The Big Other: An Offer You Can't Refuse – or Accept, in Some Cases. Education as Onto-Theological Principle (Empire): An Anti-Manifesto

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Abstract *Being increasingly puzzled by the persistence of discourses of redemption concerning education, this paper considers anew the ontological dimension. Education here is rethought in terms of governmentality, as a pervasive and invasive social technology. Far from being an essential good in need of redemption from its fallen proper "self," in our time, I argue, education has become a means to ensure that the populations of contemporary nation states are not only closely governed but carefully formed. The history of education in modernity, the classic sociology of education and various recent educational programmes and projects are cited to show that discourses of educational salvation are, at best, mistaken about the fundamental nature of what they are addressing. The philosophy of education, since its inception, has mistakenly seen itself as an adjunct to educational policy and practice – and in the process has defaulted on its avowed mission, i.e. to be philosophical. I suggest here that thinking otherwise might be more germane, that the unexamined life might be well worth living, but that the unexamined deification of education is untenable.*

Education as Ontotheology

Contemporary education, characterized by the order of "instrumental rationality" (*Zweckrational*) (Weber, 1978), has become the most advanced, most pervasive and most powerful expression of "technological enframing," to borrow Heidegger's term. Education, as we now know it, seeks to enfold beings in order to transform them in its own image, to render them productive and useful according to its own account of these things (Heidegger, 1977).

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Hasn't this "enframing" become an irreversible world order? And are there not ethical questions concerning the domination of the world by education? Is not the ubiquitous promise of education ethically questionable? And are there not also then ontologico-ethical questions for those who purvey education as an essential "good," a good to be revered and cherished in its best and most pure form?

The contemporary apotheosis of education, I contend, signifies the triumph of a powerful ontotheological principle. Our world is configured by faith in education. All over the world, where education is felt to be underdeveloped, there is a need for development; where education is partial, it needs to be rendered complete; where education is failing to fulfil its promise of equality, it is in need of reform; where education fails to meet public norms of attainment, it is in need of improvement. In the public sphere, education is frequently held out as the key to well-being: at the personal, the national and the global level. It is very rarely indeed that the modern and contemporary valorisation of education is questioned.

Recently, two emails were circulated among members of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain, asking for suggestions for the most successful papers to be identified. The criterion of success in these calls, both made by distinguished figures in the field, was impact on practice. No one raised any objection to the powerful assumption of these messages. The point of philosophy of education, it was clear, was to enhance practice.

And yet it is my contention that we should, at the very least, take seriously the (un)thought that education has become an enormously powerful governmental force at work in all domains of social life. We should, surely, question the naturalized assumption that this force is unquestionably benign. One consequence of this contention is that we should seriously question the assumption that the philosophy of education – or philosophy addressing education – should have any truck whatsoever with the educational improvement agenda, or with any aspect of educational policy and practice. In fact, as I will hope to show but will at least contend, it is possible to claim that philosophy ought rather to call into question the current global, governmental sovereignty of education.

In opening the possibility for a radical questioning of the sovereignty of education, I will contend that there is no "real" education. That is to say, there is no pure and uncontaminated, proper education that exists in Platonic space outside of or separate from the contingencies of its present historical configuration. History teaches that we have to ditch the idea of some essential education other than schooling as we know it that may have existed in some ideal past examples, or that might be identified in some few "progressive" ideal cases in the present, or that might be brought into being in some rationally planned, pedagogically sound ideal future. Education has become an ontotheological principle, a principle that now serves to heal the existential wound following the death of God and the failure of other theological substitutes. The anxiety that attends the contingent condition of

being "thrown" might have been temporarily assuaged by faith that education can transform both individual selves and collective being, but such devotion – it must now surely be clear – is misplaced. Ideas that automatically associate education with a drive to "social justice" or that align education with the development of democracy should be regarded as relics of a naïve and wholly untenable faith. The idea that education can redeem social ills has long been known to be incorrect. It is time, surely, that philosophy took ontological and phenomenological stock of what education *is*.

The idea of a "pure" education lurks behind much ameliorative rhetoric and much discourse of improvement, especially much that goes under the name of "social justice." The idea is frequently expressed – explicitly as much as implicitly – that the proper function and the proper modalities of education have been hijacked by the state machinery and that the true spirit of education, as a necessary force for good, has been suppressed by the dead hand of instrumental government. In fact, educators are themselves largely the designers, managers and operators of the now dominant socio-cultural machines of modernity, contemporary schools. Even the opponents of state controlled curricula, of the disciplinary emphasis of schooling, of the ranking and ordering of examinations do not propose an end to the contemporary domination of education. The domination of education as the master-concept of the present age is evidenced in the fact that opposition to current forms of education – with its systematic inequalities, its rabid social reproduction, its persistent ethnic and cultural biases and its lamentable delimitation of knowledge – are to be dealt with via the redemption of education from the forces of darkness (Fullan, 1993).

At the level of ideas education has become an onto-theological principle, the dominant principle of reason. Our whole being-together is significantly defined by and through education. At the level of practice, education has become the most extensive, pervasive and developed technology of government ever invented. The universality of schooling – a fact in the west, a desideratum elsewhere – ensures that the social technology developed by the pioneer bureaucrats of the nineteenth century has steadily grown, expanded and invaded the most intimate recesses of life. Its institutions punctuate the landscape. Its ethic pervades life from the nursery onwards. Its judgments define identities and its adjurations invade the inner realms of being. Education proffers an order of "necessary" correction, of constant improvement and of the remaking of self and population according to both its publicly stated norms and the norms of its less conscious and often covert practices. Ostensibly education holds out the offer of self-realization as well as socio-economic success, although these things are only offered on its own, restrictive terms. Conversely, education also and constantly threatens failure. Failure to meet the required norms of achievement, whether school pupil or university intellectual, will hold very serious negative consequences.

What's more, education doesn't just refer to those institutions and dimensions of collective social life that are explicitly concerned with education, although the ubiquity and power of these is remarkable. Social life occurs now significantly within what Basil Bernstein referred as a "pedagogized society" (Bernstein, 1995). Such a society is dominated by the pervasive pedagogic principle of obedience to the law of education. Submission to the codes of its authority structure and to the ethic of self-improvement it promotes is required of all. This double principle can be seen at work in innumerable contexts, although most obviously visible in the operations and structure of the school, the paradigm institution of contemporary social life.

The Gift that Keeps on Taking

Historically we can see the rise of the schooled society in terms of the development of techniques of population management. The order of pastoral discipline developed by Kay Shuttleworth and others, became embedded in all the everyday practices of the school. School discipline, a training of the mind and body, was the essential condition for entry into the world at large. The population itself was thus rendered accessible to a certain moral and practical fashioning. Much more important than the vagaries of curriculum was the social order established through the new institution and the attitude towards self that it cultivated. Age stratification was required to ensure that norms of development and attainment could be measured and charted. Special spaces were constructed for the management of bodies and for training in specific skills. But the most important facet of the new institution was its engagement with the self – its moral technology. Reflecting on who you are within the institution, your stage of development and your position in the hierarchy of attainment provides good preparation for alignment with the social division of labour. Examining your own conduct but also being encouraged to develop your own aspirations – in line with the "official" range of aspirations offered – are important features of reflection. The history of education in modernity can be seen as a history of the development of such techniques of moral management.

Improvement dominates the field of education. It has come to occupy the role of a general ontological principle. Self-improvement requires a structuring and context that deploys and purveys the "technology" of self-management, the technology of the self promoted remorselessly through education as the fundamental principle of citizen-formation. This is also the fundamental principle of contemporary "freedom": instilled from the first moments of consciousness and speech in the individual, through the family, the nursery and the school; it is the ruling concept of good conduct, hence the automatic references to education whenever a perceived crisis in population behaviours arises, behaviours deemed to be in need of correction. The ideal model is self-correction albeit within publicly defined norms of good conduct. This is evident in contemporary healthcare, home economics and

food consumption, for example. Self-fashioning as the principle of freedom is always attended by the regulatory enclosures of the law, the institutions, the available practices. While we must recognize that all of these are subject to contest, historical movement, active intervention of counter movements, it is equally clear that in current forms of social life there is an ethical imperative driving norms in particular directions expressing an onto-theological principle. That principle has become a pervasive, diffuse, if not totalitarian, will-to-power.

Among its advocates, and there are few who would explicitly renounce the title, education is represented as a gift. While particular forms and modes of education might be less than ideal, education "itself" is most frequently represented as and understood as an essential and very special type of good. There is little need and no space here to examine the problematic logic of the gift and the obligations that giving imposes on the donee (Derrida, 1995; Mauss, 2002). In the context of education, we might say that the obligations (and certainly the consequences of the mode of their "acceptance") of the gift of education are for life. It is also clear that education is an offer that you cannot refuse. Increasingly education is represented as a gift that keeps on giving, throughout life. Those who either lack education or who are perceived as being in danger of falling out of the educational arena are represented as being in need of reorientation, realignment and, ultimately, salvation. This is the case with two major government sponsored projects that have occurred recently in the UK: both designed explicitly to address issues of "social exclusion," a contemporary, fashionable euphemism for poverty. Both Sure Start and The Children's Fund have been predicated on the idea of education as a socially transformative force and as a gift that holds out the promise of social advancement for both individuals and communities. That both individuals and communities may not be well positioned to either accept this "gift" to their advantage (nor, of course, to refuse it) in no way diminishes the enthusiasm of the donation.

A Technology of Salvation

Sure Start is a well-established programme that sets up family centres in what it refers to as disadvantaged "communities." Sure Start seeks to make up for the gaps and failures in "proper" child-rearing to which socially disadvantaged groups are perceived to be prone. Its function is corrective, to supplement inadequate socialization by providing both models for parents and interventionist practices working directly on children. They are run by professionals deemed to have the right kind of expertise – or at least the kind of expertise that is consonant with the norms of development ensconced in various tabulations of normativity. To take one example to illustrate Sure Start's characteristic mode of operation, the scheme addresses language development. To verify its efficacy in this work, Sure Start produces its own statistical evidence of its own successful interventions into the language development of its constituency. These figures confirm the success of its

own interventions into the language competences of young children, in spite of the well-established fact that language acquisition occurs effectively independently of local contextual practices. Sure Start therefore must foreclose the kind of linguistic knowledge that would negate its own cherished language intervention practices. Its attachment to an ideal of education as a force for social improvement is thus predicated on a necessary, absolutely essential ignorance of alternative accounts of language development and of the relations between social language differences and education (Bernstein, Bourdieu). In this instance, it can be seen how Sure Start reproduces a myth of educational intervention as a socially redemptive force. Bernstein's or Bourdieu's long-available analyses give rise to a disturbing counter-hegemonic thought. The kind of educational intervention offered by Sure Start sustains the myth of education as social redemption. It can only do this via the suppression of socio-linguistic knowledge and the suppression of knowledge about language acquisition. Surely, this raises very serious questions about the ethics of selling education as a good or end in itself.

The Children's Fund shared the faith in education expressed in the official remit and practices of Sure Start. A dominant idea informing the project was the redemptive power of education in terms of both individual and collective ("community") perspectives. The Children's Fund explicitly addressed children in danger of social exclusion and sought to bring together hitherto unconnected agencies to enfold such individuals and "communities" – really, poor areas and their populations. The Children's Fund was explicitly predicated on three principles: prevention, partnership and participation. The scheme sought to make more economically effective use of service resources – an efficiency issue – by emphasizing prevention as being in the long-term more cost-effective financially and socially. The alignment of this prophylactic drive with partnership and participation was the expression of a will-to-efficiency – involving the reorganization of services, their management and their relations with one another. The emphasis given to "partnership" expressed an attempt to promote an ethic of collective responsibility. Responsibility, however, was not simply to be revived on the side of service providers. The constituency of such services – euphemistically referred to as service-users, but actually potential delinquents and their struggling families – were also to be drawn into the circle of partnership to be refashioned into partners in their own redemption. The third key term "participation" similarly signalled a governmental desire and an emerging technology for co-opting the populations targeted by The Children's Fund into the management of their own schemes for salvation.

The educational dimension of this technology of salvation could best be seen in the efforts made to operationalize the principle of partnership at the level of the individual. The young people targeted as objects of prevention would be given special treatment to redefine their social trajectories but this special treatment was

carefully designed to engage them with a reconstruction of their sense of themselves. A child in trouble at school, and perhaps beginning to get into trouble with the police, would be subjected to a pastoral regime that began with the self as focus. Given individual attention, in some specific cases, such individuals would also be given individual timetables, designed to enable them to manage a light-touch engagement with schooling and they would also, most importantly, be given a book entitled "About Me." In this book they were to reconstruct themselves, to rethink their relations to time, for example, to review their past and to reread their present situation, but most of all to construct for themselves a new, normative trajectory. To modify Althusser, they were in in fact subjected to a strictly governmental process of reinterpellation (Althusser, 1977, 1984).

A key component of this process of reorientation was often to promote (very commonly unrealistic) aspirations for young people whose educational destinies were already negatively determined. In some cases, educational aspirations would be traded against social safety, so that families would conspire with agencies in accepting low achievement compensated for by remaining within the normative environment of school – or its associated public institutions – and achieving a socially acceptable, if limited, educational trajectory. Remaining within the juridical framework of education, even if the outcomes would be very modest, was clearly promoted as – and seen as – preferable to falling into the zone of exclusion. One way or another, in these scenarios education presented and indeed operates as "an offer you can't refuse." In the cases of Sure Start and The Children's Fund the offer is very clearly made as a governmental drive to manage the worst social consequences of relative poverty.

Managing Persistent Inequalities
Perhaps because of its obvious ubiquity, the extensive reach of schooling in "the present age" is hardly ever commented on by educationists and very rarely by philosophers of education. It is my contention that the appropriate response to the ubiquity of the school (and the contemporary emphasis on education) is astonishment. That is to say that the phenomenon of schooling cries out for recognition as a phenomenal phenomenon. For me, this involves a return, again and again, to fundamental questions. What is the nature of this ubiquitous institution and what is its force in contemporary life? What is the history that has produced it and what does that history have to tell us about its current meaning? How has the school as we know it – since its inception in the nineteenth century – become what it is now and what, phenomenologically, does that process reveal to us?

To cut a long story very short, to explain what this thing is we would have to acknowledge the rise of the elementary school as the expression of a concern to govern newly (19th century) formed, large and potentially wayward urban populations and a parallel concern with rendering the condition of the population

accessible for new kinds of organization. The modern school becomes an increasingly subtle and widespread institution concerned with managing the state of the population, with ensuring what are regarded as proper norms of development and instilling attitudes and developing competences. What's more, the school enacts a social technology ultimately designed to produce self-regulating subject-citizens (Donald, 1992; Hunter, 1988, 1994).

The emergence and development of the school in this form makes the school more than a vehicle for learning and teaching and more also than an expression of the economy. While both these functions are enacted through the school, the history and form of the school indicates that the governmental function be considered as the dominant. What's more, a change in the very nature of identity is marked by this history: a change in the orientation to and definition of personhood, whereby personal identity becomes a project for labour and transformation, through interpellative and shaping processes for mass populations. We might say that in the industrial era industrial processes are applied to human material that gets conceived of actively as a population or potential labour force – material to be worked upon and fashioned. It is as if a realization grows that the people constitute a resource to be managed (Foucault, 2007).

It's worth remembering that the history of education shows us that the form of state sponsored schooling was initially elementary schooling – clearly separate from elite education. Such schooling was unpretentious and honest, at first, in its offer. The twentieth century saw the grafting onto elementary education of social ideals of equality and redistribution. Successive moves and events – the Hadow Report 1926, the Butler Education Act 1944, circular 10/65, the education act of 1976 – accompanied a growing discourse of equality and access. In that process, still operating today, elite education did not go away and retained its authority and power. Educational inequality and the negative effects of class, gender and ethnicity have proven intractable – even in very recent times (Batho, 1989; Wardle, 1974).

In spite of the ongoing discourses of equality and social justice, state schooling has been demonstrably riven with class, gender and ethnically related inequalities. The classical sociology of education – much of it developed in the 1970s and enhanced in the 1980s – not only demonstrated that inequality was persistently the case, but also explained why it was so and why it was likely to remain so (Bernstein, 1971; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1986, 1991; Bowles and Gintis, 1976). In spite of generations of relative social mobility, the patterns of inequality in education remain powerful; but they also remain the concern of well-meaning academics in education who clearly believe that this powerful fact can be reversed, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. No doubt their well-meaning, naive faith is also complemented by professional investment in such an idea. The now dominant idea that education can be redeemed from inequalities persists against all the evidence and has become, in recent times, an adjunct to the

governmental forces and processes at work in the demand for constant improvement (Apple, 1996; Giroux, 1992; Popkewitz and Fendler, 1999). At the same time, the story of progress has been persistently discredited.

The school continues to remain a central institution. Effective in providing the grounds and justification for the social division of labour, effective in producing a general ethic of (self) improvement and self-management as social ideals, effective in intervening in the culture of the child and in promoting an official culture ensconced in curriculum and in the value system of the school, the school remains *the* key governmental instrument. Its well-established and constantly refined technologies for person-management and for determining positive and negative modes of identity continue to promote a hierarchical vision of knowledge and of social relations. The school affirms a maniacally norm-related model of knowledge, identity and development.

The school is an entity recognizable in terms of its characteristic ways of working: its division of spaces, its stratifications of identity, its controls on dress, conduct and language. Schooling is a process relating to these features involving a disciplinary as well as a pastoral work on the substance of individuals and groups. Within this complex and sophisticated "apparatus" all participants are interpellated to recognize themselves as whatever the institution deems them to be. This identity is more or less in process but at times is strictly determined and has far-reaching consequences (Althusser, 1977, 1984).

We can now see the features of this essential institutional structure as operating beyond the confines of the institution becoming principles at work outside the enclosure of the school in the wider "pedagogized society." The workplace is similarly riven with hierarchies of knowledge and identity, where credentials carry status effects, where relations are characterized by norms of progress and where management is characterized as pastoral discipline and where the workforce is increasingly expected to be – even required to be – self-managing. In other words, the semantic slippage from school to schooling that implies the generalization of a process from a thing can be said to have become an ontological slippage: schooling has become the order of the day in relation to contemporary forms of Being dominated by a governance ethic. This will to govern, improve and correct is visible in various explicit educational projects concerning, for example, care for one's health but is also ingrained in implicit self-help and self-improvement messages: to manage one's life, to manage ones finances, to organize one's time effectively, to hone one's aspirations, to be ever conscious of one's "arc," to be ever reflective, to remain in touch with processes of self-improvement. In this sense schooling has become a metonymy for much of contemporary life: as the mechanism through which contemporary virtues are implanted.

A Lacanian Perspective

Of course, it's always philosophically dangerous to affirm what something essentially is. But there are questions concerning the phenomenology of education and its relations to ontology. A Lacanian perspective is useful here. Lacan's fractured ontology articulates a radical disjuncture between orders of being – the imaginary, the symbolic and the Real. On a simple application of this perspective, education is the focus of imaginary desires, at the level of individual but also of the collective. Education can both personally fulfil, so the story goes, and collectively heal divisions, restore justice and make a 'better world' (as Michael Jackson might have put it). At the same time, education takes up its place in a complex and often contradictory symbolic order as the site of authority, disciplinary propriety, a place that is also the archive of cultural development. As a field of disciplined play individual aspirations may be achieved through education, but a positive identity may only be purchased by a desired submission to its requirements. Beyond either Imaginary or Symbolic is the unremitting Real, unknowable in itself, unimpressed by our symbolic overlays that it may shatter at will and unconcerned with our dreamy imaginary fantasies. The Symbolic and the Real can never be in perfect accord with one another. The Real is what we bump up against unexpectedly, beyond the determinations of our symbolism or our imagined projections: what may escape both the Imaginary and the Symbolic. In the world of education a host of phenomena express this "answer of the real" – this disturbance in our ordered sense of what properly belongs, of what education ought to be. Persistent resistance to education by certain social groups, ongoing historically deep-rooted class differences in attainment, embarrassing statistics concerning differential achievements among ethnic groupings, disaffection, truanting, resistance to "the gift" that education offers by individuals and specific social groups, those littered spaces where pupils hang out to socialize, the annual failures at GCSE of a significant percentage of the 16+ population, annual public recriminations concerning standards, failing schools: all contribute to the disturbance of the symbolic myths of education as salvation by the crude interruption of the Real (Lacan, 2006).

Ultimately, the Real is not directly accessible through the Symbolic, in spite of the imaginary projections of the realists. What's real is not in the possession of any way of looking at or being with the order of things. In the antagonistic realm of the Symbolic the determination of what is must always be subject to difference and struggle. In our time, education has been improperly given the messianic role of bearer of personal, national and global redemption. The Symbolic Order of education has recently seen several attempts to close down the field of difference and to seal the ontological question with a range of stratagems. Education remains suspicious of "pure" theory and continues to privilege practice as the "proper." That Philosophy of Education is strongly implicated in this move is deeply ironic, of

course. "Educational Studies" has at times explicitly stated its identity in terms of a critique designed to salvage and restore education to its proper social mission. This project carries benefits for academics in terms of claims of relevance and impact. But academic discourses that assume the mantle of improvement as the proper dress-code of knowledge are highly questionable on several grounds.

Emphasis on practice and improvement is disabling for the possibilities of rethinking. Existential certitude is both inappropriate to the object and stifling to the very project of development that it seems to promote. Educational development has increasingly come to be understood entirely in terms of what Derrida might define as a programmable, delimited, predictable future: in other words a future (*futur*) that is not a future (*avenir*) but is essentially the endless repetition of the present. And that repetition includes the negative products of education in the present: its persistent reproduction of inequalities and foreclosure of identities.

Beyond or Outside Education?

A turning away from fundamental questions and a forgetting of the question of Being concerning education, as Heidegger might have it, is everywhere evident in the geography of educational spaces. Nowhere is the separation of spaces into functional sites more strongly developed than in the school, nowhere more subtly developed than in the extended, proliferated scholastic environments of our "pedagogized society," including the contemporary university. Nowhere does the homogeneous idea of commonality prevail so strongly in terms of remorseless logic of normative development (Agamben, 1993). In explicitly enclosed spaces, but also in more liberally open spaces, discourses of development and improvement, always closely managed and now centrally defined, pervade the "tableaux vivants" that express the triumph of a self-directed order, where "multitudes" become "ordered multiplicities," to borrow Foucault's distinction, that are essential features of the now vast apparatuses of education (Foucault, 1977).

The philosophy of education today frequently invokes the casually received Socratic "wisdom" that the "examined life" is paramount, perhaps forgetting the dark ambiguity in the word "examined" but certainly forgetting the Nietzschean warning about the negative role of Socrates and Euripides in Attic culture. The scholastic domination of life, according to the argument of *The Birth of Tragedy*, represents a loss of confidence. Coupled with its vast normative machinery, the "technological enframing" of modern and contemporary education might similarly signal a warning to "we contemporaries."

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