

?The Threat of Nihilism: New Educational Opportunities

<"xml encoding="UTF-8?>

:ABSTRACT

If the educator is characterized by a willingness to stand for something and simultaneously willing to care for someone, then the philosophy of authenticity should help the educator out of the problems that the Enlightenment project and some of its critics have created. While our integrative authenticity should rescue us from despair, it should also correct the possible immobilism occasioned by the interpretation of some postmodernist authors. Here, what we take as somehow fulfilling us, to a certain extent also conceived in a naturalistic way, binds us to the ways of structuring our concerns so that others can participate in a common framework. But such a philosophical perspective is confronted with two objections. First, one asks whether it is still ethics given the importance it gives to the empirical level. Second, it is questioned whether there really is a place for the other, whether it in fact transcends subjectivism. This paper deals with some of Nietzsche's central ideas and argues that the reproach of extreme relativism and scepticism is not justified. It concludes that one may find on the contrary an interesting way of dealing with the necessarily individualistic nature of education as well for the .educator as for the educandus

Main Article

If education can be conceived as an answer from one individual person to another, particularity, care, integrity and trust are of the utmost importance, and so is what "being authentic" means. Of course, an agent cannot articulate a project concerning who she wants to be without a context of intersubjectivity. Such a project must constitute a particularly illuminating example of what can be done in a certain social predicament. Furthermore, authentic identity presupposes a moment of recognition on the part of another. Authentic identity can thus mean pursuing a project in which a willed uniqueness is expressed and the wish for others to recognize this unique person whom we want to become. If the educator is characterized by her willingness to stand for something and simultaneously willing to care for someone, then the philosophy of authenticity, thus conceived, should help the educator out of the problems that the Enlightenment project and of some of its critics have pressed on her. While her integrative authenticity should rescue her from despair, it should also correct the possible immobilism

occasioned by the interpretation of some postmodernist authors. Here, what we take as somehow fulfilling us, to a certain extent also conceived in a naturalistic way, binds us to the ways of structuring our concerns so that others can participate in a common framework. But such a philosophical perspective is confronted with two objections. First, one asks whether it is still ethics given the importance it gives to the empirical level (for instance the psychological). Second, it is questioned whether there really is a place for the other, in other words whether it in fact transcends subjectivism. These kind of objections are more generally raised against philosophers who stress the empirical (what is the case) and the particular, for example against Foucault.

In his later work one finds an opposition against the inquiry for a normative theory, to be distinguished from a resistance against a search for norms themselves. Not only was he of the opinion that it is possible to criticise something without such a theory, but he was also convinced of the fact that theory on its own is not able to do that. The correct attitude of the philosopher is not so much to be sought in her ideas as if it would be possible to deduce from there a particular "posture," but in "philosophy as life," in other words in a particular ethos. That is the reason why "work on the self" is conceived in aesthetical categories: life as a "work of art." In aestheticism as an ethical ideal one can distinguish two different directions: a passive, characterized by quietism and resignation and an active where giving shape to oneself and the creation of new values are at the centre of the interest. For Heidegger an authentic poetic life is characterized by a receptivity of and an obedience to the appeal posed to us by being. This throwing open of oneself is called by Heidegger *Gelassenheit*. In the active aestheticism of Nietzsche the focus is on giving shape to one's own values. We have to set us free from the particular kind of subjectivity modernity has produced, transgress boundaries in order to create new prospects for the individual. But there are problems with his idea of resistance as style: aesthetic indifference is one of them (transgression is only limited by taste, the potentiality of enjoyment, pleasure and originality); the charge that he elevated an aesthetic of existence over all other intellectual and moral virtues, putting the self rather than the world and its inhabitants at the focus of ethical concern, is another one.

Now, it should be clear that Foucault's question is not whether political action is possible. He was very clear that a bookish act of participation was no substitute for activism pure and simple and he held that the essence of radicalism is physical action. He never asked whether action was possible, but took part in political movements. Furthermore he never attacked the choices of others, but rather the rationalizations that they appended to their choices. This seems moreover to coincide with what he meant by "an ethics no longer supported by either

tradition or reason." In his somewhat anarchistic position there is however no indication how to deal with possible conflicts of interests between individuals, or is there? The matter of subjectivism is therefore raised again.

Foucault's ideas concerning life as a work of art and the "care of the self" are inspired by Nietzsche who was recently criticised along these lines by Arcilla in the context of his reflections on liberal education. The Nietzschean subject is described by him as one who could simply not care about justifying her beliefs and actions to others, and who could exclusively concern herself with self-centered desires or values (Cf. Arcilla, 1995, p. 78):

Although Nietzsche calls on us to create and organize our own worlds, he appears to demand that we live only by the rule of whim. Are there to be no guides for the will? Is everything permitted? Is all external constraint to be considered simply an enemy will, fit only to be resisted and overpowered? Under such conditions, is it possible to create a culture that can be commonly affirmed? With these questions, which threaten any conception of social order, we begin to appreciate the cost of his renunciation of the problem of reason, a renunciation that makes him, in the eyes of many, the prophet of nihilism, or at least of the quintessentially postmodern question: Whose values?

Arcilla's reading of Nietzsche is certainly not untypical. Generally, that position is described as relativistic, nihilistic and the relationship between men conceived as an eternal fight between individuals to gain power. A similar impression is often created by postmodernist and poststructuralist authors where they make use of his ideas. Of course, generally interpretations vary and moreover ideas are sometimes quoted without reference to the context in which they were supposed to function. Though at first sight Nietzsche's position initiates foremost criticism rather than thoughts for a more constructive project, his central ideas have far reaching implications. In the following some crucial issues of his stance are dealt with before the paper returns to indicate the potential these ideas have for education and for philosophy of education.

That we must take a certain sort of responsibility for what we say about the world, is roughly what is implied by Nietzsche's saying that "God is dead." Good sense can no longer be made of the idea that the ways in which we view the world are justified by something standing above, beyond, or behind the world itself. Instead it answers to nothing more than historically and psychologically conditioned human needs. The form of nihilism that has to be overcome is therefore not so much a matter of replacing old values with new ones, as it is coming to value something where previously one valued nothing. Neither is it about taking responsibility for a view of the world and thus opening oneself up to the possibility of different views. The

Nietzschean notion of responsibility should be understood in terms of the notion of commitment, an openness to what matters to us. While a commitment to truthfulness is in some way definitive of modern life, we nevertheless seek to avoid taking responsibility for that commitment. It is this failure that leads to the specific form of nihilism of indifference with respect to what we have become in the present age. (1) Nietzsche has set himself the task of making clear both the fact of and the reasons for our failure to speak responsibly. For this, .Socratism is in Nietzsche's view to blame

Socrates asks what justifies interpreting one's concepts in the way one does and demands that the justification be articulated in terms wholly independent of the actual conditions of the interpretation in question. Why is that? Well, he seeks what guides our judgment. Unless we have good reason to rule out alternative interpretations, we cannot be said truly to mean anything at all by our moral judgments. Thus, without "reasons" those judgments are in his opinion guided "only by instinct," i.e., they are blind. Socratism presupposes in Nietzsche's opinion a standpoint that is completely external to culture as a whole. Its aim is not to achieve critical independence from this or that tradition in particular, but rather from any and all tradition whatsoever, i.e., thus not to see ourselves as members of a community at all. The idea that one interprets one's concepts in one way rather than another, amounts, Nietzsche claims, to a denial of life. To affirm life means to affirm one's membership in a culture which means "to make sense," "to speak intelligibly." What the Socratic philosopher erroneously believes he is calling for is a justification of such an obedience to the authority of a particular culture. But obedience does not equal to slavishness, Nietzsche holds. Mere slavishness does not tend to produce something for whose sake it is worth living to live on earth. Beyond Good and Evil is clear about this: "What is essential "in heaven and on earth" seems to be ... that there should be obedience over a long period of time and in a single direction: given that, something always develops, and has developed, for whose sake it is worth while to live on earth."

From the (Nietzschean) tragic point of view, I no longer see my culture as standing over against nature, but I am simply obedient to its authority (I let this or that count as courageous to me). The possibility of being mistaken by itself provides for Nietzsche thus no reason to worry whether one has somehow gone astray from the very beginning, does not give a reason to distrust one's instincts. That we have no real choice but to apply the concepts in the ways we do is in his view merely a fact about this particular community of speakers and reflects nothing about the way the world is. The philosopher's desire for something more than our human practices is a desire for something less than what we have already got, so Nietzsche

claims. His claim was not that we must learn to live without reasons, but rather that we must come to see where it no longer makes sense to ask for reasons. When we make sense we let our interpretations come to an end in understanding. We "make sense," we are intelligible, but we do not in a philosophical sense create it. In our talk about the world, there is no gap between us and the world that is bridged in doing so.

Something has the character of being if it exercises constraint or power over us. "Power" is Nietzsche's name for the constraints that making sense exercise upon us. These are according to Nietzsche psychological in nature. "Will" is Nietzsche's name for a commitment to make sense and "will to power" a way of talking about the fact that we make sense. By speaking of the will he suggests that something is achieved in making sense. Speaking of making sense as something that we do (of meaning as something that we impose), can however only be said in a psychological (and not in a philosophical) sense. The idea that the will to knowledge represents a complete break with the past is itself a rejection of the human, an expression of our dissatisfaction with ourselves, of a desire to be less than we are. The intuitive picture behind so-called aestheticist readings of Nietzsche is roughly that we are to transform our lives (make something of ourselves) by realizing that our natures are not discovered but remain rather to be invented. This idea of self-creation has to be interpreted differently. When Nietzsche talks of giving one's life style he means that one would overcome resistance to recognizing the particular life one has, properly understanding thus what we have become. Human life is conceived by him as a struggle to make sense, i.e., a struggle against our unwillingness to let ourselves be intelligible.

Nietzsche's distinction between the individual and the herd is the distinction between a life in which what we have become matters to us and a life in which it does not. The true individual will not speak a different language than the herd, but the herd fails to speak. The distinction Nietzsche makes is about the difference between speech and what we might call "mere talk." The individual should however not be construed as someone who stands outside his community and speaks a different language.

Nietzsche's position is thus different from the extreme relativism and scepticism that claims that because all the traditional groundings for value and knowledge were an illusion we are now faced with the "nothingness" of these values — a position he refers to as "nihilism" and that in his opinion is the fundamental character of our age. Both modern nihilism and traditional Western values have the same logical relation to the world: they judge it negatively and hence devalue it. He wants to reinstall the value of phenomena such as birth, death, human illness and suffering, the sensory, i.e., the human body for human life.

The child alone can "create new values" and this creation, unlike the creation often attributed to traditional values, is not given to us fixed and finished all at once in a revelation from heaven. The child is "innocence and forgetting." She gives a sacred yes to all existence for she is beyond resentment of her body and the world which characterized traditional values. The values Nietzsche envisages arise out of the creative process itself, involving an ever renewed engagement with the flux of phenomena, with the perpetual birth and death, and new birth of existence. Thus we look for the ways to overcome nihilism which enable us to affirm this world. Not the discovery of a metaphysical truth is aimed at but the restoration of the integrity of the phenomena.

Nietzsche intimates the possibility of a new relation to the phenomena, a relation in which we have learned to leave them be. On the one hand, we accept them in their pristine and unsayable integrity, on the other we transform them through continually renewed mythic and artistic renderings. Tragedy is for Nietzsche a way to overthrow nihilism by the discovery of the special value of what is near to us, the value of what seemed to be unimportant.

My formula for greatness in a human being is amor fati: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it ... but love it.

The things around us are wonderful because they are fragile. One can love them, they can become precious and things we care for, because they are not immune from the uncertainties of life. Realising this, the little things of life can get a new significance for us and this may lead furthermore to a better attunement to the world. The latter is however not to be taken similar to "resting in peace," which cannot be reconciled with his idea concerning self-realisation and the emancipation of the creative will. It is however meant to temper the ambitions of reason itself by focusing on its limitations and its presuppositions.

To rear great men is according to Nietzsche the highest task of mankind. As only education could provide for the growth of genius, it is the highest duty. He himself assumed the task of educating the educators which is a self-education, i.e., a recognition and removal of the streaks of decadence. He holds that all philosophy originated and was carried out in the service of education. True education always entails the active influencing of the soul. The individualistic nature of education is a consequence of the educator's need to express himself selectively thus structuring the needs of his students. Education is aimed through devotion to bring out the very best in someone. It has however everything to do with control, eventually with controlling oneself, being the coordinator of one's own instincts as Nietzsche calls this. Thus individualism in education is just the opposite of unrestrained development: All education

begins with the opposite of that which one now praises as academic freedom, with obedience,
with subordination, with discipline, with servitude.

Not the acquisition of facts or skills or technique, but the transmission of passion and will from teacher to student defines education. What the teacher has to teach simply is not transmissible to a crowd. The educator is to serve as a model for her students, and authority and discipline are considered to be indispensable. Education is not the determination of who the student should be, but of how he might become who she and only she is. The true educator celebrates success when her students become worthy of demanding their independence. The disciplined training that allows the student to end her servitude to custom and morality ultimately results in (the achievement of maturity and individuality thus in) the end of her servitude to higher men.

But it will clear now that his so-called subjectivism and creation of values is qualified, to say the least. And so is Nietzsche's relativism. What we are left with is a position in which human life is conceived as incarnated as well in a physical as in an intersubjective sense. Maybe this
.will prove to be his important educational legacy

Notes

(1) This understanding of nihilism is different from Sartre's existentialist version. There the meaninglessness of life in general is recognized and a distinction proposed between those who can face up to this fact and those who cannot. For Nietzsche however, the meaninglessness of our lives refers to as we now live them, but he also insists on the
.possibility of rectifying the situation