Review Essay

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NIETZSCHE’S EDUCATIONAL LEGACY REVISED


Whoever thought he had understood something of me, had made up something out of me after his own image – not, uncommonly, an antithesis of me. (Nietzsche, EH, “Why I write such good books”, p. 1)

NIETZSCHE AS EDUCATOR

For nearly three decades Anglo-American philosophers of education have been considering the educational significance of Nietzsche’s thought, yet the harvest of their research has been spare: only about twenty publications have appeared, most of them in the British Journal of Philosophy of Education and in the American Educational Theory. In the last years the number has dwindled to such an extent, that we may want to conclude that Nietzsche’s educational appeal has now completely vanished. Happily, however, this is not the case.

“Nietzsche’s Legacy for Education. Past and Present Values” is the title of a recently published book, edited by Michael Peters, James Marshall and Paul Smeyers (2001). It comprises twelve chapters written mainly by three groups of “experienced readers of Nietzsche”, who met in Belgium, New Zealand and the US in the late nineties (ibid., p. XXV). According to the editors’ introduction, the book is unique twice over. It brings together for the first time “a group of educators who, working from Nietzsche’s texts both in the original German and in English translation, mark out the significance of Nietzsche’s thought for educational theory” (ibid., p. XXV). The book is also unique, the editors add, “in that individual chapters firmly link Nietzsche’s oeuvre to contemporary scholarship and particularly to the work of the French poststructuralists”, providing in this way, “an understanding necessary for a proper appreciation of poststructuralism in educational theory” (ibid.). But in addition the book belongs in a series of...
“Critical studies in education and culture” edited by Henry Giroux, and it comes with his “Series Foreword” as well. The aim of the series, Giroux states, is to deal “with pedagogical issues that contribute in imaginative and transformative ways to our understanding of how critical knowledge, democratic values, and social practices can provide a basis for teachers, students, and other cultural workers to redefine their role as engaged and public intellectuals” (ibid., p. IX). As such the series is “part of a larger project” designated to deepen “the prospects of democratic schooling in a multiracial and multicultural society” and to promote a “productive social change” (ibid.).

This conjunction of Nietzsche's educational conception with both French poststructuralism and critical pedagogy sounds stimulating, since it suggests that Nietzsche’s new interpreters go beyond a discussion of Nietzsche alone. The topic of the book is consequently not “Nietzsche's educational legacy”, but exactly what the title of the book announces, i.e., Nietzsche’s legacy – or contribution – to educational theory. Discussing Nietzsche from such a point of view indicates both a turning point and a new trend in his interpretation. In this review I shall try to investigate this new trend and to examine Nietzsche’s relevance to the unique context in which his present interpreters place him. For this purpose I shall start with a brief comparison of the interpretations of Nietzsche in this book with others generated over the three preceding decades.

The introduction to the book includes a review of Nietzsche's previous educational reception (ibid., pp. XXIV–XXV). Unfortunately, this sections offers mainly a list of pertinent publications, and the latter is, moreover, inaccurate: The editors state that the educational debate on Nietzsche “appears” to have been closed in 1991 with the publication of Aviram's article (1991), whereas at least four additional articles continuing this debate have appeared since (Sasson, 1996; Schacht, 1996; Bingham, 1998; Johnston, 1998) – all of which are actually included in the updated bibliography of the book. In the following I shall therefore rely on my own review (Rosenow, 2000).

In that review I argued that the predominant Anglo-American interpretation of Nietzsche focuses on two topics: one is the image of the authentic individual, i.e., the ideal image of Nietzsche’s Overman, and other is the presentation of Nietzsche as a democratic and humane educator par excellence. I maintained that what characterizes this interpretation is, that it represents the educational ideals and values advocated by Nietzsche in terms of autonomy, cultural refinement, Kantian ethics, dialogical communication, creativity, self-fulfillment and adherence to the ethos of liberalism. In sum: “Nietzsche appears in Anglo-American educational