

The Cynical Educator
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We all have our cynical moments.¹ Cynicism is commonly exhibited in the workplace refrain that you are just *playing the game*. Most educators would admit they sometimes play along to a tune that is not their own. My claim, however, is more fundamental. Cynicism is far more diffuse than we realise. It occurs where we least expect it.

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Refusing to take itself or anything else in earnest, contemporary cynicism cannot be attacked by conventional means. Diffuse and insubstantial, it runs circles around sincere discussion. Paid up philosophers have struggled to comprehend “the ideological template” of such “unserious, shallow systems” preferring more serious opponents.² More broadly, academia itself—as represented by the research monograph and academic paper—is equally wrong-footed by today’s cynicism. If it can be attacked at all, a different style of delivery is required; one strong enough to unsettle the cynical reader.

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Cynics were once eccentrics who ridiculed social convention attacking the high-minded values and commitments of civilized life. Their most notorious and ancient representative was Diogenes. The “Dog” as his contemporaries knew him, lived in Athens semi-naked in a barrel. This old cynic was a one-off. Today by contrast, the cynical attitude is commonplace. Entirely banal, cynicism has given up its quirks and outrages to become a mass occupation, and as such a formidable force. This postmodern condition sidesteps well-mannered argument, not by insult or gall, but through its insipid, wet contempt. It will not be attacked for perpetuating errors, because it no longer pays reverence to the truth. Modern cynics have given up on reason, or at least they kneel no more before the promise of reason, claiming that this promise has been overtaken by the “power of things.”³ The attitude of contemporary cynicism is impervious to attack, in the sense that it responds to any serious combatant with an air of ironic detachment.

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The cynic is able to survive, and indeed thrive despite persistent doubt, despite a nagging realisation that the activities in which we are engaged must always fail to live up to justifications. Our most noble aspirations are always compromised, if not practically absurd. And these preoccupations would be entirely meaningless if they were not so completely subservient to power. Yet faced by such a predicament, the cynic carries on regardless. Cynics know what they are doing, but they do it anyway. If they didn’t do it, someone else would.

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Contemporary cynics claim to have discarded all illusions. They claim to see the world without its ideological gloss. Having been “schooled in reality” they have finally “grown up” to embrace it in all its sordid detail.⁴ The ideological commitments of modernity are dismissed with light-hearted disdain as broken ideals; these unrealistic hopes are no longer to be taken in earnest.

Cynics are not fatally disillusioned by admissions such as these, and refuse to be dragged down by a reality laid bare. They are, at worst, a little listless, having been rescued from depression by a “detached negativity,” which “scarcely allows itself any hope, at most a little irony and pity.”⁵ From this perspective everything is hopeless, and yet the cynic refuses to become genuinely depressed. Present-day cynics are only “borderline melancholics” who remain, despite everything, more or less able to work.⁶ Determined to survive, propelled by an instinct for self-preservation, the cynic puts up with dubious situations, becomes accommodated to them, and finally carries out their business.

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Cynics are *borderline melancholics*, in the sense that they know not precisely what they have lost. As Freud claimed, melancholia is difficult to overcome, as it is impossible to fully reconcile oneself to a loss one can only vaguely comprehend.⁷ Hence melancholic cynics feel a sense of loss, and feel entitled to indulge themselves in that sensation, without having a clear picture of what life was like before the loss occurred. A world better ordered by reason, or by a genuine commitment to justice, or by a more coherent community, or by a better sense of collective purpose, remains a hazy picture from the past, a phantom of “better” times. In educational settings these ideological “losses” are matched, if not exceeded, by the personal losses experienced by those who joined the profession with more immediate but equally hazy desires, such as the hope for job satisfaction, the anticipation of meaningful work, and the wish to “make a difference.” Lacking a clear conception of these ideals, educators have not yet come to terms with their departure.

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As an institution, education is widely attacked for its cynicisms, plagued as it is by activities that are openly performative, demonstrably hollow, and often rather faddish. These activities are of little value in themselves. They have little internal consistency. Their meaning derives from the bureaucratic or governmental ethos to which they are instrumentally subservient. This wider ethos itself has little inner substance or value. It serves equally specious masters, such as the imagined needs of an economy that is in a perpetual state of flux. Confused as to how it might serve the temperamental impulses of global capital, education retreats to a focus on skills that are by definition malleable, and thereby adaptable to uncertain contexts.

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Educators are often cynics too. The jaded teacher, ground down by the pressures of the job, is as familiar in film as in daily life. This teacher has become distant from both the profession and the pupils she teaches. Ironically detached, she is protected from the pain that would otherwise be produced from more heartfelt commitments. Such a teacher has long ago given up on the job, and yet does it anyway—a typically cynical predicament.

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Many educators nevertheless appear to refuse the cynical impulse. A romantic commitment lives on in those who will not give up on the idea that theirs is a noble profession which is committed to an educational project that is, at core, unquestionable.⁸

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Perhaps there was once an age in which educational ideals were embodied in philosophy and applied in political movements that earnestly sought their realisation. In postmodernity, however, the romantic educator lives by ideals that are only ever vaguely expressed. When today’s educational ideals are mentioned, they are accompanied by the sound of swallowing, betraying lack of conviction. For example: *Education as an emancipatory endeavour*, appears a little over the top. We in the liberal west believe ourselves to be largely emancipated already.⁹ *Education in pursuit of social justice* receives far more attention. And yet, it is now divorced from the dream that social roles could be occupied based on merit, and wealth could be fundamentally redistributed. The social engineer, who would be required to make such adjustments, is today reviled.¹⁰ Finally, *education for its own sake* is only guiltily admitted as an ideal, for it still bears the whiff of its aristocratic origins. It is tainted by association with wealth and leisure.

Faced by such a predicament of defeated ideals, today’s educator retreats, and yet does not quit the profession. A vague romantic impulse remains, which just about sustains the educator. This impulse is the product of a belief that despite it all, education is still motivated by an essential goodness. Abandoned by educational ideals, devoid of values to which they can appeal (yet believing themselves to be undervalued), romantic educators shroud themselves in the beneficent aura they have taken such pains to cultivate. They devote themselves to the job and allow themselves to hope against hope that their efforts are not in vain.

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When speaking of hope we must be carefully specific. Today hopeful educators scarcely allow themselves to believe that education will change the world in any fundamental way. They hold fast to Bernstein's edict: "education cannot compensate for society."¹¹ Refusing nevertheless to abandon the profession and their professional identity as a progressive force, they remain resolutely positive. They focus on the plight of the individual, encouraging those in their care to develop equally strained, yet hopeful attitudes.

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The hope of the educator cannot be sustained in abstraction. The idea that this is a benevolent profession, that it is essentially good, requires propping up. Abandoned by educational ideals, the benevolent educator needs something concrete on which to cling. For this reason, initiatives launched by government and sponsored by business that promise to deliver this good hold a certain attraction. These initiatives trade on over-inflated and often politicised and commercialised promises of hope, happiness, individual wellbeing and collective security. They are not uniformly adopted, nor are they implemented without adjustment. Occasionally they are rejected. Their success when it occurs, is not the simple product of managerial imposition. The success of techniques that promise to deliver value to the educational project is dependent on and proportionate to the felt need they satisfy. Their promise is to redeem education through its adoption of fresh innovations. These innovations satisfy an educational desire which is committed to a project of educational redemption whilst being profoundly pessimistic about the possibility of its realisation.

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When an older framework of value begins to appear threadbare if not fatally flawed, there is a sense of loss. If it cannot be rescued in some form, attempts are made to import other values as substitutes. This, for Nietzsche, represents an intermediate stage in the "revaluation of all values."¹² We are left with the following transcendental compromise: Once God departs, principles of universal happiness, universal reason, universal justice, universal humanity, and so on, are slipped into the place left vacant by His departure. This sleight of hand takes place without bringing into question the entire evaluative framework upon which such universals continue to depend: the framework is perpetuated by substituting transcendent values for a transcendent God. Values are still placed above and beyond us, against which we remain as before: human, all too human. As Nietzsche argued, the challenge for those bold enough to take it, is to abandon this metaphysic altogether and build values from the bottom up.¹³

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It is regrettable that Nietzsche's suggested formula for replacing the old metaphysic of value has already been "solved," in advance, by government. In education today the transcendental compromise Nietzsche identified has been superseded. Transcendent educational values have become increasingly hollow in appearance, and yet they have not been replaced by other grand principles which would prevent us from experiencing the agony and sense of bewilderment that descends upon us when a world is discovered to be without value. This sense of loss is prevented rather differently, through the educational narcotic of constant activity. Values are today constructed *in situ* through the everyday, often grotty reality of educational work.

To take a typically banal example from academia where whole days are spent battling out emails; the effort to reduce one's inbox to a more respectable number of unopened messages (perhaps even reaching "inbox zero") affords its own distinct flavour of job satisfaction. This is a futile exercise, since email traffic is unstoppable and much of it is generated through one's own activity besides. Yet here, in the academic's inbox, promptitude itself becomes a virtue. A timely reply helps academics feel that they are there for students and colleagues, having prioritised their needs, perhaps above one's own. This combination of efficiency with conspicuous speed, mixing perpetual availability with the glib affability of one's responses, begins to define what a good educational encounter looks like. It "gives value" to one's work, in the sense that achieving good, cheery email etiquette begins to orient and give meaning to one's work as a professional educator. A lighter inbox becomes equivalent to a good day's work.

And so, to return to the transcendental compromise, the erosion of faith in higher educational values is not experienced as acutely as it should be, because educational values have already been brought down to earth. Values are embodied in the various techniques that are available to education today, techniques that instrumentalise our hopes, fears, vulnerabilities and emotions. These techniques are wilfully adopted, allowing educators to embody the values these tools create through use. In this way, instead of working towards the fulfilment of transcendent ideals, they *give value* to their work, through work. When transcendent ideals are lost educators become *more*, not less, committed to the job. So when examining all these techniques and procedures that dominate today's classroom, school and university we should not ask: How do they warp the educational endeavour, distort it, distract it, and so on. Rather, we could ask how they give education meaning and value and substance through their adoption and use.

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To attack education itself and declare it cynical in the broadest, most global sense would be futile. Should today's educators be convinced of such an argument they would not abandon all hope. They would not quit their work, or continue only for the sake of a wage. The great curiosity of contemporary education is that hope and belief would limp on, since each is resourced and generated through the busywork that to an ever-greater extent has become our best working definition of what "education" means today. For this reason, to realise the cynicism of contemporary education, it is necessary to encounter this cynicism in practice rather than as an abstract prospect.

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As a technical activity, the pursuit of hope in education takes different forms.¹⁴ Where pupils are encouraged to "reach for their dreams," they are expected to adopt a resolute mode of hoping. They must learn to remain motivated despite sometimes-insuperable odds.

My employer sent a small billboard into the stratosphere promoting its "Go Higher" campaign—a "direct appeal to students to set their sights higher" (which means, to set their sights on us).¹⁵ Campaigns such as these, which have as their cynical objective enhanced admissions statistics, attempt to connect with a wider social narrative of aspiration. In the media, aspirations are lived through the ascent of others as we follow reality television stars and game show contestants, who reach stardom, achieving fame and fortune through a seemingly accidental combination of talent and luck.¹⁶

Impossible hopes such as these are negotiated in part through their subdivision into achievable steps. Here a mode of hoping is adopted that is carefully goal-directed, ensuring that we also work towards more realistic objectives. For example, pupils are encouraged to live by their predicted grades, and aspire to hopes that have been judged statistically sound.¹⁷ Sound hopes like this are to be combined with far less well defined, less goal-directed, more patiently hopeful dispositions. These dispositions reflect the attitude of the profession, which is beholden to a patient optimism. It makes a virtue of distinctly quiet, self-contained forms of hoping. Archetypal traits associated with the good student—such as modesty, humility, perseverance, restraint and self-discipline—are recycled and invested with new meaning. They are attached to pedagogies that seek to educate pupils in modes of hoping that will better accommodate them to the possibilities and opportunities that are afforded by the existing social order.¹⁸ With the activity of hoping chastened in this way, pupils learn to live in hope, and educators learn to place their hope in those they educate. Hopeful educators patiently wait for the fruits of their collective endeavour to be realised, assuming as they do that their efforts, and those for whom they work, are motivated by an essential goodness.

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From the resolutely positive point of view some educators adopt, cynicism is likened to "a plague that kills dreams." The *edutopia* blogger, Richard Curwin, outlines five strategies to help teachers "stop cynical feelings." The second of these is most revealing. It is to adopt a "hopeless student" simply because "it is hard to be cynical when someone depends upon you, especially a child." The plan is that with attachments such as these, the teacher is drawn into the plight of hopeless individuals, and as a result can no longer sustain her cynicism. Cynicism is to be replaced by a desire to secure "hope for all."¹⁹

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Unfortunately, there is nothing inherently radical, or even progressive, about the pursuit of hope.²⁰ Indeed, in advanced liberal societies, capitalism depends upon it. These societies operate by stimulating rather than simply directing or repressing the desires of their populations. Under these conditions, obedient subjects are those that have *not* given up hope.

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So much for hope; what about fear? Education has a role here too. Our fears are redefined as vulnerabilities. And in this form they are adopted by education. A discourse of vulnerability quickly becomes second nature to the educator with the view that this is a caring profession. Alongside our hopes, our vulnerabilities easily fall within the teacher's "duty of care."

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The lexicon of vulnerability has been wholeheartedly adopted by government, appearing with increasing frequency in policies aimed at those said to be "in need" of assistance.²¹ These policies draw from and encourage professional activities that bring to visibility an ever-expanding range of mundane incidents and feelings that indicate our susceptibility to harm. The various symptoms of vulnerability, and the various techniques, possibilities and sites for intervention, have multiplied drawing strength from their mutual proliferation.²² In Britain, the poor, the infirm, the disabled and the exploited have been reconceptualised as vulnerable subjects. They are viewed in terms of the risks they face, and the risks they pose to society. Young people, who may be all of the above and yet also have the disadvantage of their youth, are said to occupy a particularly precarious position in today's society.²³ Various agencies committed to social welfare, or social order, have been encouraged to engage with our vulnerabilities at this level, responding to those factors that are felt to make lives precarious. The perspectives they increasingly adopt, however well meaning they may appear, are decidedly pessimistic. These agencies react to the imagined threats we face as individuals and as members of society. The possibility of a more secure, less risky future is all that they can imagine.

There is a strong moralistic dimension to this battle for greater security. It operates through a twofold manoeuvre. Moral judgement is suspended in a seemingly magnanimous gesture: The discourse of vulnerability does not blame the victim; individuals are not to be faulted for the circumstances that caused their vulnerabilities. Whilst moral judgement is suspended in this way, the accompanying discourse of moral responsibility suffers no such inhibitions. This paradoxical combination relies upon acknowledged vulnerabilities generating a "zero point" in the present. A line is drawn, from which the vulnerable must now depart taking ownership of their condition. Vulnerable individuals are asked to take responsibility for their own recovery; there is an expectation that they adopt an active role in combating the difficulties identified for them. Any refusal to do so can have immediate material consequences. Vulnerable homeless people, for example, have had services withdrawn when they refused to actively engage with interventions targeting their vulnerabilities. Elsewhere, those failing to conform to professional interpretations of vulnerability may receive "harsher penalties in the criminal justice system or a loss of entitlement to welfare."²⁴ Those who are, by contrast, willing and able to conform to existing vulnerability classifications may be able to secure higher levels of assistance. These vulnerable subjects have become active and are actively supported; they negotiate their condition as their condition has been defined, and for that they are applauded.

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Those identified as vulnerable (rather than oppressed, or poor, for example) are not permanently defined by their vulnerabilities. Rather, these assigned vulnerabilities are intended to describe those features that we must learn to overcome. They define the points from which we retreat, and thereby set us in motion. This is, of course, a distinctly backward facing mode of advance.

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In focusing on the risks we face, and on our own individual susceptibilities to those risks, we are not to become risk averse. Rather, we must learn which risks are worth taking, and which risks are to be avoided. We must still attempt our ascent, even though climbing is a risky business. Vulnerabilities define the nature of the pit from which we must extract ourselves, and thereby delineate the destination

to which we retreat. Vulnerabilities also describe the nature of the equipment that will be required as we scramble upwards.

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Anger must be subdued. In schools that teach emotional literacy, anger has been constructed “as a shameful emotion to express.”²⁵ Angry pupils become those who stray outside the “emotional repertoires” that are valued by the school, and anger itself becomes a symptom of vulnerability.²⁶ Various therapeutic techniques are devised in contexts such as these to ensure that those identified as vulnerable can engage positively and productively with their condition. In this climate the risks posed by social and institutional life are viewed as perpetual threats that the individual must learn to confront. Individuals must learn resilience if they are to achieve emotional wellbeing. Alongside aspiration, risk and vulnerability, the pursuit of resilience has been placed high on the educational agenda. Resilience has been embedded, for example, in the teaching of some primary schools where it is treated as a transferrable skill. Those trained in resilience will presumably cope better with the inevitable disappointments of life.²⁷ Whilst institutions promoting resilience may appear positive, they are nonetheless despairing. They preach an ethic of survival in an unpredictable and dangerous world.

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The melancholic underpinnings of contemporary education are hidden, in part, by its attempts to appear positive. We must though, and with great determination, sound out this teacherly attitude; indeed, the peals of today’s cheery educator have become distinctly hollow in tone. Following Nietzsche, educators must again philosophise with a hammer blow, listen to the sounds that return, and find out just how hollow their idols sound.²⁸

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The effects of accumulated wealth in the West have been something of a disappointment. We in the West guiltily admit that more wealth does not always entail more happiness. This condition has been described as a crisis in happiness.²⁹ Psychologists and “psychologically minded” individuals claiming to have discovered the secrets of a happy life multiply in such a climate.³⁰ They tap into and support a proliferation of magazines, self-help manuals, life coaches, professional interests, educational techniques, whole-school policies and political reforms. These proponents of a happy life generously adopt the role of educators, educating us to help ourselves to a life of greater contentment. In this context, certain mythological constructs, such as the happy marriage,³¹ the happy family,³² the happy childhood,³³ or the happy consumer, are recycled and imposed as aspirational objects. Happiness becomes a promise that is attached to such objects of desire, and guilt is produced in those inevitable moments when happiness does not arrive as promised. We become isolated at moments such as these, wondering why it is we feel so empty, what it is about us that prevented the promise from finding its fulfilment. We feel inadequate, questioning not the promise but our ability to enjoy.³⁴

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Some react with an attitude of resolute cheerfulness. This empty, glazed over condition, becomes an end in itself.³⁵ Those who cultivate a cheerful demeanour appear to hope against hope that happiness will follow. The secret we are told is to *act happy* first, and become happy later. The problem with a cheerful attitude is that it becomes a moral duty, where those who abstain are not simply pitied for their lack of good cheer, they are resented for letting the rest of us down. A cheerful attitude becomes the contribution an individual makes to collective wellbeing.³⁶

The pursuit of happiness is deeply cynical in that happiness is either rendered remote and unrealisable, or immediate and shallow. In the first case the pursuit of happiness isolates individuals by suggesting they are unable to live up to a collective ideal of what it means to be happy. In the second case, where individuals are brought together in good cheer, the emotional condition that unites them is marked by its superficiality and lack of intense feeling.

It is tempting to oppose happiness and good cheer by adopting their opposites, claiming the importance of negative emotional states to the human condition. Whilst this might help resist the use of positive emotion as a governing technique, it could still perpetuate a common mistake, where we take the pursuit of happiness at its own word. Even if we react with a determined effort to become

relentlessly severe, even manifestly gloomy, we must do so only after recognising the deep pessimism of those who promote emotional positivity.

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As an educational objective, happiness has been divided into teachable techniques that presume to make the pursuit of it more realistic. We must identify such activities without equivocation as survival techniques, designed to accommodate us to our late-modern predicament. Alternately, we must survive capitalism, overwork and underemployment; we must survive global warming, environmental degradation and depleted resources; we must survive the other, one another and ourselves. In this context, happiness does not fulfil the role of a transcendental ideal. When it appears as such, this is just part of its technique. Reduced to the status of a survival objective, happiness is rendered subservient to a biopolitical ethos that pursues “health” against “ill health,” rather than “right” against “wrong.” The pursuit of happiness becomes an issue of success or failure, evading all questions concerning the concerning legitimacy or illegitimacy, and hence value of the quest itself.³⁷

In its operationalized form, reduced to a set of handy, learnable techniques, this educational activity is intrinsically pessimistic in that it separates happiness as an affective state, from a more critical and serious engagement with the problem of happiness.³⁸ The most obvious alternative here would be the Aristotelian approach that redefines happiness by associating it with the ability to live a good and flourishing life. The advantage of this definition is that it ties the question of happiness to a careful consideration of the context in which it is to be realised. We should, however, avoid any nostalgia for classical versions of the good life that were themselves also connected to systems of coercion, excluding by default the vast majority of the population as incapable of its realisation. Still, we can observe an important contrast here with modern happiness, which is to be treated on its own without bringing into question the perfectibility of the way of life to which it is connected. As we late-moderns are so fond of admitting, our way of life is beyond fundamental adjustment. Our way of life may be imperfect but we are nevertheless stuck with it. Trapped as we are in the present, we must simply do our best to enjoy what we have accumulated.

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Whole school attempts to promote emotional wellbeing have been rightly attacked for the “flat, rational and easily detachable emotional ideals” they promote. These ideals appear strikingly superficial when contrasted to the “fraught, impassioned reality of everyday school life.”³⁹ In such schools, pupils are encouraged to approach their feelings abstractly. They must learn to speak about rather than succumb to their emotions. They must become sufficiently detached from their feelings so that they can better regulate them. Those who have achieved this distance, regulating desires according to conventions, are defined as the emotionally literate.

In schools such as these, strongly felt emotions are to be avoided, for it is believed that “emotions derail rather than inspire intended action.”⁴⁰ Once these emotions are converted into acceptable discourse, responses such as “anger, outrage or hurt become detached from the circumstances that provoked them.” Actions are “stripped of meaning” in this way, becoming available instead for interpretation through the approved emotional categories and procedures of the school.⁴¹

Whilst school-based programmes designed to cultivate emotional wellbeing have been only patchily imposed and have achieved only mixed results, they follow a logic of design symptomatic of a broader cynicism. In these institutions, the education of desire is sought *at its own expense*. Emotions are admitted into the operations of the school on the condition they are held at a distance.

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For me, the profound cynicism of contemporary education is without doubt. Still, this does not mean that it is easily detectable. Contemporary cynicism largely evades detection because it is “lived as a private disposition.” Today’s cynics do not generally announce themselves, having little energy or appetite for direct confrontation. They have become integrated into the society they scorn, existing as a diffuse but corrosive presence. Contemporary cynicism is an instinctive condition that does not draw attention to itself, and does not wish to appear particularly eccentric. Indeed, is “quite difficult to bring this diffuse, murky cynicism to expression. It has withdrawn into a mournful detachment” and “no longer sees any reason to expose itself aggressively.”⁴² In the educational context this diffuse cynicism is particularly shy. And remains, in many cases, well hidden behind the insistently cheery yet hollow commitments of today’s educator. Another harsh observation perhaps, but those with “ears for things

outrageous”⁴³ understand that these ideals have not been “hollowed out” as a result of inattention, and to that extent today’s educator is not at fault. These ideals sound hollow to us now because we cynics have come to recognise how from the outset they were already defeated. All that remains is for us to abandon is the last vestiges of hope they inspired.

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The cynicism of education today deserves far greater attention than it receives. Its multiple commitments to happiness, aspiration, hope, wellbeing, resilience, emotional literacy, averted risk, and reduced vulnerabilities betray an underlying pessimism that few educators would openly admit. Whilst education increasingly adopts an ethic of survival and protection, many of its practitioners still believe in their progressive intent, and hold fast to their caring, well-meaning credentials.

The standard response of the educational critic would be to subject such well-meaning educators to some form of ideology critique. This would systematically diagnose their disorder and explain how education today, in practice, betrays its ideals, and unwittingly promotes ends that most educators would not openly support. The educational enterprise would be attacked as somehow degenerate, as if a true education could then emerge.

This would not be my approach. If the cynicism of education is as widespread as I suggest, this kind of ideology critique will have no real effect as the educational values it depends upon will not be taken seriously, or at least, they would only be superficially enacted. Today’s educator cannot be challenged to overhaul education through some sort of appeal to higher educational values. The commitments of this educator are too shallow and ill formed for that.

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Our problem is *not that we are fools* in need of enlightenment (it is comparatively easy to realise that we have been fooled, and hence become cynical about education); rather, our problem is that *we lack the power not to be fooled*.⁴⁴ More generally speaking: it is comparatively easy to be cynical about society and claim that we are not taken in by it. The problem we face is located at a different point. To borrow a phrase from Nietzsche, our difficulty, as critics is that we live in “a society that no longer has the strength to *excrete*” those commitments and values it finds dubious.⁴⁵ In such a climate, the cynical educator must be invited to embrace *and force out* a widespread cynicism that is everywhere in practice, but rarely admitted.

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The positive ideals that once motivated educational practice have become glib promises. They have been replaced, in part, by ready-made techniques, matched with a diffuse and lingering commitment to the assumed goodness of education. It makes little sense in this context to carry out an ideology critique in which efforts are made to convince well-meaning educators that they are subject to a kind of false consciousness that they should become conscious of, and then reject (which would require a strong commitment to critical values that are everywhere absent⁴⁶). Nor are we in need of a new spiritually and intellectually enlightened “clerisy,” a secular elite that would give coherence to our incoherent culture.⁴⁷ This is a nineteenth century idea, admittedly, and yet despite all their protestations to the contrary, university intellectuals still attempt this role having no clear idea of an alternative. Against the high-minded conceit of this position, which desires to raise the intellectual and moral calibre of society, well-meaning educators might be encouraged to attempt something very different. They could explore instead how they are in practice cynics, so as not to quash cynicism, but to *develop it*. The point is to embrace this diffuse and practical cynicism openly and with a kind of boldness it has yet to experience. The problem with many educators is not that they are cynics; it is that they are *weak* cynics.

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Weak cynicism is an intermediate position occupied by those who are disillusioned by the loss of value in education and remain involved only by force of habit (they know what they do, but they do it anyway). These weak cynics should be superseded by a stronger kind of cynicism, bringing to fruition an “extreme form of nihilism,” of the kind endorsed by Nietzsche in *The Will to Power*.⁴⁸ This educational position would be one of strength, because it would admit the crisis of value from which it

suffers “without perishing”⁴⁹ and without ceasing to educate. Indeed, it would seek out the reality of that loss, and in that sense overcome its melancholia (which is the product of a loss that is only vaguely experienced). This attitude would embrace a crisis of value that is everywhere apparent, but is rarely acknowledged, and even less often accepted. Against these denials, those who accept this loss of value as a fact of life would no longer “postpone the decisive overthrow of the uppermost values” that nevertheless continue to haunt education.⁵⁰ This postponement is the product of an urge to reinstate the values we so dearly miss. Education is haunted today by this urge, which is manifested in the diffuse idea that education is inherently good. It is precisely here that cynicism becomes a worthy disposition, to be retained and strengthened. In addition, this strong cynicism will not hesitate to challenge and perhaps reject the ready-made, all too readily adopted educational techniques which constitute that other educational narcotic to which we are so susceptible. It would attack, in other words, our tendency to multiply educational work, to ceaselessly engage in activities that promise to give education “value” from the bottom up. Questionable in themselves, these activities also serve to exhaust us.

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The strong cynic will have the boldness to admit that education is so fatally undermined, that if it were to be rescued, it would need fundamental reconstruction. This would entail the reconstruction of society no less, and would involve at its core, the reconstitution of the educator herself. Towards this end, the educational cynic is indispensable, having the strength to bring into question her entire identity as a caring professional. This rhetorically inflated figure, which trades on an increasingly hollow commitment to the social good, would be confronted and disposed of.⁵¹

References and notes

¹ This generic remark suffers from a problem common to all generic statements; it is difficult to pinpoint its target. Whilst generalities are no substitute for academic precision, and I do wish to be precise, generic remarks unsettle more than academic convention: Could it be that when I make them I have *you* in mind? Are my attacks so general that they make you feel uncomfortable? Is it your education I attack for its cynicisms, or the education of others? You appear to have no way of knowing. Otherwise, you would be free to join me, as we collude together denouncing problems that afflict others assuredly, but never us. Hence it would be more convenient if I avoided this generic tone and offered you nothing more than a few thousand words of scholarly precision, limiting my argument to its examples and allowing all who fall outside its narrowed purview to consider themselves “off the hook.”

² This is the argument made by Peter Sloterdijk in: Sloterdijk, P. (1987/2001). *Critique of cynical reason*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p. 8.

³ Sloterdijk. *Critique of cynical reason*. p. 6.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. p. 5.

⁷ Freud, S. (1917/2001). Mourning and melancholia. In: Strachey (Ed.). Volume XIV. *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Vintage.

⁸ This unquestionable good has been forcefully critiqued in the recent work of Nick Peim. See, for example: Peim, N. (2012). The big other: An offer you can't refuse - or accept, in some cases. Education as onto-theological principle (Empire): An anti-manifesto. *Other Education: The Journal of Educational Alternatives*, 1(1), pp. 226-238. See also: Peim, N. (2013). Education, schooling, Derrida's Marx and democracy: Some fundamental questions. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 32(2), pp. 171-187. Whereas Peim argues that “education has become an ontotheological principle” that “serves to heal the existential wound following the death of God and the failure of other theological substitutes” (Peim, 2012, p. 227.), I argue that the “good” that is claimed for the educational project is only superficially believed. Since the educational ideals it once relied upon have been largely abandoned, only the narcotic of constant activity can give this ideal its substantive content. This distinction is important as the object of critique switches from a critique of the imperium of educational ideals, to a critique of educational activities. This latter critique would investigate why these activities attract us despite the exhaustion they create through their proliferation (for if anything unites educators today it is their exhaustion). As I argue here, without a secure transcendental ideal for which to work, educators find themselves drawn to educational activities that promise to give value to education through their enactment.

⁹ Allen, A. (2013). Editorial. Radicalism, education and political practice. *Power and Education*, 5(3), pp. 262-267.

¹⁰ Allen, A. (2014). *Benign violence: Education in and beyond the age of reason*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹¹ Bernstein, B. (1970) Education cannot compensate for society. *New Society*, 15(387), 344-347.

¹² Nietzsche, F. (1967). *Ecce Homo. On the genealogy of morals and Ecce Homo*. New York: Vintage.

¹³ See sections 12, 20 and 30 in particular in: Nietzsche, F. (1968). *The will to power*. New York: Vintage. See also Heidegger, M. (1961/1991) *Nietzsche: Volume IV, Nihilism*. New York: HarperCollins.

¹⁴ Webb, D. (2013). Pedagogies of hope. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 32(4), pp. 397-414.

¹⁵ <http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/news/nr/go-higher-space-clearing-university-sheffield-1.298493>

¹⁶ Allen, A. (11 November, 2011). “You never will be a rock star”: Britain, social mobility and the exploitation of hope. Available from: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/ansgar-allen/%E2%80%98you-never-will-be-rock-star%E2%80%99-britain-social-mobility-and-exploitation-of-ho>

¹⁷ Allen, A. (2012). Cultivating the myopic learner: The shared project of high and low-stakes assessment. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 33(5), pp. 641-659.

¹⁸ Webb. *Pedagogies of hope*.

- ¹⁹ Curwin, R. (April 17, 2013). Cynicism is contagious; So is hope. [www.edutopia.org](http://www.edutopia.org/blog/cynicism-is-contagious-richard-curwin). Retrieved from <http://www.edutopia.org/blog/cynicism-is-contagious-richard-curwin>
- ²⁰ Webb. *Pedagogies of hope*.
- ²¹ Furedi, F. (2008). Vulnerability - Analytical concept or rhetorical idiom? In: Satterthwaite, Watts & Piper, (Eds.). *Talking truth, confronting power*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.
- ²² Ecclestone, K. and Lewis, L. (Forthcoming). Interventions for resilience in educational settings: Challenging policy discourses of risk and vulnerability. *Journal of Education Policy*.
- ²³ Brown, K. (2012). Re-moralising “vulnerability.” *People, Place & Policy*, 6(1), pp. 41-53.
- ²⁴ Ibid. p. 47.
- ²⁵ Procter, L. (2013). Emotions, power and schooling: The socialisation of “angry boys.” *Journal of Political Power*, 6(3). p. 497.
- ²⁶ Ibid. p. 499.
- ²⁷ Ecclestone & Lewis. *Interventions for resilience*.
- ²⁸ Nietzsche, F. (1889/2003). *Twilight of the idols and the Anti-Christ*. London: Penguin,
- ²⁹ Ahmed, S. (2007-2008). Multiculturalism and the promise of happiness. *New Formations*, 63(Winter), pp. 121-137.
- ³⁰ This new formation has been described by Sara Ahmed as “The happiness turn”. See: Ahmed, S. (2007-2008). Editorial. The happiness turn. *New Formations*, 63(Winter), pp. 7-14.
- ³¹ Love, H. (2007-2008). Compulsory happiness and queer existence. *New Formations*, 63(Winter), pp. 52-111.
- ³² Ahmed, S. (2009). Affect aliens: Happiness as a cultural politics. In: Satterthwaite, Piper & Sikes, (Eds.). *Power in the academy*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.
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