

Educating the “Good, Incorruptible, and Just:”

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Nietzsche has long been recognized for his confrontational position towards liberal political and educational institutions. He is arguably the greatest critic of liberalism to emerge from within the philosophy realm. Scholars have learned from him to feel disdain for sheer safety and material prosperity, and to see the danger of conformism lurking behind the apparent freedoms we are offered. From early stage in his life and career, he sides with the romantic belief that “*the aim of all culture is to generate geniuses*” and he looks for the life of a genius in the philosopher, in his case, Schopenhauer. Nietzsche advocated the need for philosopher-geniuses as rulers, as opposed to Plato’s beliefs that a society should be ruled by philosopher-kings (Shattuck, 1995). Nonetheless, a quick literature review suggests that Nietzsche has not received much attention in the realm of education.

From Plato to D.H. Lawrence, the topic of education has been the focus of much debate throughout the centuries. The question however persists amid educational circles, literary reviews, and at cocktail parties: are our schools ready to educate their students to live their lives as they should, based on values and moral ethics that point them to what Plato called the “*good, incorruptible, and just*”?

In *The Republic*, written more than two thousand years ago, Plato outlined a series of physical and intellectual practices that would warrant a form of society that was just and full of virtue, a society that was planned, with citizens who were educated from very early ages. For Socrates, only education could guarantee that children would one day become responsible (and just!) citizens, committed to the well being of the whole city (polis). In this process, Socrates emphasized the importance of educating a citizen with community values geared towards the city. By contrast, the lack of education would raise citizens that were only concerned about themselves and would, therefore, govern the city to fulfill their own interests. Socrates warns us against the decadency of the citizens of Athens, which was governed by corrupted individuals, due to lack of proper education.

In Nietzsche’s early essay on *Schopenhauer as Educator*, he deals with the contradiction between education as discipline and education as liberation. His prose is full of disparate swings from one extreme position to another. Although he goes on to say, “Education is rather liberation”, he also affirms annoyingly, “...speaking and writing are arts that cannot be acquired without the most rigorous discipline” (Nietzsche, 1965, 5-6). While he assures us that “experience... teaches us better,” a few pages later he asks himself “What in the world does the history of philosophy matter to our young people?” (ibidem, 13). It goes without saying that for Nietzsche, one must be willing (and aware) to deal with such inconsistencies, as his writings tend to be progressively more fragmented, broken up into short, out of sequence sections.

But such contradictions are real and fit in with the experience of life as we live it. Kipling and Proust also dealt with such conflicting attitudes toward learning and knowledge by placing them within the story of a developing life in its succeeding stages (Shattuck, 1995). Their work emphasizes the fact that discipline and learning precede liberation and individual talent, and then alternate and intertwine in unexpected ways. Unless we have a temporal framework to draw from and place the education and development of a specific philosopher, Nietzsche’s statements in *Schopenhauer as Educator* appear to be unconditional and hard to reconcile.

For Nietzsche, the main problem with liberalism was that its rationalism squeezes the individual into a straitjacket of universal norms, oppressing or excluding whatever does not fit. He, therefore, calls for an open education, by breaking the iron grip of liberal rationalism, ultimately chosen by each individual for themselves.

Nietzsche encourages us to *become*, to express in full articulation and without fear of being marginalized, whatever we already happen to be (Peters et al, 2000). He vehemently labels and condemns the scholars of his time (how about our times?) as sterile and bookish. Although his position sticks out like an outburst of anti-intellectual zealotry, he seems more awkward and arbitrary when compared with Kipling or Proust when discussing the same subject - education.

But what can we say about most of the political leaders of our times? Despite Nietzsche's apparent zealotry, we cannot deny that most of our politicians around the world are educated, have diplomas, and many hold doctoral degrees. Yet, what can we say about their education of the *self*, their *morals* and *ethics*? How many in this past few years alone, let's pick up from the meltdown of the global financial markets since 2008, have been exposed for lying, corruption, double standards, and love of money? It seems that, education, unlike Socrates' argument, does not guarantee an honest individual, one committed to the well being of its community and the promotion of a *just* city. Perhaps, the problem lies not with education itself, but with the quality of such education. Perhaps, our colleges and universities are not so concerned with the formation of Socrates' view of a philosopher-king, or Nietzsche's philosopher-genius. After all, our children, from early stages, belong to a certain social class: if they attend inner-city public schools and then state and community colleges, they very likely came from disadvantaged social classes; if they attend suburban public schools and then private colleges and universities, very likely they will be only concerned with their own careers and their own success, indifferent to the well being of the citizens and the community at large.

D. H. Lawrence provided us with a gloomy diagnosis of the British society at the early 1920's. According to him (1973), the educational system was one of the main reasons for the decadent society of that era. Bloom also warned us about this danger in our American school system and society, in *The Closing of the American Mind*. Just as with Socrates, Lawrence believed that only if the British educational system were to be reformulated, people would be able to break their bonds with the sorrow and resentments of a system that educated for the markets and the value of money, and material things. For Lawrence, education should be concerned with the formation and the liberation of the true self, a break free from conventionality. Nietzsche, and French Nietzscheans such as Deleuze and Foucault, also shared such educational theory. Here Nietzsche's rhetoric is turned against liberalism in favor of radically egalitarian and anarchistic views of individual and society.

Dangerously enough, having taken a pessimistic view of liberal education while in his late twenties, Nietzsche would conclude in his later years that modern decadence can be cured only through a century of world wars culminating in a global aristocracy. This new establishment would be characterized only by obedience and discipline, and contrary to any egalitarian hopes, Nietzsche would insist that radical social inequality, the experience of looking down on others, is indispensable for education. If this is so, then Nietzsche's whole idea of a world ruled by philosopher-genius may well turn out to be a self-undermining concept, as it contradicts the whole notion of the individual *becoming* one-self, expressing in full articulation and no fear of marginalization, whatever he already happens to be. Such contradiction is also an irony of the Enlightenment that was perceived by the "suspecting glance" of Nietzsche, about which Conor Cruise O'Brien (1972) writes so courageously, in an attempt to dispel the suspicion that Nietzsche's thought could one day prove the best guide to a world into which we are sadly fated to move in the centuries to come.

Furthermore, Nietzsche's insistence in radical social inequality as indispensable for education corrupts the ability of education to form social solidarity, democratic citizenship and national identity. To accept such context is as bizarre as viewing the common educational curriculum, one that incorporates all perspectives within a nation (and culture), as futile. What cannot be ignored, however, is Deleuze's 1990 prediction that education would turn into business, which today has become a reality at the level of American federal policy, which supports a single model of educational research with its top-down linear rationality and conformity to mandatory theory. The 2003 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, in effect, erased the last fifty years of qualitative research in education (Semetsky, 2004). This thesis will come as no surprise to anyone acquainted with the Nietzsche argument on education.

Nietzsche had always been concerned with education and culture. While at the University of Basel, he pointed out that the educational system had abandoned the humanist outlook in exchange for the scientific. To him, education was consequently vulgarized, as its objectives were then to prepare useful and profitable men, not harmoniously matured and developed personalities, as Socrates proposed in *The Republic*.

Nietzsche denounced the "unnatural methods of education" and the tendencies that undermined it. For Michel Foucault, however, Nietzsche's own view of education was radically aristocratic (Foucault, 1984). But, in his later years, much in line with Nietzsche's argument with regards to the role of the State in education, Foucault attempts to show that Western society has developed a new system of power and control that traditional concepts of authority are unable to understand and criticize. Rather than being repressive, this new power enhances life, and distracts people. Foucault, however, encourages people to resist the welfare state by developing individual ethics in which one turns one's life into something that others can respect and admire.

Nietzsche, despite his many unpopular ideas, spent great efforts in explaining the problems regarding education and culture, much of it in minute details. In his lecture titled *The Future of our Educational Institutions and Schopenhauer as Educator* he argues the fact that education and culture are inseparable, and that culture does not exist without an educational project, and that education can only exist if there is a culture that supports it. It is also important to note that for Nietzsche, culture and education are synonyms of what he called "the formation of the self" (1965). This was also a theoretic point of view of Schopenhauer (ibidem). For a culture to exist, individuals must learn determined rules and acquire determined habits, so they can then begin to educate themselves against the education forced upon them.

Nietzsche also points out the pernicious role of the State and the business sector as primarily responsible for the impoverishment of culture. They interrupt the slow maturation of the individual throughout the educational process, so important in the formation of the self, as they demand a rapid formation (or fast-tracking) to develop efficient employees and docile students at their service - youngsters that will learn how to earn money rapidly (see *The Future of our Educational Institutions*). As a result, even if students do get interested in more in-depth studies, such as a specialization, they do so in order to make even more money, with success and financial concerns in mind.

After all, in our society, it is not unusual, and is typically acceptable, to have money and limited higher education (i.e. Michael Dell, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Sean Parker, etc.). It is a symbol of success, and such individuals even become role models to many other students dropping out of school. But to have education and no money is unacceptable. Many characterize it as an indication of failure in life, never as the realization that money, as the Bible says, is the source of all evil. For Nietzsche, this indecorous haste to go through education quickly leads students to make bad choices based on the current career trends, parental influence, or financial rewards to name a few. To make matters worse, the timing is at an age when they are not mature enough to reason which profession they should pursue.

In the educational system of his time, Nietzsche detected two tendencies that foster the impoverishment of culture: the first, the utmost "amplification of culture," states that the right to culture be accessible to everyone, and demands that the dogma of economic policy be followed; the second, the highest "reduction of culture," states that people devote their lives to the protection of the interests of the State and requires that its citizens seek specialization, that they be faithful to the State. This persists today to even a greater degree. The result of these tendencies, Nietzsche contends, is a journalistic culture (Janz, 1984), where people tend to live the present and are "the master of the moment." As such, people are slave to the present, the cultural trends, thinking and fashion. The journalistic culture, and even the culture of the CNN's, the BBC's and the NPRs, according to Nietzsche's theory, gradually replaces true culture. It is, however, through the genius of few artistic creations that these journalist people (the great majority of us all!), living in the moment, catch the desire to survive and surpass time through the power emanated from the artists' creations.

There are lessons to be learned today from Nietzsche's examination of the educational institutions of his time. He argues that, at the junior/high school level (gymnasium), not much has been done to promote students' formation. This is probably the most important level of the educational process as it reflects in subsequent stages of learning. Hence, he emphasizes the need for educational reform at the early stages. Nietzsche also emphasizes the need for a greater investment in the learning of the native language and in the art of writing. To him, at that time, the German language was contaminated with a deceptive and elegant journalist style, which he blamed on the ascension of the lesser-educated individuals to power, provoking an immense reduction in the wealth and dignity of the language. Such phenomenon can be confirmed in our times as well. There are no longer politicians speaking for hours at a time, drawing large crowds that are genuinely interested in what they have to say, as it was at the times of our forefathers, at the time of Lincoln.

Instead, most speeches today are ghost written or manipulated to convey what the audience wants to hear, and not to represent the true opinions of the speaker.

Nietzsche went even further on this topic to denounce not only the poverty of vocabulary, but also the misuse of the resources offered by the language. For him, the responsibility of a high-quality school should always be to lead the student to understand the importance of studying the native language in depth, for if it loses its vital strength, culture itself will tend to degenerate. If an educator is not able to impress on students aversion to determined words and expressions that the media and inept writers have grown them accustomed to, Nietzsche argues that one would be better off without culture. It is imperative, therefore, to study and analyze the classics (Nietzsche would say, *word by word*) and stimulate the students to attempt to use and express the same thought several times, improving this expression each time.

In agreement with Socrates' argument, in *The Republic*, Nietzsche believed that education must begin with habit and obedience, with discipline. He was concerned with the growing disregard for the humanistic preparation of students, the increase in the scientific tendency in schools, and the emphasis given to professionalization aimed at preparing students to become financially successful. This concern is relevant even today as it prevents educational institutions from focusing on the development and preservation of culture.

Nietzsche emphatically condemns the fact that gymnasiums (junior/high school equivalent) and Universities have turned towards professionalization, despite the fact they present themselves as institutions intended to teach and promote culture, when in fact they tend to be much like vocational schools in their objectives. Again, much of his concerns persist today, where the manufacturing of MBA degrees attempts to fulfill a demand for business savvy professionals that for the most part, have not been educated in ethics or moral values. It is not surprising, therefore, that we witness scandalous and shameful realities such as Enron, WorldCom, and most recently AIG, Lehman Brothers, Madoff, and many of the great accounting firms in U.S. unfold.

As for the higher education institutions, Nietzsche becomes increasingly abrasive, as he denounces the reality of his time, yet so present in ours, where the dynamics in the class room is of "a mouth that speaks many ears and less than half the hands that write" (Nietzsche, 1980). He contends this to be the academic environment, as a culture machine, where the professor speaks, while the students listen and not many write as they listen, or thereafter. For Nietzsche, these are the moments when the student is attached to a sort of umbilical cord with the university, but he chooses what to hear, and need not agree or believe in what is heard, as there is very little accountability (*ibidem*).

Nietzsche called this autonomous mouth and ears an "academic liberty." But he alerts us that behind it, not too far away, there always would be the presence of the State reminding the students that the State is their "final objective, the end and the essence of these proceedings of speech and hearing" (Nietzsche, 1980). Here he confirms Plato's argument for an education of just citizens, but he developed his own distinctive position. He arguably relies on some of Thomas Aquinas' position (Thomism), which although making respectful use of Aristotle, Plato, and Augustine, treats existence as the supreme act, or perfection of being in God as well as in created things. Nietzsche later on departs from this divine notion, when he declares that *God was dead*, and makes clear that humanity killed Him.

Such has been Nietzsche's influence in education that his rejection of the (State-sponsored) academic liberty was evidently signaled back in the 1960's revolt at American universities as a response to the barrenness of universities which had deprived themselves of moral substance. This was the same barrenness already detected by Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, and some of his successors, the Jesuit and modern Thomistic writers such as Joseph Kleutgen, Luigi Taparelli d'Azeglio and Matteo Liberatore. The fact that such philosophical critics cannot be heard in the central venues of our cultural and social system in any authentic and systematic way should not mean that they are not relevant. Instead, it should highlight the importance of the task still imposed on educators, two centuries later, of continuously attempting to devise new ways to allow these voices to be heard (MacIntyre, 1990).

This predominant academic teaching style that favors the oral exposition of the educator and the students' hearing, this achromatic lecturing, is contrary to what Nietzsche believed university education should be.

He argues that such a system, instead of demanding rigorous training and discipline from the student (Plato's influence again), promotes a casual autonomy, which domesticates the student, in an attempt to turn him into an acquiescent being, one that will submit to the interests of the State and the rich bourgeoisie. According to Nietzsche, it is imperative that such historical, scientific and professionalizing tendency in universities is contained, and a major focus be given to the problems of culture and the essential questions posed by the human condition.

In conclusion, Nietzsche's rhetoric on education is keenly powerful, but perhaps unreadable in many ways for its dichotomies and many times abysmal and bizarre narratives. How allegorical and even self-satirical is *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*? Is it fair to say that Nietzsche's developing mental condition distorted the autobiographical story line in *Ecce Homo*, converting it into propaganda, beyond all credibility? How sad it is that he writes to Lou Salomé (1882) that "The system is dead and debunked--but the person behind it is incontrovertible; the person simply cannot be killed"? How fair is it to say that he appeals to reductionism when he affirms in *Beyond Good and Evil* that great philosophy exists in "the personal confession of its author and a kind of involuntary and unconscious memoir"? Sadly, as Alexander Nehamas would have it, Nietzsche "created a character out of himself" (2000, 233) and "became the Plato of his own Socrates" (2000, 234).

It is true that Nietzsche has always been a weak story teller, but in my opinion he remains a discursive philosopher, with very effective voice projection, searching, lapidating, commanding, and rising to a sibylline style of imposing proclamations and exhortations. It is precisely in this realm that he makes a case for education, one that echoes to this day, and one that is worth examining, one that may very well define the survival of our culture in America, or any culture in the world. One that may very well enable every individual student and scholar to become a Socrates in their own Plato.

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