

Beyond virtue and vice: A return to uncertainty

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Abstract

Education is astonishingly simple. We have all been through it, whether as children or later in life—indeed, many of us are still going through it in some form or other; we all know what works; and we are all committed to realising its individual and social potential. Such a view of the matter might dispense with the need for philosophy of education altogether as the problems of education are seen as little more than puzzles to be solved. We know (or think that we know) what we want to achieve, the challenge is how to do so most efficiently. If only the virtues of education were that perspicuous, that simple. If only the vices were so easily identified and expunged. It turns out that education is astonishingly complex. The following chapters aspire to re-introduce a certain complexity that abstains from an all-too-easy understanding. They seek not to offer solutions, but complications, disruptions and dissensions. The authors assume positions against the usual associations and evaluations regarding certain words and phrases—a revaluation that turns the virtues to vices and the vices to virtues.

KEYWORDS

ethics, Nietzsche, populism, transvaluation, Utopia

It is quite an achievement to stay cheerful in the middle of a depressing business, one that has more than the usual number of responsibilities: but what could be more important than cheerfulness? Nothing gets done without a dose of high spirits. The only proof of strength is an excess of strength.—A *revaluation of all values*: this question mark is so dark and so huge that it casts shadows over anyone who puts

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it forward—this sort of destiny of a task forces him to keep running out into the sunlight to shake off a seriousness that has become heavy, all too heavy. (Nietzsche, 2005, p. 155)

Education is astonishingly simple. We have all been through it, whether as children or later in life—indeed, many of us are still going through it in some form or other; we all know what works; and we are all committed to realising its individual and social potential. Such a view of the matter might dispense with the need for philosophy of education altogether as the problems of education are seen as little more than puzzles to be solved. We know (or think that we know) what we want to achieve, the challenge is how to do so most efficiently. If only the virtues of education were that perspicuous, that simple. If only the vices were so easily identified and expunged. It turns out that education is astonishingly complex.

Still, hardly any other subject draws quite the same degree of public scrutiny as education, in the media, the private and the political sphere. Specific preferences with regard to education are an important part of the identity not only of individuals but also of social groups: being conservative, liberal or left-wing is related to what kind of education one would advocate. It, therefore, does not come as a surprise when much of the political agenda of any existing political party concerns itself with education, its forms, purposes, organisational structures and finances.

Of course, the positioning of education as of the utmost importance is not new. It is rooted in a long tradition of utopian thinking that came to see in education the means to salvation. Discussions of education have been an integral part of all utopian thinking since the 16th century (which drew on Plato and his model states presented in *The Republic* and *The Laws*). Education here became a primary concern, and in the form of a centrally organised formal education it was thought to pave the road for the development and progress of humanity into a bright future. Unable to resist this call, pedagogues and educators willingly accepted the challenge and the associated self-image. It was only in the early 20th century that this exaggerated view of the capacity of education and the attendant grandiose self-image of the pedagogues and educators came into question. Critical (or ‘dissenting’) voices such as Siegfried Bernfeld remained largely unheard, and only with the rise of Critical Pedagogy and the deschooling movement was formal education criticised to greater public effect.

Although criticised, formal education is still regarded by many as the key to individual and social salvation, with a shift to a predominantly economic vocabulary to realise it. Although this could be viewed as a rationalist corruption of Christian hope, it would be hard to deny the more or less religious or spiritual foundations of modern educational discourse, with notions like attainment and achievement being more associated with the economic success and prosperity of the individual and the society as a whole. But that is not the only characteristic of modern educational discourses. The critique of education and educators was at least successful enough to question the necessity of professional expertise in order to take part in educational debates. After all, education is an experience common to us all, one that leads to the impression that we are all qualified to make observations about what is bad and how to make it better. Thus, a feeling of genuine and general competence fuels all those discussions: René Descartes was right in stating that common sense is the most fairly distributed thing on earth—at least when it comes to education, as everybody seems to feel called, and appropriately equipped, to take part in the debates about education. That does not come without certain effects.

The blithe assumption of general competence and the position of education in political discourses and debates have led to a gradual erosion of meaning: Shallow phrases, hollow proclamations and empty vessels confound serious educational debate. Appeals to raising standards, improving attainment, supporting progression, engagement, inclusion and fulfilment are repeatedly recited as mantras in papers, documents, guidelines and frameworks—whether they be part of policy consultations, newspaper, TV and social media debates or wider public discussions. The imperatives to provide easy solutions in minimal time have led to simplifications with regard to educational cause–effect structures. This educational populism has also led to an erosion of the consciousness of education as an adventure that engages us throughout our lives, one that having no guaranteed outcome or end is not without risk.

The flattening and sanitising of educational discourses into pious aspirations and ardent debates provoke reflexive and repetitive responses—with the same hackneyed associations. Politicians repeatedly and earnestly pronounce their

half-understood phrases, and educators and teachers absorb those notions into their vocabulary because they are part of the official discourse, their livelihoods depending upon effectively restating or enacting those sincere pronouncements. In the end, everybody keeps repeating the same hollow phrases to express the same all-too-simple observations about instant educational causalities and the simple solutions for complex problems those causalities seem to make possible.

The diagnosis, then, is that this flattened discourse is itself anti-educational: it is hostile to educational life, valuing appearance over reality and ignorance over knowledge. This diagnosis demands nothing less than an educational trans- or revaluation. The following chapters aspire to re-introduce a certain complexity that abstains from an all-too-easy understanding. They seek not to offer solutions, but complications, disruptions and dissensions. The authors assume positions against the usual associations and evaluations regarding certain words and phrases, employing polemics and perhaps exaggerated argumentation to revalue the educational values that are too readily accepted by those involved in the public educational discourse—a revaluation that turns the virtues to vices and the vices to virtues. In what perhaps looks like a provocation, the revaluation endeavours to open up a space of productive uncertainty—a space in which things are less clear-cut, less obvious and less natural. It is only in this realm of uncertainty where reflection can start anew and go beyond what is always already known; it is only here where criticality can be re-established and the astonishing complexity of education be appreciated again. Or, to use another word of Nietzsche: '[O]ne must still have chaos in oneself in order to give birth to a dancing star' (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 9).

Rachel Wahl begins our revaluations of apparent virtues by looking at the concept of agency. Although agency is typically viewed as an unquestioned good, there is, argues Wahl, a darker side. Alongside the call to agency is the call to responsibility: being able to contribute brings an expectation to do so. Suddenly a capacity becomes a burden, a power becomes a load. Drawing on dialogues between politically opposed American university students in the months following the 2017 inauguration of Donald Trump, the paper queries agency by reframing it in terms of the patient receptivity of one who listens and whose expectations for their own agency are modified by an encounter with another.

Sebastian Engelmann explores our perennial passion for 'alternative' education. Any dissatisfaction derived from mainstream educational arrangements and systems can be called into question by evoking something different, 'alternative'. The problem is, of course, that every alternative is defined in relation to a putative mainstream. Engelmann offers what he calls a 'hagiographic history of alternative education', not to persuade us to affirm allegiance to alterity but to show how that history fails to take account of its own political framing. Contemporary thinking on the category reinforces the observation that what is overlooked is how alternatives are framed. The under-reporting of the failures of alternative education offers an illuminating counter to the assumption that 'alternative' means better.

Emma Williams invites us to look again at the often uncritically accepted idea that balance is a good state to be in. In discussing the consequences an overly balanced life could have for oneself, and the costs the demands for balance could incur for others, Williams not only reconnects with older discussions on the necessity of ecstasis and imbalance to move forward, to create and to live, but also engages with educational practices and the ways in which they present or represent ideas around balance or imbalance—with possibly detrimental consequences. As will be demonstrated, questions of balance are a matter of life and death.

Norm Friesen and Tobias Hölterhof take on the concept of fulfilment by exploring the terrain of humanistic and developmental psychology in which self-fulfilment is the promise of a future self-actualised identity. Yet the path to this fully realised identity is beset with uncertainty, disorientation and even crisis. Rather than interpret the complex and uncertain course to self-fulfilment as something problematic, the dark journey into the underworld seems to be integral. Drawing on Otto Bollnow's existentialist theory of education, for whom moments of uncertainty, disorientation and above all of crisis were the foundation of educational experience in human existence, they offer a positive reading of this darker path to the self.

Naomi Hodgson addresses the different ways 'happiness' has been interpreted and promoted, focusing on the various conditions that have contributed to what she terms the 'happiness turn' in positive psychology, economics and education. Placing happiness high on the educational agenda by offering lessons in happiness or well-being could serve different interests, interests that do not necessarily align with the good of the student. Work in educational philosophy draws attention to what is left out of the picture by psychological conceptions of happiness and its measurement. Hodgson's aim is not to counter reductive notions of happiness by offering 'richer' philosophical accounts, but to illustrate how profoundly educational our affective lives are in order that we may understand better the conditions, scope and limits of human happiness.

Karsten Kenklies initiates reflections on apparent educational vices by analysing the way in which alienation plays a fundamental role in all concepts and practices of transformative education. Against the often philosophical, theological, sociological or psychological conceptualisations of alienation as something that needs to be overcome, as one of the great sorrows of humankind, modern society or contemporary subjectivity, Kenklies invites us to view alienation from a genuinely pedagogical perspective. Such a reorientation of perspective allows us not only to realise how a fundamentally negative notion of alienation rests on metaphysical assumptions that are difficult to defend with modern arguments but also to begin to appreciate the fundamentally positive role alienation plays in all truly worthwhile educational endeavours.

Philip Tonner argues for a reevaluation of authority as an educational virtue, seeing it as a form of participatory guidance that is an aid to growth. Tonner argues that 'virtuous authority' is authority exercised from the point of view of 'a larger experience and a wider horizon'. If teachers' 'pedagogical imperative' is to bridge the gap between more developed forms of knowledge than their pupils currently possess, then their practice will necessarily involve authority. As a result, Tonner suggests authority should be repositioned as participatory, immanent and democratic. Authority practised as a form of participatory guidance, to pursue a Deweyan line of argument, can be 'an aid to freedom' and not freedom's enemy, and as such Tonner argues that authority, so revalued, ought to be cultivated in our educational thought and practice.

Emile Bojesen explores the ways in which ignorance can be thought of as a precondition for the transformative processes people undergo, sometimes willingly, sometimes less so. In linking the question of ignorance to problems around creativity, activity and passivity, and perceptivity, Bojesen opens up a conceptual horizon in which the fundamental question for the educational powers that shape us has to be asked anew. Interpreting the signs transmitted by Nietzsche, Lyotard and Stockhausen, the chapter raises awareness of the gap that accompanies all our perceptions of formation and transformation.

David Lewin gives attention to the seemingly age-old indoctrination debates. Rather than follow the usual pattern of seeking ever more cunning ways to distinguish education from indoctrination, Lewin argues that we can rehabilitate the notion of indoctrination precisely by seeing it as a form of education. Revisiting Ivan Snook's *Indoctrination and Education*, Lewin examines a number of candidates for indoctrination in order to show that, in each of Snook's cases, the pejorative label is not a good fit. He argues that much of what is framed as indoctrination turns out to be either impossible-implausible or necessary-inevitable; the fact that there is scarcely a gap between these extremes should, Lewin claims, give us pause to wonder whether the concept of indoctrination has any meaning beyond the policing of borders defended by contemporary liberalism.

Sam Rocha concludes the re-evaluation of apparent vices by reflecting on the fundamental importance of obedience. Taking the starting point from a discussion of Ernst Fromm's calls to disobedience, Rocha endeavours to unveil the appreciation and maybe even necessity of obedience that underlies all calls to disobedience. In discussing not only different forms of obedience such as political, moral, and pedagogical obedience but also—above all—existential obedience, it becomes more and more obvious that a sweeping vilification of obedience shows, at least to some degree, a lack of self-awareness. It is never really a question of whether or not we can, should or do obey, but more a question of the will and power that we ultimately do obey while being disobedient in the face of other attempts at coercion. And it emerges that this discussion is an appropriate conclusion to all our attempts to re-evaluate apparent virtues and vices

of education as it asks maybe the most fundamental question of all: the question of what ultimately drives us, of the will that moves us—and of the power that binds us.

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