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Cleaning up the Mess and Messing up the Clean: A Response to ‘Happiness Lessons in Schools’

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The fact that certain educators and psychologists (assuming that there is any difference between the two) believe that happiness lessons are a good idea is simultaneously bizarre whilst being utterly in keeping with current orthodoxies. I make this claim, because during my experience as an English teacher, we were pretty much told that every lesson ought to be a happiness lesson. By this, I mean that every lesson ought to be fast paced (preventing boredom), that it should accommodate different kinds of learner kinaesthetic, auditory and visual (those students with ants in their pants will get to shake off those ants). All areas being taught should be scaffolded so that students would feel comfortable with what they were learning in order that emotional scarring would not result from their confusion and they could learn more effectively. If possible learning should be like a game, in fact turning certain areas into games is widely held to be good practice—it is important that learning should never be a slow, difficult or onerous activity. Students should also be rewarded whenever possible (in the case of disaffected students you might reward them for not doing certain things—swearing, beating each other up etc.). Ultimately if an inspector came to watch your lesson she would hope to see most if not all of these things. Indeed, not only would the inspector not want to see mayhem within the classroom, rows of quiet attentive children would be almost as unacceptable—the students should be champing at the bit paralytic with excitement at the thought of being able to learn kinaesthetically or answer questions in brief speedy question and answer sessions.

With all this in mind it seems slightly bizarre that anybody would want to introduce happiness lessons, given the fact that every lesson is supposed to promote happiness anyway. Of course happiness lessons are in keeping with this idea as they perhaps represent its intensification and thematisation. The kind of happiness at stake here seems quite in keeping with the vision of happiness that Judith Suissa’s paper is critical of, and I believe has similar roots in positive psychology (Suissa, 2010). Here happiness is viewed as ‘feeling good’. This can be empirically verified by watching the children’s pleasure in learning and by asking them if they’re enjoying themselves. There is a whole body of material on student voice that can supposedly verify all these things. As Suissa notes in her paper, this is an extremely limited conception of happiness—the cursory nods within positive psychology to philosophical thought about happiness fail to account for the ethical/philosophical dimension of that thought and therefore those areas pertaining to happiness that cannot be measured empirically.

Though I find myself in agreement with much of what Suissa has to say in her critique of positive psychology I find that her account is perhaps simultaneously too close to and too distant from that psychology. I want to argue that this simultaneous closeness and difference belongs to the fact that both Suissa’s paper and the positive

psychologists see education as inextricably bound up with the individual or the ‘self’, though their visions of that self are quite different. Also, are there ways in which both Suissa and the positive psychology approach are ahistorical that is to their detriment? Finally, I wish to suggest that both approaches are ultimately about mastery, although in Suissa’s case this is a far more complex and appropriately troubled issue.

Firstly, it seems that much of Suissa’s critique of positive psychology relies on the difference between the thin psychologists version of the self and the philosopher’s or novelist’s ‘thick’ ‘textured’ self. The positive psychologist’s self is thin in the sense that the self is either a happy or unhappy organism that possesses skills that are somehow not integral to the self, but something that the self applies. In contrast Suissa’s thick textured self admits all those difficult complicated areas of the lived life that are related to issues of ethical normativity—I am what I come to value and how I see the world, I am not simply some object that feels this way or that. This explains Suissa’s question: ‘Yet in what sense can forming and sustaining “productive relationships” or “caring for others” be described as skills?’ Although I agree with Suissa that this seems terribly cold, the question should perhaps not only consider the ‘sense’ that allows us to describe these things as skills, but also the historical background that provides this sense. In *The Postmodern Condition* (written in 1979) Lyotard maintains that the grand Enlightenment narratives of truth and justice have been superseded by the logic of performativity, in which everything becomes measurable in accordance with how effective or ineffective it is (Lyotard, 1984). Consequently, the tendency within educational studies to measure and test everything (to see if it works) ultimately makes sense. It equally makes sense to think of sustaining productive relationships in terms of skills—the bookshelves are full of manuals telling you how to do just that—there is nothing surprising about this—it is an historical phenomenon. Of course, it is perhaps philosophy’s job to throw light on the thinness of this particular way of seeing the world. Indeed, I agree with Suissa’s feelings of depression at the notion espoused by some psychologists that we should create a more equal society because this will make us feel better, but the kind of thoroughly postmodern way of viewing the world that it reflects unfortunately does make sense. Of course it also refuses its own historicity—the idea that a more just society makes us feel better is given a universal slant. So my question here has to do with how far these appeals to the self are ahistorical.

There is another kind of universality present in Suissa’s work and is perhaps what gives rise to her incredulity towards the claims discussed above. In *Untimely Meditations* Nietzsche writes: ‘I enquire now as to the genesis of a philologist and assert the following’:

- I. A young man cannot possibly know what Greeks and Romans are.
- II. He does not know whether he is suited for finding out about them.

Let us consider the first point. A young man cannot possibly know what Greeks and Romans are because the kind of existence that they represent is in so many respects alien to us, yet one feels that for Suissa, Aristotle and Anna Karenina are being read as though they were our contemporaries. This is not to say that Aristotle is irrelevant, but no text can give us the texture of his life, however much we might wish it were otherwise. Anna Karenina is (obviously?) a fictional character, and Suissa’s reading of Tolstoy is at times both moving and powerfully argued, though as I intend to show,

it may open doors to rooms that she or indeed we may not be suited to enter. In the meantime, it is necessary to say a bit more about this ahistorical approach to ethics and individuality that Suissa presents in her approach to literature. Since Tolstoy we have seen the dismantling of the omniscient narrator, empty existential figures such as Camus' outsider, the fractured world displayed in the fragments of T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land*, the confusion of Pynchon's hyperreal nightmarish worlds. The point here is not so much that the individual has become more complicated (messy?) as much as the ways of viewing and representing subjectivity have become so. Once acquainted with these forms of literary representation that have their philosophical/literary counterparts (the distinction between literature and philosophy has undergone deconstruction in some quarters) in the work of Levinas, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze and many others it is difficult to see the individual in terms of completeness. However, for Suissa, the richly textured life is the 'complete' life. The 19th century realist novel gives voice to this impression of completeness. There is coherence to Tolstoy's characters however troubled they may be that allows us to get a grip on what's going on with them. They seem knowable to us because we are told what they are thinking. They are represented as 'complete' despite their possibly irrational messy behaviour. It is perhaps the continuing popularity of the realist novel, with its conservative indifference to groundbreaking shifts in the arts and philosophy that makes 19th century Russia and the heroes and heroines of its literature appear so knowable, so 'complete' to us now. This is perhaps a trick of history for they are not. I make these points in partial defence of the psychologists who Suissa feels ought to know more about Greek thought and the critiques of utilitarianism. Though I am not suggesting that she embrace the permutations of thought regarding subjectivity handled by the philosophers mentioned above, those permutations should perhaps be addressed.

As already mentioned, Suissa's 'thick' individual is the 'complete' individual, but there seem to be certain tensions running through her paper as to what this amounts to. This is due, I think, to both her philosophical and literary choices and the particular aesthetics or phrasing of the piece. Let us begin with the kind of individual that emerges through the writing and its literary/philosophical nature. In certain respects Suissa's individual looks rather like a secularised version of Kierkegaard's authentic self—the one who pursues what matters to him/her rather than going after the meaning of life through some grand philosophical enterprise. However, at the same time, there are references to ethical normativity and it's asserted quite reasonably that 'autonomy' is an important educational aim, yet 'autonomy' implies taking a distance from one's life and immediate concerns. By the same token, stylistically, Suissa's writing often embodies the measured analytic tone of the liberal philosophical tradition as she shows up the inconsistencies in the positive psychologists' arguments. This is also present in the discussion of Tolstoy, although in these sections, there is a certain discursive loosening up. So for example, the analytic discourse is in evidence when Suissa approaches Anna Karenina's life as a 'thought experiment' but loosens when she uses terms such as 'texture'. I am therefore suggesting that there are philosophical/aesthetic tensions in Suissa's writing.

In the messier (to my mind the most interesting sections of Suissa's paper) Richard Smith's work on philosophy, literature and education makes an appearance. However, it seems that whereas what Suissa does with literature sometimes comes close to what Smith is about there are also important differences. On occasions, Suissa treats literature as a resource—an object that shows us 'complete' lives that we can use to help us be better (happier?) people. In contrast, this distinction between philosophy and literature is not so clearly drawn in Smith's account—philosophy is

literary—Plato’s dialogues are simultaneously drama and argument and the two aspects cannot be separated. By the same token, there is an historical dimension that is often humorously dealt with in Smith’s work. When for example he asks if Darcy from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* should be thought of as a candidate for self-esteem training we get the full flavour of an historical gap directing us to a time in which this question could not possibly make sense. We might also note that Smith’s style is generally unapologetically literary, words are allowed to dance. There is a lightness of touch. These are not incidental factors that make the work more interesting to read but central components in a philosophical/literary vision. Ultimately what I am suggesting is that there is a Dionysian dimension to Smith’s writing. Nietzsche often discussed the relationship between the Greek Gods Apollo and Dionysos, Apollo being representative of pure form, stillness, timelessness and perfect order, Dionysos, becoming and destruction. Let us return briefly to the second part of the Nietzsche quote in which a young man may not know if he is suited to finding out about the Greeks and Romans. Nietzsche is surely thinking here of the Dionysiac ritual in which people would enter into a trance, lose themselves in the dangerous sensual pleasures of the dance, become unhinged forfeit control and become animal, become intense. The experience of the Dionysian need not take this form—in fact it may take all manner of forms (which will in some way relate to our historical moment). One such form would involve reading. We often talk of losing ourselves in a book and losing oneself is integral to the Dionysian experience that is also an educational experience. Here education is not the education of the individual (for Suissa any form of education is the education of the individual) but accompanies the loss of individuality as we become intense in our reading. Of course in reading, Apollonian reason does not disappear from the scene, we interpret the words just as we get lost in them. There is a fusion of thought and feeling. If we think of literature in this way it does not provide us with ‘thought experiments’. To experiment one must be outside, one must be a subject involved in an objective activity.

The positive psychologists’ focus on ‘feeling’ perhaps touches on some element of the Dionysian, but then there is a need to gain scientific mastery over ‘feeling’, measure it, imprison it and not allow it to go outside and dance. In contrast, a cold analytic philosophical approach to happiness will throw feeling aside in favour of thick conceptual arguments. I do not think that Suissa embraces this second approach whole-heartedly—the scent of existentialism about her article takes her away from this. By the same token, particularly towards the end of her piece, Suissa’s writing promises to dance—the inclusion of the quotation about Levin has the promise of the dance about it. I am thinking here particularly of this passage: ‘When Levin thought about what he was and why he lived, he could find no answer and was driven to despair: but when he left off asking himself those questions he seemed to know what he was and why he lived, so he acted unfalteringly and definitely...’. This description of Levin’s experience seems to have a Dionysian quality to it whereby he stops analysing his life in a detached fashion and begins to live intensely. There is a darkness surrounding his experience—the light of reason is no good to him. Levin does not understand how he is able to go on living but does so anyway. It is interesting that following the above quotation, Suissa asks a number of questions that patently cannot be answered—was it that Levin had not learnt the right happiness skills, would an informed use of CBT helped him out? Despite the historical implausibility of these questions (from the earnest tone I get no sense that the Darcy joke is in operation here) they gesture towards the dance as questioning is no longer appropriate. To get Levin at all we must go on the intense journey with him without

asking why. Of course, within the constraints of the realist novel, Tolstoy has already done a lot of the work for us.

Finally, it should be noted that extended periods of reading are not encouraged in English lessons anymore. It apparently generates unhappiness. Make of that what you will.

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