

BOOK REVIEWS

The Cynical Educator

By Ansgar Allen

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When I was offered to review *The Cynical Educator*, I did not know what to expect. I'm familiar with the Cynics, and I know a certain amount about philosophy of education, but to consider both together seemed like a challenging task. Yet as soon as I opened the book I found myself completely at ease with the project. I work in academia and my partner is a soon-to-quit primary school teacher. I know how shit British education is from start to finish (and "shit" is something you will read a lot about in *The Cynical Educator*). The first pages of the book had me nodding in agreement with Allen's picture of contemporary education. The book opens with an announcement that education is dead—or, in fact, never truly existed. This provocation sets the tone for further reflections about us, the author and reader, and our roles as educators and academics. Already by the second page we are pushed to critically reject traditional interpretations of academic texts: "This book raises more problems than it answers"—a common refrain amongst authors. It defers to the reader in hope of better reception." (p.7) "This book provides no systematic answers; it makes no claim to be definitive"—the scholar's excuse for inaction." (p.7)

Encouraging us to relate to his text differently, Allen offers us an approach drawn from the Cynics, a "militant philosophy promoting change through personal discomfort" (p.3). This new way of engaging is achieved through provocation, through excitement, questioning the stifling rituals of educational practices, but also through a complete surrender of hope and self-importance.

Having issued this challenge, the book moves on to present its main argument—namely, that the value of education is assumed unquestioningly and universally as a "good," something to be desired and achieved by any means necessary. By inviting us to have a look at ourselves, Allen wants to provoke a change in the educational practices that we enact uncritically. The form of the book

is one way he achieves this. Organised in short separate sections—some of them almost aphorisms channelling Nietzsche—the book does not obviously structure its argument following usual academic practice. The central project of critiquing the Western educational system recurs in various manifestations, drawing on ideas from Foucault, Nietzsche, Diogenes and Camus. The three main topics Allen leads us through are critique of education as a false promise, education as reinforcing power structures, and education as a transcendent ideal.

The Cynical Educator traces something like a genealogy of Western education, unearthing its problems from Ancient Greece through to contemporary practices. Starting with Socrates as the paradigmatic educator, the second chapter discusses the ways Stoic, Epicurean, Sceptic, Platonic and Aristotelian traditions approached education differently (p.27), but failed to question the basic premise of separating life and the realm of ideas. This contributed to educational practices of life-denial and rejection of the material world. In Rome, on the other hand, philosopher educators acquired a new role. Since education was only available to the rich higher classes, educators had to become servants of power—critical, but only within acceptable limits, and justifying their own necessity. Discomfort became a major feature of education practice, its effectiveness judged on how unsettled it made the student. At the same time, however, never so unsettled as to prompt total rejection. As a result, self-discipline and moderation became end goals of educational practice. This type of teleology is further exacerbated in later Christian education, where the body-soul divide encouraged practices of salvation of the soul and discipline of the body. Allen discusses certain practices, such as baptism, in detail, clearly following Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power. Chapter four continues with the development of Christian pastoral power and practices of care of the "flock."

Allen is sceptical of the critical power of these "paths to salvation"—even the most radical ones can lose their transformative potential as they became co-opted by institutions.

Despite the focus on past education practices, Allen's genealogical approach means that though "[t]hese fragments may sound distant, [...] we inhabit their echo" (p.35). The rise of obligatory state education demonstrates the relevance of the historical context. Allen understands mass education (presumably including all levels of contemporary education) as damaging and unfair to both students and teachers because of its compulsory character and a constant pressure therein for "improvement," measured through arbitrary frameworks such as Ofsted and REF. At the core of this problem is that people are encouraged to believe in education as an inherent good in itself, even when government policies and managerial meddling seem aimed at limiting possibilities for productive engagement with education. This makes educators "cynics" with a small c—people who are disillusioned with the system, mock its existence and reject the adoption of new "improved" pedagogical

frameworks or teaching methodologies suggested by government “experts,” but are nevertheless unable to step outside of it and revolt to an extent that would change it. They see education for what it is, but continue to turn its wheels.

In chapter six, in the discussion of the Cynics, Allen presents a different type of rejection of education, society and philosophy. This Cynical critique promotes contempt for social norms and common methods for the production of value. In one particular example, Diogenes delivers an excellent oration and immediately afterwards devalues its educational effect by defecating in front of the audience (p.107). This wonderful act seems nonsensical, and Allen does not do much to explain it either, but serves to illustrate how a Cynical approach to education might simultaneously be positive and not reproduce doxa (something that he considers anathema to effective education). Cynics, it seems, approach teaching as an immanent activity with no transcendent framework in mind. Thus, teleological or deontological educational practices are put to the test through mockery, corruption and refusal. In opposition of Platonism, Cynical philosophy affirms life in all its disgustingness and nonsense. But even Cynicism is not spared co-optation in the contemporary world, where small-c cynics “rebel without a cause” fail to bring their critique to the point of actual change.

Somewhat unexpectedly, the book also deals with existentialism through de Sade and his master-slave relationship understood as an education practice. Even though Allen is positive about its subversive power, he is also critical of its scope. De Sade’s relationship with Juliette and her subsequent development reveal the hidden appeal to transcendence that such a relationship holds, the assumption of complete personal sovereignty which makes man the ultimate transcendent power. The last two chapters are dedicated to a more complete critique of transcendent ideas in relation to education—educational goals, ideas, practices and hopes. Education as a universal good, completely de-contextualised from its environment and the purposes it serves, is one of the contributing factors to today’s commodified, monetised and measured education with its fees, market model and success criteria. However, suggestions for how we might change this are few and unclear: accepting uncertainty, but not to the point of co-optation or inability to act; critique, but from the position of the parrhesiast. Mostly, it seems, to be Cynical educators we need to embrace the absurdity of life, the intensity of the good and the bad that co-exist together, without being satisfied by neat narratives about the importance or rightfulness of education. “Painful ambiguities are all we have left,” Allen concludes (p.186).

As much as this is a book about education, it is also a book about ethics. Following the same ethical tradition which can be traced from Nietzsche to Deleuze and Guattari, there is an implicit undertone present: we are all facing the void, and we can either pretend it is not there and create imaginary barriers to hide behind, or we can accept the intensity and pain it brings and stare back. As Allen asks “How to

live if nothing is true?" (p.123). In other words, education not only teaches us a specific kind of morality, but also embodies it by re-producing its own transcendence and its own creation of values. What Cynicism offers us is ways of understanding the falsity of these promises, but also a glimpse that another type of education is possible. However, unlike Deleuze and Guattari, Allen does not go down the path of creating the conditions of production for this immanent ethical project, but stays firmly grounded in the Cynical tradition of rejection and ambiguity. This leaves his project feeling a bit too critical and not sufficiently applicable to educational practices. It is clear that we must work to create values in the full knowledge that universal truth does not exist, but the Cynics do not give us enough of a jump to understand the alternatives.

It is hard, then, to reflect on how his authorial suggestions can be put into practice. One possibility might be to become more critical of one's own role in reproducing these educational structures. Yes, it is (nearly) impossible to be employed in a UK university without participating in the REF, but it is possible to not advance one's career on the backs of peers by writing scathing reviews of their books. It is impossible to be a teacher without being pressured to improve your school's Ofsted performance, but it might just be possible to teach children curiosity and critical skills despite that. Allen doesn't talk explicitly about making the "right" choices, or even what they might look like, but his actions speak for themselves. For instance, the book is published by Mayfly books, an independent publisher and is available online for free. It is critical, without embodying a competitive survival-of-the-fittest attitude towards other educators. It oscillates from bold statements about education to every-day complaints whilst preserving a philosophical rigor.

However, these tentative suggestions still feel somewhat superficial and unsatisfying, cynical with small c. How can we really do Cynical teaching? What kind of relationship between teacher and student can we create? *The Cynical Educator* falls a bit flat on that front, but having been part of Free University Brighton since its start, I know that different education is possible. Rather than a Socratic model of a wise man and a teacher who disseminates knowledge to awe-stricken pupils, we do education collaboratively. The students suggest what they want to learn, we suggest what we want to teach. We discuss all the murky debates philosophers haven't been able to solve without pretending we know the answers. Indeed, the availability of information on the internet has already undermined the possibility of conning students into thinking a teacher has unfathomable knowledge that they don't have access to. So why assume a position of authority when instead you can be creating knowledge together?

This education is also not the model of a Roman man of moderation and self-discipline, who dares to make education uncomfortable for the sake of improving their students. In a deprived area, education is already hard enough without teachers putting additional obstacles in the path of learning. At the free university, we do not

create standardized tests for our students. We do not present education as a neat little package that can be delivered to the students in manageable portions to maximize their learning. In fact, we don't even think about maximizing their learning. We see value in being lazy too, in asking your classmates to summarize the readings for you because you were too tired to read them before the class, in struggling with a text so much that you only read one page. We see value in the chaos of learning practices and methods.

The Sadist relationship of fostering personal autonomy through complete subjugation of the individual's desires would also likely not work in a contemporary learning environment of 30+ students, although policies to produce uniformity of desire are part of the insidiousness of schools. At the free university, we have more than 200 students of different ages and abilities in different "departments." What is astonishing here are the reasons our students come. A recent survey of my classroom produced the following range of responses: "I am interested to know more about politics"; "I want to know about politics because I want to be able to argue with my Tory friends"; "It was either come to the class or go to the pub so I came to the class." Their reasons for coming were as varied as I imagine our reasons are for teaching, yet the learning environment in the classroom is incredibly inclusive and productive.

Allen is not necessarily suggesting these particular methods, but neither is he suggesting abandoning ship (that ship being education). There might not be a transcendent "good" to education, or anything to give us much reason to believe the current system can be fixed, but he's certainly not lost all hope for education. Neither have I. At the free university, the basic premise is that no money changes hands. No one has to pay and no one gets paid. We refuse to turn a blind eye to the hardships of learning. A Cynic might refuse to bullshit their students into believing education is the most important thing they can do—or that education in and by itself will get them out of the poverty they live in. At the free university, we question narratives about meritocracy and the value of degrees, which encourage students to accumulate a ton of debt to come out with a piece of paper at the end and no job prospects. A Cynic might try to challenge their students to think outside this customer-provider relationship so strongly encouraged by the commodification of academia. At the free university, we call out uncritical thinking when we see it. No sugar-coating, no learning to get a better job, no end goal to the process. We just enjoy doing it.

References

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Reviewer details

Elizabeth Vasileva has recently finished her PhD at Loughborough University. Her main research focus is new materialist approaches to ethics and politics, with a secondary focus on anarchism, identity, feminism and postcolonial theory. She is interested in the intersection of theoretical perspectives and lived experience. Elizabeth is currently a lecturer and an organising member of the Free University of Brighton. Feel free to send thoughts and comments to e.vasileva@mail.com



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