However, in "Resisting Technophilia, Reconciling Humanization: A Luddite's Lament," Scussel points to other emerging trends and discourses surrounding AI that warrant the attention of philosophers of education. Specifically, she explains the necessity for us to "indulge our native and necessary ignorance" and explores the ways in which AI undermines this fundamental aspect of education. [7] She notes, "ignorance is a valuable resource, but not a resource that can be packaged and sold to consumers. Rather, ignorance is a resource humans ontologically possess. Yet humans, in general, lack the proclivity to appreciate and be comfortable with our ignorance; and I argue this is so because being ignorant is inherently uncomfortable."[8] She goes on to remind us of the relationship between *elenchus* and *aporia* and the necessity of iterative struggle to clarify our understandings. Scussel's framing of ignorance is illuminating as she points out that the reckoning with our own ignorance as we move between *elenchus* and *aporia* is not something to simply be overcome; it is constitutive of inquiry itself.

As such, we are on a slippery epistemic slope as we shift from utilizing AI to retrieve information (i.e., using AI as a search engine) to using AI to generate new, unique materials and content. Not only does this raise important questions surrounding how we conceptualize authenticity and authorship in the age of large language models,[9] but it should implore us to remember the role of intellectual frustration in inquiry. For example, a recent blog post from the

---

[6] See Cal Newport, *A World Without Email: Reimagining Work in an Age of Communication Overload* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021).

[7] Erin Scussel, "Resisting Technophilia, Reconciling Humanization: A Luddite's Lament, *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024), 115.

[8] Scussel, "Resisting Technophilia," 115. Although I think Scussel makes a compelling point regarding the discomfort associated with ignorance, I anecdotally find that students often seem perfectly comfortable with their own ignorance, arguably evidenced by how intractable the challenge of getting students to engage with materials both inside and outside of class remains. This certainly is not a new problem, but it strikes me as a uniquely ironic one given the ease with which they can now access vast repositories of information with the assistance of AI.

[9] See Lauren Bialystok, "Lines in the Sand: Originality and Cheating in the Age of ChatGPT," *Philosophy of Education*, forthcoming.

Harvard Division of Continuing Education titled "Should I use ChatGPT to Write My Essays?" advises students to consider using ChatGPT to generate ideas for their essays and write essay outlines for them.[10] The suggestion to students to utilize AI to organize their ideas or generate them in the first place is more than a matter of improving efficiency. In erasing the productive struggle of the writing process, inquiry is not simply streamlined; it risks becoming circumvented altogether. In other words, the planning stage of writing is not an activity that is simply to be gotten over with so that the real work can begin; it is an indispensable aspect of inquiry.

Scussel cites other examples such as a graduate course that recently advertised that it will instruct students to utilize ChatGPT to "end the struggle with developing theoretical frameworks" by presumably refining prompts and inputting them into a large language model in order for them to simply get on with the work of writing a dissertation. This example is particularly troubling. While developing a theoretical framework that appropriately aligns to one's research project can be challenging—and is a notoriously thorny aspect of developing a dissertation—the suggestion of offloading this intellectual labor onto artificial intelligence has significant implications for the production of knowledge. As Cynthia Grant and Azadeh Osanloo note, "[t]he theoretical framework is the foundation from which all knowledge is constructed (metaphorically and literally) for a research study. It serves as the structure and support for the rationale of the study, the problem statement, the purpose, the significance, and the research questions. The theoretical framework provides a grounding base, or an anchor, for the literature review, and most importantly, the methods and analysis."[11] In other words, developing a theoretical framework is a significant intellectual step in the generation of knowledge; the assumption that this labor can be automated fundamentally misunderstands the nature of knowledge construction. It is not something to be gotten out of the way so that research can begin; rather, it is an integral component of research itself. The idea that we seem to be encouraging a generation of emerging scholars to utilize AI to do this intellectual work on their behalf has troubling implications for academic work, as we risk encouraging researchers to engage in inquiry without an understanding of the theoretical foundations on which their work rests. As such, Scussel's contribution underscores the need for us to take seriously the productive nature of epistemic struggle as we imagine the future of intellectual labor.

Additionally, Scussel's point is a useful illustration of Kline's analysis of "convenience creep" in education. Instead of sitting with their emerging ideas

---

[10] Jessica A. Kent, "Should I use ChatGPT to Write My Essay?" September 6th, 2023, Should I Use ChatGPT to Write My Essays? – Harvard Summer School.

[11] Cynthia Grant and Azadeh Osanloo, "Understanding, Selecting, and Integrating a Theoretical Framework in Dissertation Research: Creating the Blueprint for Your 'House,'" *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice, and Research* 4, no. 1 (2016): 12.

and working through the initial frustration associated with beginning a writing project, students can turn to a frictionless experience of prompting AI to do that mental work for them. While examples of convenience creep and its relationship to an increased reliance on technology are plentiful in educational contexts—to say nothing of our daily lives—AI offers students what is potentially the most tantalizing technology of convenience thus far: something that can do the "thinking" for them.[12] As philosophers of education and teacher educators, it is critically important that we engage in ongoing explicit and candid discussions of the pedagogical, ethical, and philosophical dilemmas posed by such technology. It is not only crucial for them to reflect on their own technology habits and habits of mind, but to consider how they will continue to grapple with these questions in their future practice.

CONSIDERING THE DATA-FIED SUBJECT

Although I explore what I refer to as the shifting nature of human subjectivity in *Public Education and the Digital Age*, Austin Pickup rightly points to my underdeveloped treatment of the role of data. As he puts the point:

> it should be considered that the modern, sophisticated technology that we are most often concerned with is conducive to, and only possible through, an ontological conception of the human already constructed in generations past—thus, critical genealogical analyses of this social construction of the subject is a vital piece of resisting technophlia."[13]

Drawing on the work of scholars such as Colin Koopman, Ian Hacking, and Kurt Danziger, Pickup explores how the history of the data-fied subject, in tandem with the role that psychologists have played in shaping the culture of education around attempts at "mental measurement" of students, laid the foundation on which our culture of technophilia in education has been built. However, we need not look to Koopman's fantastic genealogical analysis of the "informational person" to see the ways in which a fetishization of data has shaped our orientations around teaching and learning. Incessant demands for "data-driven practices" reveal the ongoing reduction of humans and human activity and inquiry to mere data points for us to respond to. This problem is exacerbated, as Pickup explains, in purely digital instructional environments

[12] It is here important to note that large language models such as ChatGPT are not doing anything that resembles human thinking. Instead, these algorithms are designed to simply pull from extremely large data sets to best respond to a query or prompt. The misconception that LLMs are thinking exacerbates the issue of granting them epistemic credit.

[13] Austin Pickup, "Problematizing the Digital Subject in the Age of Educational Technology," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 55 (2024), 125.

where we no longer meet and build relationships with students, but simply respond to the various data points they shed as they interact with a Learning Management System. Furthermore, as it becomes increasingly common for aspects of course design and implementation such as grading and assessing student work to be conducted by AI,[14] we eliminate the need for human interpretation of such data while raising questions surrounding what, if any, teaching is happening at all. This connects directly to Scussel's concerns surrounding intellectual struggle as well as to my own concerns explored in the book of the erosion of interpersonal, human connection and the culture of positivism; AI-powered instruction positions instructors as "finished" subjects, to use Freire's language,[15] who have no room to continue to learn alongside and with students. Rather, they merely need to input prompts into AI features that can construct courses, deliver commodified bits of information, and assess student work for them. Knowledge is not co-constructed, but merely verified. At the same time, students' subjectivities are flattened into data points. While I would contend that frameworks from the tradition of critical pedagogy provide inroads here, Pickup's response adds a much-needed layer of depth and nuance to my original analysis.

TECHNOCRACY AS A WAY OF LIFE

Kline's contribution, "What's so Different About the 'Digital Age?'," pushes for further clarification of the points I make throughout, and his insights allow me to weave the various contributions together. First, I believe he is right to suggest that when I refer to "technological creep," I am really referring to a type of "convenience creep." This reframing better captures the broader point I seek to emphasize throughout the book, which is the ways in which neoliberal, market orientations towards education prime us to adopt the various technical "quick-fixes" promised by edtech, and connects to points made by both Scussel and Pickup. In other words, the corporate remaking of education *precedes* and *renders intelligible* technophilia in education. This theme of convenience creep can be threaded through from Scussel's discussion of the use of technology to render the activities associated with teaching and learning more efficient, to Pickup's analysis of the datafication of subjects and the pre-packaged nature of "master course shells" and how this allows us to efficiently circumvent the messy work of education. Put differently, our desire for convenience and efficiency that accompanies the neoliberal restructuring of education gives rise to such technocratic approaches to education. Additionally, although the point I make at the outset of the book regarding the use of weather applications on smartphones was intended to be somewhat cheeky, Kline is right to identify this remark as

[14] See, for example, Anthology, "Empower Instructors With AI," Blackboard Learn's AI Design Assistant | Anthology.

[15] See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012).

imprecise. Here, Scussel's response offers me a lifeline. The underlying point of the original example of relying on a weather application instead of "peering out the window to decide if one needs a raincoat" was to illustrate the various ways in which we routinely cognitively offload mental labor onto technology—illustrating the "convenience creep" often associated with technology that Kline points out. Admittedly, however, this example is insufficiently nuanced, and I would say categorically distinct from a student relying on AI to generate ideas for an essay for them.

Additionally, Kline's dissatisfaction with my critique of Quality Matters (QM) warrants an additional point of clarification. For the uninitiated, Quality Matters is an "educational quality assurance organization" that provides member institutions with highly standardized recommendations for scaling online instruction. QM sells memberships to colleges and universities to have online courses "certified for quality," which means they adhere to QM's highly prescriptive framework for online course delivery.[16] Kline is right to point out that frameworks such as Quality Matters are not themselves *necessarily* problematic; a desire to improve the experiences of students enrolled in online coursework to ensure that these experiences are of high quality—especially as online "modalities" are on the rise—is not at issue. To the contrary, Kline persuasively notes that when faculty dismiss guidance on ways to better present and organize materials on a Learning Management System, it creates unnecessary frustration for students and can erode the overall student experience of a course. However, when a for-profit entity seeks to define for institutions what counts as "quality" and then condition faculty to adopt highly standardized modes of instruction that adhere to their proprietary framework, then deeper issues of corporate influence are at work. It is not that QM "makes the online modality worse" so much as it is a symptom of the broader technocratic culture of higher education. As Andrew Feenberg succinctly puts the point, "technologies are not just means subservient to independently chosen ends but that *they form a way of life, and environment*."[17] This connects to a key point I make in the introduction of the book that I am primarily concerned "*with how technology shapes the way we think about* education."[18] In hindsight, perhaps my critique of QM would have been better summarized with Marshall McLuhan's well-known adage, "the medium is the message."[19]

Lastly, as the title of his response suggests, Kline pushes back on my framing of the "digital age," noting that while he is sympathetic to my suggestion

[16] For a more detailed analysis of Quality Matters see Morgan Anderson, "Quality Matters and Matters of Quality: COVID-19 and the Techno-rationalization of Teaching," *Philosophical Studies in Education* 52, no. 1 (2021): 15-25.
[17] Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology* (London, UK: Routledge, 1999), 7.
[18] Morgan Anderson, *Public Education in the Digital Age: Neoliberalism, EdTech and the Future of Our Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 1.
[19] See Marshal McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

across the book that there is indeed something about emerging digital technologies that is distinct from the "teaching machines" of the sort pioneered by Sidney Pressey and B.F. Skinner,[20] that I do not sufficiently attend to or establish these distinctions in the book. He is right. First, I will expand on Kline's critique, further underscoring where he is correct to question my "use of the word 'now' or phrases like 'particularly in the last decade',"[21] before I specify how I differentiate between the teaching machines of early twentieth century and the technologies we use today.

The teaching machines devised by those such as Pressey and Skinner relied on behaviorist conceptions of learning. In this framework, learning is merely a change in observable behavior which could be recorded to demonstrate that "learning" had occurred. Although the adaptive learning technologies widely utilized today may at first glance seem leagues beyond Pressey and Skinner's analog versions of the early-to-mid-twentieth century, the underlying framework and philosophical assumptions are nearly identical. Learning is still conceptualized through a behaviorist lens as an observable change in behavior, where students interact with software that captures their responses and renders them into data. This highlights the "problem with innovation" that I explore in Chapter 2. As I note, "[t]he collapsing of 'technology' with 'innovation' has been one key success of proponents of educational technology."[22] Despite the fact that modern digital technologies remain rooted in the paradigm of behaviorism and function almost identically to the individualized teaching machines of the 1950s, dominant orientations around technology which assume that it is always inherently *innovative* obscure this reality. In this way, much of the technology utilized in educational settings is not new, but frustratingly familiar.

At the same time, key distinctions between digital and analog technologies often evade critique, which perpetuate erroneous assumptions surrounding the neutrality of edtech. Put most succinctly, we use analog tools; digital tools, however, can *use us back.*[23] For example, the digital technologies we interact with on a daily basis are designed with persuasive technologies to capture and hold our attention; sophisticated algorithms, purposeful aesthetic design, and programming around notifications and alerts work together in ways that raise questions surrounding the flow of influence between humans and technology. Technology also introduces new opportunities for surveillance and control (e.g., instructors monitoring students' activity in an LMS; P-12 schools

[20] See Audrey Watters, *Teaching Machines: The History of Personalized Learning* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021).
[21] Kip Kline, "What's So Different About the 'Digital Age?,'" *Philosophical Studies in Education* ***55,*** 122.
[22] Anderson, *Public Education in the Digital Age,* 47.
[23] Scholars such as Samantha Deane have rooted similar arguments in the tradition of new materialisms. See Samantha Deane, *Democratic Education in an Armed Society: Learning to Live with Guns* (New York: Lexington Books, 2023).

moving towards digital hall passes that keep track of student breaks)[24] that reshape and intensify the contours of power in instructional settings. Additionally, the ease with which various ensembles of edtech render human activity into data represents an intensification of the datafication of subjects that Pickup explores in his piece. In this way, the digital age is characterized by both an intensification of preexisting trends as well as a sharp turn in the relationship between humans and technology.

TOWARDS AN AGENTIC PESSIMISM

Finally, both Pickup and Kline identify a point I struggled with throughout the writing of the book, namely my portrayal of a "cautiously optimistic" outlook. I started thinking and writing about these ideas almost ten years ago, and I must admit that "cautiously optimistic" no longer accurately reflects my attitude on these matters. However, I remain deeply committed to a core tenet of critical pedagogy, which is the centering of our own agency. I believe that fully appreciating the potential inherent in the realization of our agency is to keep a glimmer of optimism alive. This is particularly important at a time when various iterations of techno-fatalism occupy much of the airspace, and we are inundated with messages conveying that there is simply nothing we can do about any of this, so we might as well get on board. To be clear, I appreciate the complexity and intensity of the ideological systems of power and the market incentives that encourage such an outlook. However, it is simply not the case that we are powerless and that an acceleration of current trends is inevitable. To the contrary, humans—for the time being—are still behind the proverbial wheel, even if AI is increasingly driving the car.[25] Thus far, however, it seems that Silicon Valley remains unapologetically driven by market incentives rather than ethical or philosophical concerns. Despite calls by leading minds in the field to slow the pace of developments in artificial intelligence,[26] these pleas for caution have largely fallen on deaf ears. For example, last Spring in an open letter to the community of AI-researchers where he called for a six-month moratorium on the AI arms race, Elon Musk noted:

> Advanced AI could represent a profound change in the history of life on Earth, and should be planned for and managed with

[24] See, for example, Amy Rock, "Digital Hall Passes: Pros, Cons, and Student Privacy Concerns," *Campus Safety*, February 24th, 2023, Digital Hall Passes: Pros, Cons and Student Privacy Concerns – Campus Safety (campussafetymagazine.com).

[25] See, for example, Andrew J. Hawkins, "People Are Afraid of Self-Driving Cars—Can the Industry Change That?," *The Verge*, April 17th, 2024, People are afraid of self-driving cars — can the industry change that? (msn.com).

[26] See Jason Abbruzzese, "The Tech Watchdog that Raised Alarms About Social Media is Warning About AI," *NBC News*, March 22, 2023, The tech watchdog that raised alarms about social media is warning about AI (nbcnews.com).

> commensurate care and resources. Unfortunately, this level of planning and management is not happening, even though recent months have seen AI labs locked in an out-of-control race to develop and deploy ever more powerful digital minds that no one—not even their creators—can understand, predict, or reliably control.[27]

This underscores the point that we do in fact have the power to approach research in artificial intelligence more thoughtfully and intentionally but are deliberately choosing not to do so. Austin Pickup does well to remind of us Foucault's message when he says, "my point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same thing as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but a hyper and pessimistic activism."[28] While I find Foucault's words particularly prescient in our contemporary moment, I would favor the concept of agency over activism, as the former implies a deeper understanding of the relationship between theory and practice. As philosophers of education, we are uniquely positioned to engage in such agentic pessimism as we look ahead to the future of education in the digital age.

---

[27] Elon Musk, "Pause Giant AI Experiments: An Open Letter," *Future of Life Institute*, March 22, 2023, Pause Giant AI Experiments: An Open Letter - Future of Life Institute.
[28] Cited in Pickup, "Problematizing the Digital Subject in the Age of Educational Technology," 132.

GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS, DFW RATES, AND THE SIMULACRUM: BAUDRILLARD MEETS THE MODERN UNIVERSITY

Abbey Hortenstine and Deron Boyles
Georgia State University

In January of 2023, Georgia State University proposed a policy stating that, if graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) taught courses that reported grades of Ds, Fs, or withdrawals (DFW) at a rate of twenty percent or higher, GTAs would be required to complete a course on how to teach college students before they could resume their job as a teaching assistant.[1] If GTAs teach a course with a DFW rate of twenty percent or higher, they not only risk losing their jobs, but they also risk losing their tuition coverage until they complete a remedial course. By examining the implementation of this policy, as well as the broader political and cultural context in which it occurs, we argue that policies such as the DFW policy at Georgia State University limit academic freedom, bridle epistemic curiosity, and lead to a performance of knowledge.

Using the work of Jean Baudrillard, we argue that such policies risk rendering the enterprise of education not only banal, but also self-refuting and implausible.[2] Policies such as the DFW policy make salient Baudrillard's descriptions of the simulacrum and the "spiraling cadaver" of the university by highlighting university tendencies to value passing students and distributing degrees over encouraging thoughtful inquiry and knowing.[3] When this epistemic erosion occurs, the university progresses towards a pure simulacrum of education.[4] That is, "education" becomes an inadequate imitation of the potential of thoughtful inquiry. We argue that the DFW policy encourages instructors to pass students regardless of the quality of their work or the quality of inquiry that takes place in university courses that involve GTAs. The DFW policy, specifically, but also broader educational policies with similar goals, generally, instantiate Baudrillard's hyperrealism and indicate a collapse of education into performative procedure. In other words, when instructors are encouraged to assign passing grades regardless of the quality of student inquiry and knowledge, they are partaking in a merely theatrical demonstration of teaching. For Baudrillard, the failure to recognize this collapse in the university context makes

[1] Department Chair, email message to author, February 24, 2023.
[2] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 121.
[3] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* 154. We want to note, however, that we are not arguing against policies that aim to aid students (i.e. to keep them from failing), but we remain critical of the motivations behind this DFW policy and maintain that the policy is but one example of the sources of epistemic decay riddling higher education. This is why we ultimately offer the potential solution of hyperconformity.
[4] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 121-123.

© 2024 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

possible a "rotting, by accentuating the parodic, simulacral side of dying games of knowledge and power."[5]

BAUDRILLARD'S HYPERREALISM AND SIMULACRUM

Baudrillard begins *Simulacra and Simulation* by introducing Borges' fable of the map. According to this short story, there was once a vast empire that cartographers wished to draw. These cartographers became increasingly obsessed with creating a map that was as exact as possible, and eventually the map was drawn so much to scale that it was the same size as the empire itself.[6] The story ends with a description of the "Tattered Ruins of the Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars."[7] The map was so large that it acted as a pseudo-empire, lying atop the original, both rendered as bordering on the absurd. For Baudrillard, the relevance of this fable is found in the "allegory of simulation."[8] That is, the significance is found in the fact that the map itself lays atop the real empire as an exact replica. By outlasting the original version of the empire as well as by providing space for inhabitants, the simulated empire covers the real one, and both the real and the simulation sacrifice authenticity; both are uncanny, and their meaning becomes muddled. Baudrillard writes, however, that we have now reached a phase of existence in which even this iteration of simulation is unusable. He writes, "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it."[9] In other words, the hyperreal is not a simulation of what is real, but instead is acting as a simulation of the real, a performance of something that does not exist, but which has enough of the symptoms of existence such as to *seem* real.

Further explicating the creation of the hyperreal, Baudrillard examines imagery in *The Ecstasy of Communication*. He describes an art installation at Beaubourg which depicted realistic naked sculptures posed in ultimately ordinary positions. Because there is nothing illusory, nothing hidden, the viewer is left, perhaps perplexed, with nothing to see. Baudrillard writes, "Precisely because there is nothing to see, people approach, lean over and flair out this hallucinating hyper-resemblance, haunting in its friendliness. They lean over to see an astounding thing: *an image where there is nothing to see*."[10] He explains that this transparency is what creates obscenity, an "obscenity of the real."

---

[5] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* 149.

[6] Jorge Luis Borges, "On Exactitudes in Science," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley, (Penguin Press, 1999).

[7] Jorge Luis Borges, "On Exactitudes in Science."

[8] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* 1.

[9] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* 1.

[10] Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012), 32. See, also, Graham Murphy, "Post/Humanity and the Interstitial: A Glorification of Possibility in Gibson's Bridge Sequence," *Science Fiction Studies* 30, no. 1 (2003): 72-90, 73.

According to Baudrillard, this obscenity takes place when "everything becomes…visible, exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication."[11]

Similarly, this obscenity is found in the current system of schooling. Baudrillard writes of the rotting of the university, painting a picture of what he calls the "spiraling cadaver." He argues that the university is "nonfunctional…lacking cultural substance or an end purpose of knowledge."[12] In his description of this decay, Baudrillard questions the possibility of knowledge along with the question of representation. He ultimately argues that we exist among the ruins of knowledge and that even these ruins are "defunct."[13] He illustrates a scenario in which degrees will be awarded without "an equivalence in knowledge" and that this results in a "terror of value without equivalence."[14] The current market-based system of schooling based on pared down bits of information transmitted from teacher to student simulate genuine inquiry. The transmission of information, however, is conflated with inquiry and there is no movement towards knowledge, but instead an aimless meandering towards the performance of teaching, inquiring, knowing, and the entailment of grading. Genuine inquiry is substituted by a grotesque amassing of rubric-based grades and course credits regardless of meaningful understanding. This performance, then, becomes nothing more than "an image where there is nothing to see."

For Baudrillard, this simulation only takes on the appearance of being new, and this "exchange of signs" has persisted between students and teachers as a "doubled simulacrum of a psychodrama."[15] This simulacrum of the university yields a hyperreal, transparent iteration of knowledge and power, and ultimately of the death of the university. In other words, like the way in which the allegory of simulation eventually fails to capture what is happening to the breakdown between the borders of Borges' map and a real empire, there is a decay that takes place within the performance of knowledge, until it no longer resembles knowing, but performs the idea of knowing where no real inquiry takes place.

Georgia State University's DFS Policy

DFW policies are part of a broader concern in higher education for student retention rates. In recent decades, research has shown that the movement towards including larger groups of the population in the enterprise of higher education has led to a decrease in retention and overall graduation rates. Researchers have indicated that "key demographic variables," economic

---

[11] Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication.*
[12] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 149.
[13] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 151. See, also, Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).
[14] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 155.
[15] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 155.

struggles, and "academic readiness" indicate the likelihood of student success via graduation.[16]

We argue that the DFW policy at Georgia State University is a symptom of this "doubled simulacrum of a psychodrama" and that the policy manifests Baudrillard's "spiraling cadaver" of the university. That is, this policy masks the absence of reality, of real knowing, and instead acts as a continuation of simulated knowledge. Part of this simulation is the act, art, and assumptions of grading. While much more could be said on the topic of grading, generally, our focus is on the tensions between justifiable determinations of quality made by GTAs about student work and the DFW policy's apparent replacement of expertise with simulacrum.[17] Indeed, the DFW policy is ultimately missing the point: the policy is trying to provide a simulation-based answer to a simulation-based problem: the gamification of grading and the ironic endorsement of said gamification. Students most at risk of earning Ds and Fs (although they are not alone in this effort) tend also to be clever at trying to outwit the grading requirements; the DFW policy endorses such gamification and, as a result, epistemic decay. The policy instantiates institutional rot, in other words, by contributing to a brand of epistemic putrefaction that renders nothing but simulated knowing possible. Baudrillard argues that the loss of correspondence of signifiers to reality means "the world is a game,"[18] but he also notes, according to Blades, that "such a game is pathological because the real, in the name of the authentic, becomes increasingly distant in the circulation of signs to the point of no longer being present."[19]

Consider the paper trail surrounding the discussion and institution of this DFW policy. Discussion of the policy began at the first Senate Faculty Affairs Committee (FAC) meeting that took place in the spring semester of 2023. The meeting minutes mention that the DFW policy should be discussed at the February meeting.[20] The February FAC meeting minutes indicate that a draft of

[16] Salvatore A. Barbera, et. al., "Review of Undergraduate Student Retention and Graduation Since 2010: Patterns, Predictions, and Recommendations for 2020," *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* 22, no. 2 , (2017): 227. It is important to note that the motivations behind the increased inclusion of students arguably also has little to do with genuine effort towards equity, and, instead may have more to do with the financial needs of colleges and universities.

[17] See, for example, Stuart Tannock, "*No Grades in Higher Education Now!* Revisiting the Place of Graded Assessment in the Reimagination of the Public University," *Studies in Higher Education* 42, no. 8 (2017): 1345-1357; Kiruthika Ragupathi and Adrian Lee, "Beyond Fairness and Consistency in Grading: The Role of Rubrics in Higher Education," in *Diversity and Inclusion in Global Higher Education*, ed. Catherine Shea Sanger and Nancy W. Gleason (Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 73-95.

[18] Jean Baudrillard, "The Power of Reversibility that Exists in the Fatal," in *Baudrillard Live*, ed. Mike Gain (New York: Routledge, 1983/1993): 43-49.

[19] David W. Blades, "The Simulacra of Science Education," *Counterpoints* 137 (2001): 62.

[20] Georgia State University, Faculty Affairs Committee Minutes. January 2023.

the policy was created and would be reviewed in the March meeting.[21] The March meeting minutes read: "The general policy committee presented the first draft of the DFW letter. It was returned to the General Policy Committee to continue work on the letter. [It] will be reviewed in the March meeting. Voting is not expected until the first meeting of the 2023-2024 academic year."[22] Meanwhile, on February 24th, an email was sent from Georgia State University's Educational Policy Studies (EPS) Department Chair, which read:

> Finally, if a GTA is on the university's DFW list (instructors who award D's, F's, or W's to 20% or more of students), they will have to take a course in college teaching before they can teach again. If you are supervising a GTA who fits this description, I will be reaching out to you. There is lots to critique about this approach but there is pressure coming from the university to lower the DFW rates in undergrad courses and this new policy is, apparently, non-negotiable. I hope you are enjoying this unseasonably warm weather and have a restful weekend.[23]

The department chair's email indicates the insouciance that accompanies simulacrum, along with the fabrication of a performed problem. The DFW policy is attempting to answer the question "how do we decrease the number of students who are earning Ds and Fs, or who are withdrawing from a course?" At best, it asks "why are students withdrawing from a course, or earning a D or an F?" At worst, this policy fails to respond to any educationally legitimate question and aimlessly seeps down from one bureaucratic entity to the next. Upon the receipt of the chair's email, GTAs in EPS were left considering not only the practical implications of the policy, but the theoretical ones as well. The GTAs wondered if they could continue teaching the following semester, if funding necessary for continued enrollment in the doctoral program would be received, and then, what this policy meant in a broader scope. Furthermore, questions were raised about the "re-education" that would be required: Who will be teaching the remedial course? What will constitute the content of such a course? How, indeed, will such a course be evaluated—that is, what happens if the remedial course ends with a DFW rate of 20% or higher? Will the remedial instructor be remediated?

Notably, this is not something that is occurring only at Georgia State University. Economic professors at James Madison University, for example, are experiencing a similar phenomenon. Six professors received significantly lower

[21] Georgia State University, Faculty Affairs Committee Minutes. February 2023.
[22] Georgia State University, Faculty Affairs Committee Minutes. March 2023.
[23] Department Chair, email message to author, February 24, 2023. We leave it to readers to interpret the final line of the note. We also note that the department chair was not responsible for enacting the policy. That ignoble status goes to an associate dean in the college. It was her ineptitude and lack of experience that put the policy into practice and caused the havoc we document in this article.

marks on evaluations from their chair following the summer semester of 2023.[24] On a nine-point scale, many professors lost, on average, two points with a majority losing points because they were assigning too many Ds and Fs. One professor, who earned a four out of nine for "teaching," shared the feedback they received: "Please work to meet students where they are in terms of skills and preparation and provide remedial and extra assistance as needed in order to reduce the number of D and F grades. Continue to adjust course material and delivery to improve grades and evaluation scores."[25] What are faculty to do with such a suggestion?

The professors took this sort of feedback to mean that they were expected to increase grades, regardless of the quality of student work to receive adequate scores on their evaluations. Earning low scores would bar these professors from being considered for promotions or from earning financial awards based on their performance.[26] When they took their concerns to administration, no scores were reversed and their dean informed the professors that because the DFW rate for their ECON 200 course was 25%, clearly the professors needed to work on improving their teaching.[27] The dean also rejected any mention of grade inflation, arguing that he did not condone inflating grades and reiterating the importance of improving teaching. Again, faculty are considered entirely culpable for student performance, and grade increase, regardless of the reason for the increase, is desirable over genuine inquiry.

DFW policies can be read as part of a theatrical performance inseparable from Baudrillard's stages of simulacrum. The concept of a university broadly conceived as an institution of learning that maintains faithfully the enterprise of knowledge aligns with Baudrillard's characterization of the "reflection of a profound reality."[28] That is, a university purposefully aimed towards substantive or authentic knowing is not corrupting the real. Awarding grades that do not correspond with knowledge in a market-based university environment moves more readily towards the second and third stages of simulacrum: towards "mask[ing] and denatur[ing] a profound reality."[29] By awarding grades as currency and engaging in the two-fold performance of teacher and student in exchange for this currency, any original aims and purposes of knowing are twisted and foregone. Such currency exchange is symptomatic of neoliberalism's stranglehold on modern U.S. universities, but the reality of corporate universities

---

[24] Charlotte Matherly, "A Spat Over Teaching Evaluations Roils a Department," *The Chronicle,* 25 October 2023, https://www.chronicle.com/article/a-spat-over-teaching-evaluations-roils-a-department?cid=gen_sign_in.

[25] Charlotte Matherly, "A Spat Over Teaching Evaluations Roils a Department."

[26] Charlotte Matherly, "A Spat Over Teaching Evaluations Roils a Department."

[27] Charlotte Matherly, "A Spat Over Teaching Evaluations Roils a Department."

[28] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

[29] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

only justifies DFW rates as self-corroborating and, we argue, implosive circularity.[30]

These DFW policies move the university into the third and fourth stages of simulacrum—“mask[ing] the absence of a profound reality” into no longer resembling reality and becoming “its own pure simulacrum.”[31] For example, the FAC that meets to discuss policy in the university is a performative gesture. The committee forms to address and respond to problems that only exist within the second order of simulacrum. When the FAC met to address the issue of the high rate of Ds, Fs, and Ws in the university, the focus on these markers as both currency as well as a measure of performance highlights the “absence of a profound reality” by shifting the goal of schooling from inquiring and moving towards knowing to earning ostensibly only passing grades “without an equivalence in knowledge.”[32] Student success in this third and fourth order becomes centered around earning a grade higher than a D and refraining from withdrawing from a course. Indeed, adding “withdrawal” in the policy further explicates the twisting of profound reality into the absence of reality. This conflation is at least in part a matter of reason. Logically, D and F are of the same kind. They are purported evaluations of student work and are qualitative assessments made by GTAs and faculty based on the quality of work submitted by the student. A W, however, is different in kind. Neither faculty nor GTAs determine a W, strictly speaking.[33] The decision of a student to withdraw from a course is made for a wide variety of reasons: too much reading, sampling courses to find out which ones are the easiest, work/life balance, illness, death in the family, etc. In these instances, there is no correspondence between the student’s decision to withdraw and the quality of a GTA’s or faculty member’s assessment of the student’s progress. Indeed, a W is *not an assessment* of progress at all. It is a status of dropping a course, as just noted, for any number of reasons having nothing to do with the quality of teaching in a given course. Relatedly, we question the 20% threshold. From where does such a percentage come and how is it understood as anything other than an arbitrary number? No explanation is given in the policy and no justification follows.

Given Baudrillard’s simulacrum and hyperreality, we therefore read these DFW policies as a continuation of the systemic decay and death of the

---

[30] See, for example, Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); William G. Tierney, “The Autonomy of Knowledge and the Decline of the Subject: Postmodernism and the Reformulation of the University,” *Higher Education* 41, no. 4 (2001): 353-72.

[31] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 6.

[32] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 155.

[33] It is true that course instructors submit a W (or a WF-withdraw failing) at the end of the semester, but if students withdraw before the withdrawal deadline, the electronic grading system automatically “populates” a W for the student, and it is out of the instructor’s hands—no change can made in the system.

university, and along with it, an indifference towards curiosity and knowing, and instead, an adherence to performative, theatrical schooling. The policy, at first glance, may seem to be an effort to make the university and "success" more accessible by making failure more difficult. This version of success, however, operates within a university system based on the receipt of empty grades in exchange for student performance.[34] When the university exists within the context of a performance-for-grade-based economy, failure to obtain passing grades results in failure to obtain the currency necessary to receive a diploma, lowering graduation rates. When the university operates in such a marketplace, the economistic response is to decrease the receipt of grades that will not result in graduation. This form of grade-based economy, however, exemplifies an intellectual rot, or a resistance against the university stimulating epistemic curiosity, or a desire to work towards knowing. When an institution awards grades "without an equivalence in knowledge" as currency towards a degree, it limits or even undermines inquiry, and instead encourages performance akin to Baudrillard's "doubled simulacrum of a psychodrama."[35]

DFW policies are a reaction to a problem manufactured within the confines of this grade-based economy and within this "doubled simulacrum of education." At its surface, Georgia State University may argue that the policy allows for higher GPAs, higher graduation rates, and perhaps higher rates of job placement out of college. It might appear that the policy is aiming to "close the achievement gap," allowing for a more inclusive university experience that results in a better return on investment.[36] As the policy is symptomatic of this doubled simulacrum and exists as a manufactured reaction to a manufactured problem, it begins to collapse back into itself, creating a sort of feedback loop of an exchange of simulated inquiry and teaching—a solution posing as progressive problem solving, but instead perpetuating a cycle of temporary, ultimately self-refuting remedies.

FATAL STRATEGIES

Our analysis of the DFW policy is not only critical, but also arguably a form of fatalism: there is no return from the abyss of a corporatized university

[34] In our case, the course has a Board of Regents' requirement that students "pass" the class with a C or higher. A grade of C- or below will not earn credit.
[35] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 155.
[36] See "Faculty/Students Win APSA Best Conference Paper Award," Georgia State University: College of Arts and Sciences, 3 July 2021. The paper utilized quasi-experimental research that "*not only makes a significant contribution to a growing body of research on AL [Adaptive Learning], but also provides critical insights into how AL can improve students' metacognitive skills, motivation to learn, and academic success.*" Georgia State University's description of this paper as well as the decision to advocate for the paper's findings illustrates the university's tendency to link DFW rates with student success and achievement gaps. While it is beyond the scope of this paper, we also assert that Georgia State University's National Institute for Student Success is complicit in the effort to enforce the DFW policy.

and its DFW policy. We plead guilty, but also point to possible ways to surmount despair. In his book, *Baudrillard, Youth, and American Film*, Kip Kline responds to the sense of nihilism readers are frequently left with after reading Baudrillard. Kline explains that there is a hopefulness to be found in Baudrillard's work around fatal strategies, hyperconformity, and indeterminacy.[37] Kline uses the term "postmodern hope" to articulate his rejection of both neoliberal, market-based education policy and critical theorists. We agree with Kline that, instead of critical theory, we should use fatal theory and radical thought "to resist violent rhetoric and policy regarding youth and education."[38] To critique critical theorists, Kline points out the tendency to react in a "shocked" manner or with "incredulity," which he argues is merely a "sign of resistance." Kline calls, instead, for a "counter-spiral" through radical thought.

For example, hyperconformity might look like "*not* support[ing] schools as an institutional location for treating social problems."[39] Kline explains that as we well know, schools are "subservient to the economic system in late capitalism," so to then expect schools to tackle social issues is to expect them to perform in ways that critical theorists think schools ought to function, not how they can or will function in their current iteration. Hyperconformity, then, would involve "push[ing] these negative conditions until they flip."[40] In other words, we cannot expect solutions embedded within the current system to self-correct.

Kline also emphasizes the importance of illusion and enigma as it relates to the juxtaposition between education and schooling in the United States. He illustrates the current American system of schooling as relying on scientism and hard facts. Scientism, according to Kline, stands in direct opposition to education.[41] Kline, in line with Baudrillard, argues instead to render the world as uncertain and mysterious. The enigmatic and the indeterminate expose the "flimsy form of certainty" relied on not only by policies like Georgia State University's DFW policy, but more broadly in the market-based system of schooling found in the current university setting. These DFW policies rely on quantitative data to measure student and university success. There is no evidence, however, that genuine inquiry has taken place when this data is analyzed. When considering the scenario at James Madison University, for example, the insistence that we "meet students where they are" in order to improve grades rather than to guide them towards inquiring and knowing implies that the "right mix of carrots on sticks," as Diane Ravitch puts it, will increase grades, and

[37] Kip Kline, *Baudrillard, Youth and American Film: Fatal Theory and Education* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 111-112.
[38] Kip Kline, *Baudrillard, Youth, and American Film*, 113.
[39] Kip Kline, *Baudrillard, Youth, and American Film*, 123.
[40] Kip Kline, *Baudrillard, Youth, and American Film*, 123.
[41] Kip Kline, *Baudrillard, Youth, and American Film*, 123.

subsequently, create the illusion of better teaching, more learning, and higher student performance.[42]

What might this look like in resistance to Georgia State's DFW policy? Hyperconformity might look like awarding As to all students regardless of performance, to eradicate earning Ds and Fs and minimizing Ws. Or it could mean refusing to give a grade lower than a C, based on performance. Ultimately, awarding As to all students would be the only choice, however, as Bs and Cs would become indicators of poor performance akin to the former Ds and Fs, and subsequently might befall the same fate as the D and the F. Awarding As to all students would lean into this DFW policy to the point that it would leave the grading system in a state of meaninglessness. Alternatively, an option could be to award only Ds and Fs, with the goal of achieving a 100% DFW rate. Grades as currency meant to be utilized in a system of schooling completely subservient to late-stage capitalism would inflate to the point that these grades could no longer be used as currency, potentially imploding the usefulness of the diploma. On the other hand, making earning a diploma impossible would also work towards this type of implosion. This would simultaneously serve Baudrillard's critique of the university system—that is, that it awards degrees without "an equivalence in knowledge" and that this results in a "terror of value without equivalence."[43] Awarding only As or ensuring a 100% DFW rate might look like it also undermines genuine inquiry and movement towards knowledge. It is possible, however, that, in the scenario where only As are awarded, without the fear of grades or a focus on earning currency, pursuit of knowledge might once again become a possibility through this hyperconformity. In other words, hyperconforming may serve as an act of subversion and allow teachers to create space for students to move towards genuine inquiry.[44]

This brings us back, then, to the manufactured problem with a manufactured solution. The DFW policy is a flimsy response meant to answer the wrong questions, operating within the hyperreal. To ask the right questions, however, we cannot merely respond with shock or incredulity. This policy is not shocking; it is a market-based response to a market-based problem. Per Kline's suggestion, then, perhaps we must work from the fringes to instead imagine a new education—one that exists outside of the current mode of schooling.[45]

---

[42] Diane Ravitch, "2014 John Dewey Lecture: Does Evidence Matter?," *Education and Culture* 31, no. 1 (2015): 3-15.
[43] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 155.
[44] This is not the only means through which hyperconformity could occur. The concept of hyperconformity as conceived by Baudrillard as well as an extension of his concept of fatal strategies could serve as material for future research on the topic. See Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies,* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2008).
[45] Kip Kline, *Baudrillard, Youth, and American Film*, 127.