

EDUCATION IN AN AGE OF NIHILISM



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Education in an Age of Nihilism

The issue of 'educational standards' is at the centre of government policy and at the heart of the contemporary educational debate. There is widespread anxiety that academic students are failing, yet there is a new machinery of accountability and inspection to show that they are not.

This timely book addresses concerns about educational and moral standards in a world characterised by a growing nihilism. The authors state that we cannot avoid nihilism if we are simply laissez-faire about values, nor can we reduce them to standards of performance, nor must we return to traditional values. They argue that we need to create a new set of values based on a critical assessment of aspects of contemporary practice in the light of a number of philosophical texts that address the question of nihilism, including the work of Nietzsche.

Education in an Age of Nihilism relates philosophy and theory to policy and practice. It will appeal to students and academics studying education and the philosophy of education, providing a much needed analysis of the assumptions underlying the debate on educational standards.

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And if he's kind and gentle too,
And he loves the world a lot,
His twilight words will melt the slush
Of what you have been taught.

Oh, you know what you could be –
Tell me, my friend,
Why you worry all the time
What you *should* be.

The Incredible String Band
You Know What You Could Be
(lyrics by Mike Heron)

The front cover reproduces Matisse's painting 'The Dance'.

Nietzsche's impact on the thinkers of the early twentieth century was extensive. Wittgenstein and Heidegger, Lawrence and Gide, Strauss and Stravinsky, the Cubists and Futurists all registered his liberating influence. A Nietzschean 'culte de vie', a celebration of the sensual, the vibrant, the instinctual and the profane of life – a celebration of 'what is' – pervaded the aesthetics and secular ethics of the decades before the First World War. Its special expression was found in a renewed and liberated culture of dance (we think of Nijinsky and Diaghilev, Isadora Duncan and Loïe Fuller).

It is above all in dance – in its spontaneous order, alertness and poise, energy and style – that we are absorbed most intelligently in the flow of experience. In dancing, Apollo and Dionysos, *logos* and *eros*, meet. In Matisse's 'The Dance' they come together in harmonious ecstasy and naked elegance.

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List of abbreviations

We have used the following abbreviations for Nietzsche's works.

<i>A</i>	<i>The Antichrist</i>
<i>BGE</i>	<i>Beyond Good and Evil</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>The Birth of Tragedy</i>
<i>D</i>	<i>Daybreak</i>
<i>EH</i>	<i>Ecce Homo</i>
<i>GM</i>	<i>On the Genealogy of Morals</i>
<i>TI</i>	<i>Twilight of the Idols</i>
<i>Z</i>	<i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i>
<i>GS</i>	<i>The Gay Science</i>
<i>WP</i>	<i>The Will to Power</i>

We have used the latest Penguin editions in all cases except for *The Gay Science*, where we have used the Vintage books edition (trans. and ed. W. Kaufmann, 1974); for *The Will to Power* we have used the Vintage Books edition (trans. and ed. W. Kaufmann, 1968); for *The Genealogy of Morals* we have used the Oxford World's Classics edition (trans. and ed. Douglas Smith, 1996). For *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* we have used the Prometheus edition (trans. T. Common, revised with an introduction by H. James Birx, 1993); for *Daybreak* we have used the Cambridge University Press edition (trans. and ed. R. J. Hollingdale, 1982).

Wherever possible we have referred to the section of the text. Otherwise the page number of the relevant edition is indicated.

Introduction

In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes that ‘The highest values have devalued themselves. There is no goal. There is no answer to the question, “why?”’. He believes this is the state of affairs of his time. Values have become merely conventional: they are experienced as external to us, as things we do not recognise ourselves in or identify ourselves with. Political programmes proceed under their own momentum. It is the smooth running of the system which thus becomes, by default, the chief goal and end. This, the devaluation of value, is one kind of nihilism.

We have written this book in the conviction that education, in much of the English-speaking world, and particularly in the UK, is characterised by a similar nihilism, by a lack of commitment which we conceal with devices such as orthodox mission statements or programmes of docile ‘values clarification’. Perhaps the most glaring sign of our devaluation of value is the reduction of complex educational aims and purposes, of the whole question of what education is *for*, to a matter of *raising standards*, understood as a matter of children, schools or whole educational systems (local authorities, for example, or nations internationally competing at mathematics) moving from lower to higher positions on league tables, entirely as if educational achievement were no different from that of a football team pulling clear of the relegation zone or becoming a contender for promotion. A standard, we should recall, is in one of its meanings a single scale, like Celsius or Richter, on which all temperatures or earthquakes can be ranked. The standard, and thus the goal and values, are one and the same for all. (All, that is, must be *commensurable*.) Absurd to object that you were trying to do something *different* with your pupils or students – perhaps enlarge their horizons or give them insight into their own experience. As well excuse your football team’s relegation on

the grounds that the players have been fine role-models to the community.

Along with this reductionism comes a positive refusal to devote real thought to questions of the aims and purposes of education. It is striking that the official documents and reports of the last twenty or so years, from many countries and organisations of the western world, either contain only the most perfunctory statements of such aims (often treating them as eminently establishable by *fiat*) or declare that discussion of ends and purposes is now redundant: a nostalgic practice which we have finally grown out of. Of course we should expect nothing else where the triumph of the market has declared individual subjective choice sovereign and *deliberation*, by corollary, pointless. If the consumer is supreme, educational values are simply what the consumer happens to want, and it makes no more sense to undertake any great inquiry into those values than into preferences in the matter of cars or brands of chicken tikka. Between them the league tables, which announce the score or position as the supreme good, and the market, which deifies choice (of course the logic of the league-tables is to reduce the scope of choice: otherwise people might start thinking about what they really want), appear to exclude the possibility of thinking about educational values altogether.

Into this vacuum spurious or ersatz values readily enter. Mission statements advertise excellence or world-class status, as if this meant that the institution was committed to something substantial, as if this meant that you might know, when you went to this or that university or school, what made it different from any other. The university department may be exemplary (by the standards of quality assurance), the school may be a beacon (having come out of its inspection better than most): but a beacon or example of quite *what* it is generally hard to say. There is a sense here that what is valuable is defined by contradistinction to its opposite (the merely satisfactory, or even the failing). It was this formulation of value as *the opposite of its opposite* that Nietzsche – again – saw as the core of nihilism. What do we stand for? We are no longer sure: only that it is not what these others represent. We are the reds, which means that we are definitely not the blues – them we abhor and would not be mistaken for; once more as if the values of education were no different from those of the most mindlessly partisan football supporter. Governments may encourage this moral immaturity by naming and shaming those who do not come up to the mark. Our values are acknowledged in that we find it is not ours but the

neighbouring school which is thus stigmatised, closed and re-opened under new management (existing staff may re-apply for their jobs). In the same way a child's sense of his worth is confirmed when he is told that he has done well enough not to be sent early to bed *today*.

It comes to seem that the only sure value of education lies in the maintenance and extension of the system itself. Better education means more education – shorter holidays, a longer school day:¹ education, education, education, as Mr Blair expressed his new government's priorities in 1997 (see below, p. 184). 'Efficiency' and 'effectiveness' have long been shibboleths. A *school effectiveness* industry of researchers and consultants proclaims that there is no limit to the speed with which the vehicle may proceed (so to speak), irrespective of the state of the road. No school is so bad, so the orthodoxy runs, but that a good headteacher (a superhead, as we must now call him or her) cannot turn it round via the effective management of change. The proponents of school effectiveness are our new educational Taliban, intolerant of philosophical debate or diversity of values, for the most part incredulous at the idea that their approach is not simply common sense. All rush to improve schools, showing how standards can be raised by the teaching of thinking skills, by the judicious use of information technology, or by re-arranging the desks in a horseshoe.² A degree of misgiving, a lurking sense of the inadequacy of all this can perhaps be seen in the note of desperate, insistent reiteration: Mr Blair's three-fold 'education', the stream of publications bearing titles like *Really Raising Standards*.³

Educational policy, we are told, should henceforth be evidence-based. Social scientists should put themselves at the service of government in the quest for 'what works'. But this idea, apparently so innocuous – who can be against what works? – bears a little examination. All kinds of things may work without being the solutions which, given a broad view of things, we would choose. What 'works' may be morally repugnant (in one sense the Nazis' final solution certainly worked); its very success as means to an end may encourage us not to consider whether the end is appropriate or desirable. It tells us what to do, and it saves us from *thinking*. Talk of what works, in short, risks leading to short-term solutions for problems which may not, in the terms in which they are conceived, be problems at all. Being a question wholly about means, such talk forecloses on questions of the ends which are proposed. The bland confidence that 'what works' labels an unassailable educational

good is one of the most worrying signs of the moral void in which education now founders. What if a literacy or other strategy 'worked', raising children's reading scores, but at the cost of ensuring that few of them ever read for pleasure or ever thought very much again?

To many these arguments, and no doubt this whole book, will seem perverse. At a time when governments are committing themselves to education to an extent not seen for many years (and we do not question the genuineness of their fervour), why do we choose this moment to publish a book such as this? We shall probably be dismissed, if we are noticed at all, as moaners, cynics, conservatives or even elitists (an interest in Nietzsche, after all, is often considered suspect). Conceivably we shall be ourselves regarded as nihilists: just as Nietzsche is sometimes, absurdly, thought to glory in the very moral emptiness that he exposes in his own time.

Yet what if the earnest efforts of the undoubtedly well-meaning – of Ministers of State, school improvers, heads of Standards and Effectiveness Units, listers of competences and outcomes, and all the rest – rest on standards of thin air? The very reasonableness, as it may seem, of the terms in which education is currently conceived is what should worry us here. Our contemporary educationists (in committee, task-group or working-party: how well-focused they are!) display a gimlet-eyed certainty, a confidence in talk of planning and targets, transferable skills and outcomes, that speaks loudly of *repression*. Perhaps a facility with the new terminology is not altogether healthy. Whatever the benefits of our New Model Education there is a shadow side here. The targets, standards and benchmarks become the latest nostrums and settle (for all that they like to pose as part of the radical new broom sweeping away the forces of conservatism) into a complacent and nihilistic orthodoxy.

One purpose of this book, then, is to disrupt the new conventionalism: to make what has become familiar and over-familiar in our educational world look a little more odd. This, though, is not easy. The authors of this book are themselves of course not immune to the siren voices, the lure of the accepted commonplace. This after all is where we work; these are the times we live in. To stand back from the assumptions of our time requires support and suitable resources. We have found these above all in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose presence may be felt throughout our book even where we do not draw on or refer to his work explicitly.

What is it about Nietzsche that suggests to us his usefulness to thinking about education now?

The revival of interest in Nietzsche in the second half of the twentieth century and the current proliferation of books and articles underline the fact that there is not one Nietzsche available to us but many, some of them radically different (and Nietzsche himself, it should be noted, is many Nietzsches). Heidegger's Nietzsche, for instance, is the author of a coherent (if latent) doctrine which constitutes the last word on western metaphysics; Kaufmann's is a recognisably Enlightenment figure whose chief concern is to liberate us from the constraints of authority and superstition;⁴ the Nietzsche of the post-structuralists (to use this opaque term for the sake of convenience, and thus to designate Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze amongst others) foregrounds the connections between power and knowledge, the centrality of desire and affirmation, and a certain creative playfulness of philosophical style. We have not attempted to position ourselves carefully here with respect to these various Nietzsches. We owe the reader some account of what we understand by *nihilism* and other crucial concepts, and we go some way towards supplying this in the chapters below. However the reader who looks for a systematic interpretation of Nietzsche will be disappointed. We are less interested in interpreting Nietzsche than in fruitfully *using* him for our own purposes. In fact this seems to us the Nietzschean thing to do.

It would be wrong however to proceed further without mention of the one book in recent years that attempts to bring Nietzschean perspectives to bear on education: David Cooper's *Authenticity and Learning: Nietzsche's Educational Philosophy* (1983). Cooper undertakes a far more systematic and scholarly exposition of Nietzsche than we have attempted here. We have learned much from his book, even where we would not follow his account. In particular we would differ from him in his characterisation of the authentic individual that education should produce. The real difference between Cooper's book and ours, however, is in the sense of the educational climate to which he and we are responding. He was properly concerned by the failure of the kind of education often thought of as 'progressive' or 'child-centred' to achieve anything other than a parody of authenticity. Less than twenty years on, however, the issues are not the same. The triumph of the political Right has ensured the defeat of progressivism, in the debased and sentimentalised form that Cooper attacks, and the rise of quite different educational values, questionable on different grounds.

One way Nietzsche is useful to us is in releasing us from overly narrow conceptions of philosophy. This, if it must be categorised, is a philosophical book; at any rate it is written by four philosophers of education. Philosophy can be a dry and technical business, and philosophy of education has in the past often seemed to want to assert its philosophical credentials by burlesquing the worst kind of analytical aridity. Nietzsche on the other hand makes available to us a richer and less limited notion of what it is to do philosophy. As is well known, his procedure is less to undertake conceptual analysis or to construct tight arguments than to undermine and discredit perspectives that he finds unsound: to reorient our thinking in different directions. In order to do this he is prepared to employ different styles and different voices – aphoristic, fragmentary, apocalyptic, ironic. Thus he takes us beyond existing frameworks of expression and interpretation and suggests the possibility of new ones. And this, we believe, is a valuable approach in a world where the dominant frameworks (and especially of course the nihilistic, performative framework of educational thinking) show an enduring capacity to resist the onslaught of more traditional forms of analysis.

Nietzsche makes us question the easy distinction between philosophy and more literary forms of expression. He reminds us that we must take *language* seriously: that the range of our language and the quality of our thinking are not two separate matters. Language is not to be treated as a box of disposable tools whose function is simply to help us get to wherever we want to go; or, if we do treat language like that, we should not be surprised to find ourselves enmired in the instrumentalism that results from unconsciously foregrounding means-towards-ends. His famous description of truth as a mobile or flexible army of metaphors (*TI*: 374) points to the ineradicably figurative nature of language.

Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.

(*Ibid.*)

When we suppose language to be offering us direct and unmediated access to reality we have probably failed to notice the particular metaphors we are using (or, more accurately, which are using us). Educationists' ready talk of *effectiveness* and *what works* supplies

examples. That is how we come to think that the only sensible way to interpret the world is by 'counting, calculating, weighing, seeing and touching, and nothing more' (GS: 373); and that is both crude and naive.

Above all, it is Nietzsche's perspective that is helpful when we consider what may reasonably be called the crisis of values (or demoralisation) in education. To take this view of education is not to complain that 'the values dimension' has been left out, as if it were something familiar that had unfortunately been omitted, such that some earnest working-party could put matters right by drawing up a set of guidelines. It is emphatically not to make out a new case for 'moral education' as that is generally understood. The problem is both deeper and more interesting than that. The point is precisely to ask what is the value of the kinds of values that currently inform education. And where those values, upon examination, appear discredited and inadequate, where are we to turn? We must find new ones, or nihilism will rule. We must create fresh values, precisely as Nietzsche tells us, in that spirit of dynamic vitality and affirmation which lies at the heart of his notion of the 'will to power':

A virtue has to be *our* invention, *our* most personal defence and necessity: in any other sense it is merely a danger... 'Virtue', 'duty', 'good in itself', impersonal and universal – phantoms, expressions of decline, of the final exhaustion of life. . . . The profoundest laws of preservation and growth demand the reverse of this: that each one of us should devise *his own* virtue, *his own* categorical imperative.

(A: 11)

Anything less than this, Nietzsche would have us understand, is life-denying, and, so far from reinvigorating our moral lives, 'is virtually a *recipe* for *décadence*' (ibid.). In education it is the difference between raising standards as a matter of unfurling banners beneath which one will whole-heartedly march, and raising standards in terms merely of ensuring that the children score more marks this year than last.

In an earlier book, *Thinking Again: Education after Postmodernism* (1998), we also examined the state of education, arguing that instrumentalism, particularly in its latest guise as performativity, has brought about a kind of intellectual paralysis, a condition in which it is difficult to move from vague unease with the educational

climate to substantial critique. There are similarities between that book and this. Both attempt to unsettle established thinking about education; both draw on thinkers generally uncongenial to the Anglo-Saxon mind (there we used in particular Foucault, Lacan, Lyotard and Derrida) in order to establish radical lines of criticism and re-open the possibility of creative thinking. This book is rather more closely focused than the earlier text. It is the product of our belief that the roots of the 'postmodern condition', as Lyotard (1984) described it, go deep, and are to be found in that radical negation of values that Nietzsche, and we, call nihilism.

The book is organised in the following way. In Part 1, *Working without Values*, we show how various aspects of our world, especially but not only the world of formal education, are essentially nihilistic. We argue that this is manifested most vividly in some of the best-known attempts to improve education, such as the school effectiveness movement and even the interest in 'emotional literacy' which promises to redeem the schooling that commits itself too narrowly to purely cognitive or intellectual goals. An important theme of this Part is *work*. Clearly education must in some sense prepare children for work, and it is a naïve and perhaps irresponsible philosophy that severs that connection altogether. But the same nihilism that infects education has also come to colour our idea of work, we argue, with disastrous results.

Part 2, *Overcoming Nihilism*, explores the theoretical resources available for addressing the problem of nihilism. Here we offer our most explicit interpretation of those aspects of Nietzsche and of the perspectives he makes available that seem most pertinent to our concerns. The 'revaluation of our values' seems to require a radically new approach to the ethical life in general. We go some way to position our reading of Nietzsche against other influential recent readings, and focus on Nietzsche's contrast between Apollo and Dionysos as a fertile source of insight. Here too we emphasise the crucial role that conceptions of language and literacy play in modern understandings of education, arguing that an impoverished notion of literacy cannot but lead to an impoverished notion of the whole educational enterprise.

In Part 3, *Raising Standards*, we make a case for some unfashionable educational aims and approaches. Education is all about communication, isn't it? – but perhaps there is distinctive educational value in a certain kind of silence, in withdrawing, in listening. Moral education, meanwhile, might concern itself at least as much with cultivating a sense of affirmation, a relish for the zest of life, as

with the humble virtues (patience, forbearance, tolerance) derived from the Judaeo-Christian, and mediated through the Kantian, tradition. Nor is it entirely clear that proper relationships between teacher and taught should be a model of distant and disembodied formality. Authorities as far back as Plato, as well as more recent ones, have suggestive things to say on the matter. Education inculcates knowledge, but there is a sense in which ignorance too has its educational value. There are perhaps disturbing ideas here, but ones which we believe must be taken seriously if education is to be reconnected to learning, to vitality and to responsibility.

Lastly, nothing is more certain in the world of education than that good management is the key. The management of change, indeed, may be said to be at the heart of educational reform, as it is in the other public services and perhaps in all aspects of our rapidly changing world, particularly in what is increasingly recognised as the knowledge economy in an age of lifelong learning. It is good organisation and management that make the whole more than the sum of its parts, that help us to formulate aims and objectives and thus to move from where we are now to where we want to be. How could this be doubted? Accordingly we have ourselves tried to draw helpful connections among the different parts and chapters here by including our own reflections on management and in particular on its connections with education and learning. We have kept these short, in deference to the reading habits of the age, and have interspersed them as handy *Fragments* throughout the book.

Notes

- 1 'Primary school pupils are to be given more rigorous preparation for their move to secondary school, and a nine-to-five school day when they get there, the government will announce this week', *The Guardian*, 13 March 2000.
- 2 All are real examples: the last may seem a burlesque, but can be found in, e.g., D. McNamara (1994).
- 3 P. Adey and M. Shayer (1994).
- 4 Both Heidegger and Kaufmann give a particular emphasis to Nietzsche's notion of the 'Overman' that does nothing to dispel the charge of subjectivism and arbitrariness so often levelled against him.