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How Can It Be? Nietzsche, the Radical Water Practice of a Looked After Child, and the Established Order of the School

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Abstract *The death of God, announced by Nietzsche in Beyond Good and Evil (1886/2001), and in his earlier works, has been hailed as a revolutionary turning point, at least in philosophical terms. Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics tears apart, for example, as lived experiences, assumptions dividing the very corporeality of our individual and social being from the systems of knowledge and expectations, and of how and where we live from the construction and meaning of our individual and collective identities (Woodward, 2013). And yet there are circumstances—perhaps this is mostly so when living outside an established order from which you derive your meaning—that render your status, your future, your security profoundly disturbing, with no point of remittance. In such circumstances—and these are the circumstances today most obviously of the refugee, the dispossessed, and the poor—the future is only tenable by being able to belong to whatever established order is necessary. Having the requisite skills, appearance, and mode of being to secure a job and somewhere to live are not very mysterious but necessary indications that being part of any such order has been effected. This paper explores these points in relation to an ethnographic study, conducted over one year, of looked after children, focussing on one child in her reception year at her local mainstream primary school. More generally, this serves as an illustration of how schools necessarily do the work of the symbolic order.*

Keywords Nietzsche, looked after children, symbolic order, ethnography, metaphysics

Being, Identity, Institution

Before turning to the ~~empirical~~ and ~~ethnographic~~ aspects of this paper, I should make a more general point about the particular theories or kinds of philosophy that emerge under the personal pronoun of Nietzsche or Agamben, or anyone else. Whilst not wanting to deny any of the specific properties or arguments of any single

thinker, it is not any uniqueness, indicating an individual genius or egregious error of thinking made by anyone, I wish to discuss and analyse. Instead, I am interested in the positions that Nietzsche's critique of metaphysical being occupies in relation to what I describe as the *established order*; where the established order represents a vested interest in maintaining whatever that order supports, such as a hierarchy, or a set of beliefs, or a series of practices that every day identities are configured and more or less secured around.

What Nietzsche's critique of metaphysical being emphasizes are the structural factors, such as cultural practices, political alliances and aims, that contribute to the context identities are produced and enacted within; also the internal logical operations of the drama of the lives of those involved. It is through these structural factors opportunities to encounter Nietzsche's critique of metaphysical ontology come into being, as described in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886/2001). But why choose, *Beyond Good and Evil*? Why not instead, for example, indicate *The Gay Science* (1887/2001) and emphasize that its articulation of the death of God is the articulation of the end of any metaphysical epistemological truth or ontological necessity; and that what follows from this has been a radical philosophical nihilism? And of course, it is true, my choice of *Beyond Good and Evil* is to some extent arbitrary; but at a perhaps more superficial level, my very brief description of why I have chosen this text rather than another may I hope throw a little light, perhaps a little awkwardly, on some of the more liberationist or revolutionary potential that has been claimed on behalf of Nietzsche's work.

At a superficial level, *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886/2001) is a bravura philosophical performance. In it the epistemological regime of the established philosophical order is perceived as being a contingently determined order, forged to support its political and ethical vested interests. As Moss (1998) has noted, Foucault mobilises the arguments and the abundant energy in this text to indicate a Nietzschean exuberance that refuses the ontological determinism and epistemological limitations of what by contrast appears to be a pernicious philosophical and social landscape. And given, because so vast, the impossible to measure outpouring of books, papers, conferences, positions and reputations that have similarly emerged, it has become difficult not to see certain philosophers, such as Deleuze, Derrida, Nancy and Agamben as short-hand for revolutionary being; as being that is representative of those who remain apart, determined to find a place having exposed the contingent nature of a metaphysical order that is no longer tenable on the grounds that it has claimed all along. At a superficial level, of course, this is true. But in order for such truth to become possible, the well-known figures that have always already been mentioned, or at least silently acknowledged, such as Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and the like, must have long maintained some place,

some stable place, not very far away from the established order; and largely it has been from there that they have been able to launch their critique of that same established system, in many of its political, economic and epistemological manifestations. Without the political and intellectual alternative to the established order, prised into being by the political and intellectual status of Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and their like, there would be no other place to go. This is not the same as saying that the arguments that crop in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886/2001) would struggle to gain a theoretical purchase within the established order. Instead a more basic position is required: unless Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and their like, already had a place from which to read and present *Beyond Good and Evil*, in other words unless they belonged to such an institution with a culture of understanding that is able to accommodate a different political and theoretical order (including that of themselves), then no position of difference to the metaphysical determinism that Nietzsche exposes in his work could be maintained.

If Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida did not have faculties of philosophy, schools of humanities, a publishing industry that runs after their names to turn them into money and reputations, and the accompanying rest, as well as similar orchestrations for other academics and commentators, then there would be no place, no *other established space* from where the end of metaphysics could be articulated, perceived and understood. This superficial, but basic and corporeal point is stubbornly indelible. For Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and the like to be recognised, requires without exception that some other established order that also now includes, but in a way that undermines the metaphysical determinism of the previous established order, be forged and occupied.

Without such a place already being there, financially, physically, intellectually, and being of another order, which includes, but simultaneously undermines, as in the process of erasure, the established order then, well frankly, you can have no place, no identity. Most obviously this because no one is able to recognize any of your thinking that indicates being is contingently forged rather than metaphysically given; what is more no one is able to follow, much less comprehend, what you are saying; and thus, you have no place inside the institution, no job, no money, no prospects. But in actual fact, by now, you have also endured a priori and simultaneously a second destitution. Your identity, as a philosopher, the only one that counts in the circumstances, is non-existent, quite obviously, since no one can perceive or even register that you are.

In other words, there is no being, no identity, outside of the institution. And perhaps when the institution is philosophy, or a department of philosophy, or even a philosophical movement, that's not so bad. But when the only institution with any credibility that you are statistically likely to have any chance of remaining within is your local mainstream school; and when not to do so significantly reduces not only

your life chances but also the length of your life; then being destituted, twice, by society is a horrendous possibility that needs to be avoided.

If there is a caveat, then, to a Nietzschean revolutionary exuberance it is this: whether you call it the established order, the metaphysical order, the Symbolic Order, or the other order; onto-epistemic identity, that is—the staging of being—is dependent upon some identity or other being recognised and securely stitched—or in the currently modish language of Bowlby (1997), attached—to the world in which it is securely configured and lent meaning. When this does not happen, or goes wrong, then the consequences for those with fewest resources, and so not Foucault, not Deleuze, not Derrida, are dreadful. Whatever one might feel about current state schooling in the UK: for those children who are most vulnerable—a definition which includes looked after children—the local state school is likely to be the only institution specifically organized to establish and support their best possible future. Especially for those children from challenging socio-economic backgrounds, it is likely to be the only such institution that they will ever have the chance of belonging to; it is, in some respects, though imperfect, the best chance they will ever have. Somehow, they must belong.

The identities, the lives, and the structural factors in the case I'm addressing here, unfold in and around a primary school where I worked as a Teaching Assistant for one day a week for just over a year, in order to record the lives of two looked after children. This paper concentrates on only one of these children, who was not quite five at the start of the academic year, when this paper begins. Looked after children are amongst the largest and most vulnerable of identifiable groups within the UK who are marginalised according to a normativity that sees them as by definition falling outside the institution of the family. This falling outside, which is often determined by significant levels of abuse or neglect, can have a prevalent and damaging impact throughout a person's life. Surely if philosophy has anything to say worth listening to, it should be about such matters.

How can it be that Nietzsche's famous critique of metaphysical truth and order, and Agamben's (1998) analysis of bare life and homo sacer, can have any critical purchase, if not explanatory power, in relation to the depressing statistical fate of looked after children in the UK? Another much more provocative question might be: if Nietzsche's famous critique of metaphysical truth and order, and Agamben's analysis of bare life and homo sacer, are unable to provide us with any significant insight into the mundane realities by which we live, including such troubling outcomes as the depressing statistical fate of looked after children; then other than facilitating an oppositional philosophical indulgence, saying nothing beyond a cliquey academic modishness, what is their point? And whilst this is not the place to exhaustively list the extensive discontinuities that exist between the

broad outcomes for children who have not been looked after, and those for children whose lives become the more direct responsibility of the state, it is important to be sure about the extent and nature of these differences, and to whom they apply.

A Looked After Child in The UK: A State of Exception

Briefly, then, a looked after child in the UK is defined as follows:

Under the Children Act 1989, a child is legally defined as “looked after” by a local authority if he or she:

- is provided with accommodation for a continuous period for more than 24 hours
- is subject to a care order; or
- is subject to a placement order

A looked after child ceases to be looked after when he or she turns 18 years old. On reaching his or her 18th birthday, the status of the child changes from being looked after to being a young adult eligible for help and assistance from the local authority (DfE, 2014).

Let us think about this in terms that both Agamben and Nietzsche encourage us to understand. We will begin with Agamben, and a theme that is very much alive, since it describes a growing rift of increasing political and economic significance. This expanding rift intensifies the growing distance between those whose identities are invested in what I am going to refer to as the established state; and those whose identities lack the same investments, and therefore consequently fall outside the established state: by default these are the people who quite simply do not belong.

We will come back to the established state shortly, but for the moment I sketch one of the ways that this concern has been articulated. Giorgio Agamben, among many others, has commented on the implications and assumptions that have created this increasingly pressing scenario. Most famously Agamben has discussed those whose identities fall outside the established state, and, who therefore by default, are quite simply those who do not belong, through the figure of “homo sacer,” a figure engendered, Agamben explains, by the modern state of exception (Agamben, 1998). The state of exception is itself brought into being when the sovereign (perhaps taking the form, for example, of the democratically elected President of the United States of America; or Colonel Gaddafi when he was in power; or the nominal head, but effectively any arrangement that is the determining power, of any household or family) suspends the Law (in whatever form that might take, such as some aspect of

a written constitution, or a set of ideological principles, or accepted patterns of behaviour) that ordinarily gives rights, rights of being by right of belonging and identity, to the various subjects that would ordinarily be constituted by that Law of the established state. Examples of the state of exception include any executive decision that holds in abeyance or strips from being, any rights and practices that would otherwise by nature accrue by being a member of the established state, such as: the state of exception that functions to permit extraordinary rendition; the state of exception that functions to permit the sanctioning of benefits claimants; and the state of exception that functions to permit the suspension of habeas corpus.

But what happens to such bodies, bodies that were once citizens with rights, bodies that as such without identities, according to the established state, are unrecognizable, as being outside the Law? Testament to the rise in the nature of politics ushered in by the increase of states of exception, include: tides of refugees, notably from countries where the established state has been replaced for these refugees by a state of exception, such as in Syria, Iraq, and Somalia; as, similarly, does the rapid emergence of refugee camps and detention centres; as does, in the UK, the growth in the number of food banks set up by the third sector for the rising number of people that the state, for whatever reason, no longer obliges itself to (ethically and economically) regard. These are all easily identifiable examples of states of exception.

This “state of exception” produces the figure of homo sacer and the condition of “bare life” to which we are all ultimately susceptible. In a state of exception, to continue the theme of elision and the sovereign suspension of law, the individual is deprived of national civil rights and international human rights—such as habeas corpus, appeal to systems of legality and, increasingly, recourse to the Geneva Convention and due process—and is in turn constituted (interned) within a “zone of indistinction” where the dividing line between citizen and outlaw, legality and illegality, law and violence, and ultimately life and death are strategically and at times fatally blurred (Sowah, 2015, p. 5)

The figure of homo sacer is profoundly *without*. Without rights, without power, without a place to be institutionally, as the institution for example, of yourself, in relation to the established state; because any such identity by definition is not recognized by the established state, and is the predominant characteristic of *being* outside the established state. It is not difficult to understand how bearers of this

deficit of identity as regarded by the established state, might be represented to us by refugees, dissidents, the poor, and that their fate is the embodiment of that which falls outside the assumption of the same established order.

This is also very profoundly a falling outside of the assumption of identity and belonging as forms of natural being. Specifically in relation to looked after children, this falling outside of the assumption of identity and belonging as forms of natural being, would apply to their individual being and the established order of the family, and within that to the established order of the community and society. It is this falling outside the assumption of identity and belonging as forms of natural being which seems to provide a philosophical and political link to certain pathologies that are associated with looked after children. These pathologies are often described as “attachment disorders” (Chaffin et al., 2006). The pathologies or ‘attachment disorders’ from this perspective are especially interesting because they indicate the site where the difference between internal being and the external world of the established order are forged as identity (Hillen & Wright, 2015). We will look in detail at one aspect of this, namely radical water practice, drawn from the ethnographic research. Educationally the impact of these pathologies is devastating:

There is now a difference of 42.7 percentage points between the rates of looked after and non-looked after children achieving A*-C GCSEs in English and mathematics and also the same size gap for 5+ A*-C GCSEs and equivalents including English and mathematics.

Looked after children are twice as likely to be permanently excluded from school and three times more likely to have a fixed term exclusion than all other children

67.8 per cent of looked after children had a special educational need (SEN)

The most common type of SEN for looked after children, was “behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.”

There has been a general improvement in the percentage of looked after children with a SEN attaining most key stage 2 and key stage 4 measures

The percentage of looked after children with a SEN achieving key stage 2 and key stage 4 measures is much lower than looked after children without a SEN. For some measures the difference is greater than double.

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But entrenched poor outcomes for looked after children are far from confined to significantly depressed levels of educational attainment. For example, the Royal Colleges of Nursing, Paediatrics and Child Health, and General Practitioners in an inter-collegial publication (2012) noted:

Although looked after children and young people have many of the same health risks and problems as peers, the extent is often exacerbated due to their experiences of poverty, abuse and neglect. For example in respect of mental health and emotional well-being, looked after children show significantly higher rates of mental health disorders than others (45%, rising to 72% for those in residential care, compared to 10% of the general population aged 5 to 15)—conduct disorders being the most prevalent, with others having emotional disorders (anxiety and depression) or hyperactivity. Eleven percent are reported to be on the autism spectrum and many others have developmental problems. Two thirds of looked after children have been found to have at least one physical health complaint, such as speech and language problems, bedwetting, co-ordination difficulties and eye or sight problems. Generally the health and well-being of young people leaving care has consistently been found to be poorer than that of young people who have never been in care, with higher levels of teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse clearly evident (Royal College of Nursing and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2012).

Radical Water Practice

I would like now to turn explicitly to observations derived from an ethnographic study of looked after children, as mentioned earlier. The study spanned just over a year, and for the purposes of this paper will focus on only one child, Mel, (a pseudonym is being used here in compliance with the ethical protocols according to which this research was conducted) and her time within the reception class of her local mainstream primary school. The data was gathered by myself, as a researcher, working within Mel's classroom as a Teaching Assistant, once a week. Within the space of a year, Mel's "compulsion," or "obsession," or "fixation," as some of her behaviours were variously characterised, with water, had changed. Up until this point, what Mel did with water, her interest in it, her practice of being with water had precipitated her abjection from being within the regular classroom; but from the

age of around five this became an interest that could be accommodated, as being within a part of a regular classroom. Admittedly this place of accommodation was only just within the margins of a regular classroom; but still, it was somewhere, some space, that could be included.

Being included, and an identity that can take place, as has already been discussed, is an empirically essential prerequisite to the possibility of any sustained and hospitable experience. Prior to this, Mel's way of experiencing water had the effect of removing her, taking her away from the behaviours, meanings and reactions that could be tolerated as being part of a regular classroom. It is easier to understand why this was so by looking at a brief list of some of Mel's previous water practices. Mel would: stand in a pan in the girls' toilets whilst flushing the cistern over and over again, so that water cascaded down her lower body and onto the floor; switch on taps so that water overflowed basins; pour water over and across herself; transfer water in various quantities from one place to another, and sometimes more importantly transfer it to places where water was not supposed to be.

All of these practices, based around water, required Mel, either: to make a bolt for some region of the classroom that was not effectively policed; or, more surreptitiously to absent herself from an area of detection. If she was going to maintain her water focussed activity, which she was described as being "compulsive" about, or "obsessed" with, or "fixated" on, then these were the only alternatives available. It is interesting to describe the terrain that this logic of radical water practice mapped out in the classroom within which Mel was situated. It was a terrain composed of only the most meagre of possibilities for being. These slenderest of chances, to be in this way, existed only in the least well policed areas of the classroom; and these were barely spaces at all; certainly they were not spaces in themselves, since they were at best relational, like the gap between an incompletely drawn curtain and an open cupboard door; and were therefore also dependent upon perspective, such as the direction in which a teacher was gazing, so that in their nature they were thoroughly transitory; thus their being hung upon a brief concatenation of circumstances, momentary events that obscured the presence of a body, which, in snatched seconds and at most minutes, could not be seen, and so briefly allowed Mel's radical water practice to be.

It was as if there were two competing horizons of being; horizons of possibility that were very real, but had to be brought into existence through some form of activity, a process which it is now common to call a practice, and to describe the someone or something involved in this as a practitioner. In one sense, then, it would seem that the classroom represented two potentialities, two mutually

exclusive ways of being, neither of which could be there, let alone be sustained for any period of time on their own.

The horizon of being that supported Mel's radical water practice to be realized required chance to bring into play collisions of arrays of circumstances, a teacher's attention distracted through a question spoken by another child, a curtain drawn in happenstance conspiracy with a partially closed door, providing the cover needed to run across and secretly turn on a tap; there being precisely no metaphysical guarantee to either the regular order of the classroom, nor even of success for Mel in her demonstration that this very same classroom order could not be so metaphysically guaranteed. Was Mel able to capitalise on the opportunity of secretly turning on of that tap?, would it lead to the subsequent flooding of a corner of the classroom?, and to that end, might the curtain remain drawn and the door open long enough?, could the teacher be distracted sufficiently?, was it possible for Mel to manage this whole ensemble discretely enough...? Even linguistically, as reflected for example by the modal verbs, "could," "would," "might," and in the conditional sense of the tenses, including, "was it possible for Mel to manage this whole ensemble discretely enough...?," the scene is represented as one of emerging and receding possibilities that open up at various sites within the field of the classroom.

This occurs, of course, from Mel's perspective vis a vis the realization of her water practice; which is to say, that from the place of Mel's gaze—which cannot remain the same, nor be static and so must alter—every now and then, there is perceived somewhere along the wall of regular classroom practice a potential breach; a potential breach that is contingent upon opportunities delivered by chance; that may or may not be exploitable; and therefore that may or may not serve as a temporary platform upon which to stage a flood, or fountain, or water fall, or shower. Though when such a staging is successfully realized, it has the effect of displacing, even though relatively briefly, the regular practice of being in the classroom, which has to stop, in order for Mel's radical water practice to be. Quite literally what appeared to be happening was that in order for Mel's being to be staged, which occurred through her water practice, the regular classroom had to be disordered, displaced, made somewhere other. But then, quite quickly, this staging of being Mel, would be dismantled, the temporary breach in the wall of regular classroom order would be sealed over, and the terrain, upon which the radical expression of Mel's being was based, would be removed. Nevertheless, what each staging of being Mel through her radical water practice demonstrated, with a salience that was deadly regardless of its brevity, was that the regular order of the classroom was not a metaphysical given.

Any metaphysical truth is such because it has to be such, and can therefore be no other. From time to time Mel was very literally told to think directly, without distraction, about the importance of acting as if the regular order of the classroom were a metaphysical truth, and that there could be no other form of being within that space. This happened when Mel was sent to the thinking cushion, where she was dispatched to think about how she had made the wrong choices, such as deciding to saturate soft toys by putting them in the water bath or flooding the cloakroom, which would momentarily have disrupted or even stopped regular classroom activity. What Mel was repeatedly directed to contemplate whilst seated alone in this way was: that any register of the metaphysical given of this and therefore any regular classroom was palpably the school's desire that it be so, rather than it actually being so; that the course of this same desire could be interrupted, even if only momentarily, and when this happened, it exposed something of monumental importance; it exposed the irresolvable problem that the regular classroom was not what it desired itself to be, namely a metaphysical reality; and that this exposure, of itself to itself, that it was not itself, was massively troubling; because it meant that any certainty, based upon what should be most certain of all, namely itself, could always be deluded; thus no guarantee of Being existed, no metaphysical order was able to rescue this situation; and in reaction to which the regular classroom exacted a political reality in lieu of its metaphysical guarantee, that it would forge itself as resolutely as it could be from its own practice of regular classroom activity.

To understand why the implications of Mel's radical water practice were so devastating, it helps if we see that what she did to the regular classroom, is analogous to how Lacan's clinical and theoretical research exposes the implacable terror of the Real and the alarming fragility of the Symbolic Order. As Belau (2001) has noted, the accession of the subject, which in this case is Mel, to the Symbolic Order—represented here for Mel at school as being in the regular classroom—can be a deeply traumatic experience. As we have seen, being in the regular classroom is far from a simple matter of being physically embedded within the contours of some specific area called a school. Being in any such place, we have observed, is a practice, and not a metaphysical given. And because being is a practice we have also seen that when Mel does not engage in this way, she is dislocated from and dislocates regular classroom activity. Indeed, the activity of being in the regular classroom, and of being anywhere, requires more than a neutral engagement. Being in the regular classroom necessitates that its subjects' being is defined by the same consistency that makes it possible to identify that area as such; being in the regular classroom, in whatever form that takes, rich or poor, looked after by the state or by biological parents, is divided up, directed, modulated and is even forged, out of the way that the regular classroom organizes the being of its subjects.

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What Mel's radical water practice illustrates is that: being in a particular place means that you become by making up a contour of that same region, and that without such contours, the specific being in some place that you form as an individual, would not be realized. The example of "phonics," which I shall shortly come to, rehearses very deliberately every day the same ontological principle. This is the principle of being as being staged, rather than being as being always already there. And yet, for this staging of being to have any meaning, what is not, and according to this same logic, could not possibly ever be staged is its very "stagedness."

Any disclosure that whatever was specifically being presented was not that being itself, but instead was radically differently never always already there, and could only ever be anywhere through the practice of being presented, would mortally contradict any particle of any such ontological plausibility. This would make even the fiction of being there prior to staging, an act of being that was from the moment of its very possibility unsustainable. Quite literally in its stead what must be staged is that being is always already there and therefore could not *be* staged. And in this "staging moment" of being, that this could *not* be staged is more than an injunction against the possibility that any being could be if staged; it is more generally a symptom of the desire to *be* independently, but also the systematic working out of this impossibility, which the injunction of *not* is simultaneously driven to silence.

We have already seen that Mel's radical water practice has challenged the injunction that protects the obviously staged nature of Being in the classroom; and that it has been through the process of this challenge that an alternative form of *being Mel* has intermittently emerged through the wall of symbolic classroom practice. This is because all ontological plausibility is dependent upon that same determination not to hear, not to see, not to acknowledge and thereby register the contingent nature of all identity. The same conditions that are therefore necessary to assert the *independent Being/being of Mel*, which have the effect of configuring her being outside established classroom practice also apply. And just to remind ourselves, when Mel forgets or does not comply with how this convention works, and by this means effectively disrupts the assumption of normal classroom ontology, she is sent to the thinking mat to contemplate the ramifications of this intolerable form of exposing its metaphysical fragility to the Real.

So how does phonics manage to reinforce and suture its participants to the Symbolic Order of classroom ontology, and shape the definition of those participants into the contours of that space, so that they are integral to its being there, and essentially belong in that place?

Phonics, Identity, Belonging

Much attention has been paid to the issue of phonics in classrooms, but virtually entirely from the perspective of it being or not being an essential aspect of English literacy that must be acquired as a normal part of one's understanding of the world, if children are to become literate. The driving motivation behind this compulsory practice in state schools is to establish a national identity with respect to the standardized achievement of literacy in England. It is perhaps more obvious at this scale that all projects that express identity are political projects, in as much as they assert what or who belongs according to specific criteria that are invested with some property that is supposed to represent authenticity and belonging, or otherwise impropriety and exile.

There are a number of areas of contention that emerge from this sort of perspective about "phonics," which tend to appear to be empirical in their nature. For example: Are the grapheme and phoneme relations that phonics describe accurate? Do children naturally acquire competence in language and literacy according to the highly prescriptive order of acquisition that phonics maintains? Is the evidence about rates of literacy learning demonstrably improved using phonics rather than any other method? Does the prescriptive structure of phonics constrict understanding, learning and teaching to a brief set of instrumental techniques that limit creative thought, independence and engagement with reading and education generally?

Whilst these are obviously interesting questions, mostly because of what they indicate about assumptions of how people understand and are oriented towards the world that they encounter; even before they have been answered, if indeed any empirically plausible answers are at all possible, all of these questions take as their fundamentally credible and fascinating assumption that it is technical expertise or even exposure to a certain kind of correct analysis, that will lead to the development of literacy because of its obvious relevance as a defining feature of belonging to the educated state of the nation. This last point is very far from an exaggeration: it is the motivating reason for phonics.

Phonics is thus the inclusive medium by which the British government seeks to make every child by this practice belong as an integral part of the nation in the form of its continuous learning community; and this desire is managed through the state's compulsion to make all state educated children perform the right physical action with their body, to accompany their utterance of the correct sound, with this articulation demanded by every child on their visual receipt of the corresponding letter shapes. Whilst, for the most part, extraordinarily efficient, in terms of performing being a part of this community, this determination to perform belonging does come at a brutal cost. It is, of course, a metaphysical cost. Moreover, it

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necessitates assumption and invasion; and then the persistent vigilance of guarding, and knowing as a possibility, which is all the more disturbing, that no metaphysical being is possible. And why?

Well, first of all, let us try to rehearse here, however imperfectly, how phonics is routinely practiced. Where and when phonics happens, how it is situated, is very significant; and for Mel it is situated thus, between “carpet time” and assembly, to maximum affect. When children first arrive at school, from around eight forty-five in the morning, accompanied by parents or older siblings, they begin “free play.” Free play as a child involves taking part, with other people or on you own, in either one or more of the following types of options of being: standing, leaning or even sitting about, apparently dazed whilst the rest of the world zips around your relatively inert presence; playing with other children, usually by employing equipment of some kind, such as a hoop, sand, or some educational resource, but always inevitably in the space provided by the school which shapes what being is possible; participating in a more obvious engagement with traditional if not stereotypical school activities, such as looking at books, constructing things with physical materials, and creating a visible impression of something that is represented by drawing, writing or colouring.

Free play therefore functions as an introduction to the Symbolic Order of the school, during which the threshold is crossed to the more formal world of cultural, social, intellectual and economic identity where this is all quite literally performed or played out. There are symbolic and practical markers indicating the manageable nature of this transition which help to define the ontological shape of free play; and these include: parents and older siblings milling around in the classroom area, saying goodbye (thus signalling the gentle affirmation of the immanent termination of the world oriented towards my being, and the opening up of the horizon of the external world which manifests the requirement of an impersonal being and the practice of its formal presence, for example by sitting up straight, listening properly, not speaking out of turn, keeping your hands and feet to yourself and a thousand other injunctions and conjunctions that are overtly registered in wall displays, and notices written on boards, or are manifested by being into verse in order to be chanted, overt markers and covert markers that exist in all sorts of learned behaviours, they all invade, shape and define your being, which they incant, suture and articulate in the Symbolic Order); mums and dads, and brothers and sisters sitting with or bending over this vulnerable extension of who they are, assisting in some way, by undoing the zip or buttons on a coat, finding a note in a book-bag that has to be passed to the teacher (confirming that this movement from the practice of personal to impersonal being is acknowledged and anticipated by the bulwarks of your personal being); and more fundamentally by the nature of the activities that

free play generates and supports (which are not overtly directed by “staff,” the alien representatives of your impersonal being, unlike the activities that will soon follow until you are allowed to return to the world of personal being).

These and other markers acknowledge and so legitimate what then seems to be the compulsion to be part of an inexorable movement along the road to the world of the impersonal Symbolic Order; they manage this locomotion; they allow these and other symbols of personal being to be brought right up to the brink of impersonal being, which, because of this gesture towards their illusory accommodation, offer some reassurance, just prior to crossing that decisive threshold: this is reassurance brought about by the assumption of common purpose.

That accommodation of personal being is a reality after free play is an illusion is remorselessly demonstrated throughout the day, with toys that have been taken across this line from home being confiscated and suspended out of bounds in limbo, in net bags that allow the contraband to be seen in plain view but hang high out of reach, until the end of the day when the impersonal Symbolic Order temporarily withdraws. But there are other persistent demonstrations that personal being is outlawed, is outcast, such as the injunction against wearing personal clothing with the compulsion of a school uniform; the determination of the day’s timetable with its consequent evocation of its subjects’ sentimental and intellectual concerns and identities, which simultaneously provokes its disciplinary abjection of personal being from the presence of the school and classroom, in a thousand details that define legitimate being, such as not running along the corridors, eating what, when and how as directed, even thinking is prescribed so that it becomes a performative activity that privileges correct orientation towards the impersonal order of being, since thought should be on task, useful and communicated in the proper way through the raising of a hand and then waiting to receive direction as to whether to articulate any thoughts in the specified manner or as to remain silent.

Carpet time follows free play, and is symbolically the moment when all representations of personal being, such as parents and siblings, certain kinds of conversation, toys and other artefacts, redolent of the symbolic home and the internality of personhood, are removed from the affective presence of the classroom; even coats that once bore the imprint of “home” are now rebranded as “outdoor wear” with their relocation to a specific area of the school that emphasises their functional role within the impersonal Symbolic Order of the institution, where they are put on named pegs in orderly rank outside the classroom, to maximise the efficiency of the school educational process in all of its integrated manifestations, including being quickly able to locate and put on in a safe place coats, hats, scarves, gloves when the weather makes this appropriate.

How can it be?

Carpet time affirms the collective impersonal identity of each of the participants, adults and children alike, though clearly they fulfil different roles within the same essential process. The teacher sits on a low comfortable chair, the kind that you see in the reception areas of hotels, garages, businesses; it is obviously from an office catalogue of some kind, with its tubular steel frame and chunky, rough wool-style oatmeal upholstery, which murmurs, but quite clearly enough, the message that the corporation to which it belongs is able to differentiate between and then include two levels of being which it has managed to integrate to the same common impersonal purpose, and these two levels of being are: being as it is practiced by the ordinary, functional equipment (such as the very durable and purpose manufactured small plastic seat and metal frame chairs that feel common to every state primary classroom in England) that symbolises nothing more beyond that which is incidental to this form of being; but then they also practice a less obviously industrial but no less instrumental form of ontology which is still clearly distinct from that assumed in the practice of the personal Symbolic Order, but nevertheless beckons towards a corporate version of personal ontology, a mime of the ontology that the individual recognizes as indicating this possibility, of something private, mitigating, self-interested; though this is quite obviously the institution's version of personhood and the individualism that it evokes, since it simply functions to make the institution more effective according to whatever criteria have been ascribed to it.

But nevertheless, even recognising this last fact, means that the individual subject, who has recognised it, also must recognise as a precondition of any such understanding, and thereby will be interested in, the division between what is marked here as the institution of the school and what is left over from this experience, the remainder, the personal that is not completely represented by this designation, which is the unintended and the detritus of impersonal Symbolic Order. So what the institution establishes by this and other means, and by abjecting or ignoring, which amounts to the same thing, the bits of unintended and detritus material in whatever form this might take, is an institutional personhood, which it installs and reaffirms as the individuals that make up its population of the school.

We can see evidence of this in almost all of the school's practices that focus on children as if they are individuals in their own right *but as* in relation to the school; as for example in daily assembly, where the school in various ways inscribes its values, such as its value for orderliness, with its lining up before arriving, and sitting in rows on arrival, and with its respect for all who accede to institutional personhood and form the learning community that the school represents, marked for instance by the response it engenders in all its individual participants collectively to morning salutations, which is simply one polite

manifestation of what is nothing less than the school's ubiquitous moral if not spiritual order; or in its practice of instructions, which is possible only because the school has managed to forge the institutional personhood of its individual participants as instructable beings, reaffirming this constantly, by for example the incessant encouragements to listen carefully, sit up properly, think creatively, respect other people's opinions, encouragements and directions which are all the time realised in the words spoken by the staff, and written on walls, are sung in classrooms, and are praised with stickers and stars displayed in books and on posters: they are inescapable.

And it is with this institutional personhood that children are expected to experience and be within the horizon of possibility offered by the school. The logic of this process is thoroughly inclusive, in a remarkably and frustratingly Hegelian sense, meaning that with respect to it, escape is politically impossible; so that even being that is judged by the institution to be a falling away from the being of institutional personhood is made evident by the school not of its own contingent rather than metaphysical reality; but the perceived degree by which insitutional personhood does not occur, instead becomes another instrumental feature for creating a hierarchy within which a register of being falls 'naturally' and urgently into place, with constant reference made to its lists of progression towards being a member that properly belongs to the institutional personhood of its individual participants, where institutional personhood is given meaning and so can be understood.

This institutional behaviour is essential, since it enables levels of non-compliance with being in this way to be ordered and addressed as another manifestation of the school's determinedly inclusive property of its ontological makeup. Again whilst this might seem to be an abstract expression of day-to-day experience, it is rendered real and pervasive by techniques so routine as to become the mundane and fundamental practices that define a state primary school. For example, there is an endless cycle of established and predictable public announcements, that take place in the school within their own routine theatrical context, such as during assembly or in registration, that reaffirm, by their declarations and markings of achievements and excellence, the consistent practice of the school's onto-epistemic identity.

They do this, of course, very logically if not altogether tautologically, by locating its highest virtues in the events that emerge from its routine and mundane existence. Thus there is an endless litany of "readers of the week," and "mathematicians of the week," declared to the school each Monday morning as it gathers collectively throughout the year; since in an almost Tibetan Buddhist manner, wherein if an elaborate cosmological map of the Tibetan universe is not

completed in sand, and then obliterated, and then the process repeated again, endlessly, the ontological order that the map represents would be undone and fall into chaos, so that an inextricable tie exists between the Buddhist practice of making the map and the ontological order that the map represents; so too, each Monday morning, with the announcements of “readers of the week” and “mathematicians of the week,” the same process of everyday practice defines the ground on which the school is established.

It is not enough that the practice occurs privately, personally, outside the impersonal determination of institutional personal being. It is not enough that in some personal space, usually described in terms of an interiority, outside institutional being, that practice might be registered and become meaningful in some way that is entirely idiosyncratic according to the dimensions and contours of what just such a space, an “interiority,” for the school might be. This is almost entirely without educational institutional significance. This is not to say of course, that, for example, all mathematics that occurs with respect to a child who attends a school is useless if that mathematics does not more or less directly emanate from or report back to that school: there may be many diverse, important mathematical qualities that are explored and developed alternatively. But this is a different kind of usefulness. All that matters to the school is that its subjects institutionally comply with its educational regime.

The school must guarantee that no other form of being is tolerated, as far as the onto-epistemic identity of the school is concerned, given the school’s overwhelming desire that this identity *be* metaphysical, even though any such identity is demonstrably contingent upon the public affirmation of what it is. What this amounts to is very unlike the public message that the school celebrates, of inclusion, so that even mention of exclusionary possibility as part of the state school’s work is prohibited. Prohibition, briefly, is publicly, however, very effectively mandated; but only on the grounds that certain forms of ontology exclude or compromise some aspect or other of the inclusive practices and beliefs that the school maintains: certain kinds of Islam for example are famously impermissible in the UK in state schools on these grounds. It is worth mentioning this example in particular, because state education, amongst other things, is that for which the government of Britain exists, in a ferociously competitive form, only in order to maintain and develop as a practice that which accords with its own imaginary identity.

It is this connection, played out in a specific way here, but generally applicable in all other contexts, of imaginary identity realised through institutional practice (where institutional practice includes not only the way that schools work, but also the institutional practices that articulate individual responses to almost anything

imaginable, such as not being able to acquire food, or the declaration of the total shopping bill by a checkout operator in a supermarket: almost nothing escapes), that makes all identity political.

But what has this to do with events in school, such as “mathematician of the week” and “reader of the week”? The philosophical role of truth and the logical notion of tautology are central to understanding what happens and what is of importance here. These are not simply abstract ideas; they are mechanisms, or systems, or processes, or whatever you want to call them, that truth and tautology, as structuring affects, have on how we are able to understand the world around us; they shape the contours that make up that world and us as individuals, they forge the geography by which how we also fit into that landscape and—with some of us almost seamlessly and continuously, but others more awkwardly, more discontinuously—become a part of its topography; so that in every practical and theoretical aspect of our being, they are inescapable and specific. And it would appear ludicrous, irrational, unreasonable, unaccountable, if this were not so: because the philosophical role of truth, and the logical notion of tautology, are the mechanisms, or systems, or processes, or whatever you want to call them, by which reason and meaning are able to make their appearance as being—and not as a practice—metaphysically within the world.

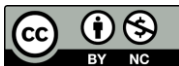
That this form of being is forged, and that it can be undone, is not in question. Nor is it in doubt that, ontologically, this is the only game in town. The real questions, the political questions, are what we do to make this a meaningful accommodation, for those whose experiences tell them otherwise; which is not an inconsiderable achievement, as, for example, occurred for Mel, as I have tried to indicate, above.

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