Europe, Continental Philosophy and the Philosophy of Education

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On what might a comparative discussion of philosophy of education that takes Europe as one of its terms be based? This paper begins by addressing the complexity that attaches to the name 'Europe' in this context in order to lay the way for a more detailed consideration of so-called 'Continental' philosophy—specifically of poststructuralism. It makes reference to the ways in which the work of poststructuralist thinkers has often been interpreted in 'postmodern' educational theory and seeks to reveal certain errors in this regard. Distinctions are drawn between postmodernity, postmodernism and poststructuralism, illustrating the last of these in terms of two influential strands of thought drawn from Levinas and Nietzsche, and indicating their value for education. In conclusion, some brief remarks are offered regarding the institutionalization of philosophy of education in Europe.

What can this paper be about? Where to begin? There are problems about what Europe is, yet reason to believe that it has a unique, defining role in what anyone reading this journal is likely to think of as philosophy of education. Certainly there have been similar forms of study elsewhere in the world, in wholly different traditions. But if 'philosophy of education' is what we are speaking about, then we cannot think about this without some sense of its origins, and, wherever we start from, this will take us back inexorably to Europe. Even 'philosophy', a word notoriously difficult to translate into non-European languages, takes us back to Europe. So there are real problems as to how a *comparative* account taking Europe as one of its terms is feasible.

I propose the following approach. The first section of this article offers a series of ways in which 'Europe' might be taken, considering it as a modern political configuration, as an inheritance, as excluding (or as other to) the UK, and finally in terms of the contrast between Continental and analytical styles of philosophy. The second section briefly acknowledges some of the main currents of philosophical thought that have shaped contemporary philosophy of education before elaborating what is

connoted by the term 'Continental' today. The third section, the major burden of the paper, clarifies the ideas of postmodernity, postmodernism and poststructuralism, illustrating the last of these in terms of two influential strands of thought. The final section makes some brief remarks about the institutionalization of the field in this part of the world. This approach may seem roundabout, but it is necessary if meaningful comparisons are to be made.

Europe?

What then is Europe? We might think, first, of the modern political configuration, membership of which increased on 1 May 2004 from fifteen to twenty-five states. But the landmass designated by the name 'Europe' is not the same as the political organization to which the term commonly applies. The European Union is, so we are told on its website, a family of democratic European countries committed to peace and prosperity, joined in a unique political relationship:

> It is not a State intended to replace existing states, but it is more than any other international organisation. The EU is, in fact, unique. Its Member States have set up common institutions to which they delegate some of their sovereignty so that decisions on specific matters of joint interest can be made democratically at European level. This pooling of sovereignty is also called 'European integration' (Europa, 2004).

Hence the political entity of Europe is, on its own self-definition, diverse, making generalizations about it and its academic practices all the more open to question. The Union has developed in a context that is itself changing—from its inception in the aftermath of the Second World War to its more recent and continuing adjustment to postmodernity. In such circumstances ideas of identity and sovereignty are themselves compromised by forces of globalization: national and geographical boundaries become far less significant and less pertinent to academic practice. Moreover, philosophical questions, by their very nature (their generality, their 'deepness', their breadth, perhaps their universality) tend not to be tied to local policy and practice to the extent that other

aspects of educational research are. Hence, even where they start from specific questions of local policy, they quickly transcend these particular concerns.

The question of what is meant by Europe might prompt us, second, to turn away from current political structures and to think in terms of the heritage that it has conferred. Once again, geographical boundaries are transcended, for however one defines this heritage, and whatever strengths or weaknesses one discerns within it, the background of European thought and civilization is commonly understood as the backbone of the western tradition. Indeed this very way of thinking of a lineage—this arborescent structure, as Deleuze might put this—is very much a product of that inheritance.

A third complicating factor over the definition of Europe has to do with a far more ethnocentric quirk of the British, one that is captured in the infamous headline from *The Times* newspaper in the days of Empire: 'Fog in Channel. Europe cut off.' British isolationism has not entirely disappeared! Hence when the topic is European philosophy of education and this is being prepared for a British-based journal, the default assumption will be that coverage of work going on in the UK is not part of this brief.

This distinction feeds into another, between 'Continental' and 'analytical' philosophy—one that in its own way is equally quirky. The distinction is one that has divided philosophy departments; and it is one that has left some in philosophy of education looking with incredulity and dismay at 'the other side' (though this dismay usually comes from one direction more than the other). Of course, 'Continental' by no means covers all the work that goes on in philosophy in Europe, any more than it is confined to that region of the world. This is a distinction that applies generally to contemporary philosophy (in the western tradition), albeit that the preponderance of Anglophone work is analytical. But there is reason to be chary of the distinction— perhaps no more reasonable, as Bernard Williams remarked, than a classification of cars into 'front-wheel drive' and 'Japanese'.

These then are the difficulties facing any attempt to give an account of European philosophy of education. They do, however, provide something of a rationale for what follows. In their light I now proceed to say something about currents of philosophical thought that have shaped contemporary philosophy of education,

highlighting the Continental. This will perforce involve reference to postmodernism and poststructuralism.

The philosophical inheritance of continental philosophy

Any attempt even to outline the main strands of this inheritance in a paper of this length comes close to absurdity, but it is difficult to see how some mention, at least, of significant thinkers can be avoided. Hence it seems impossible not to include some reference to 'beginnings' with Plato and Aristotle, with their immeasurable influence— on metaphysics, ethics, epistemology . . . the very structures of philosophical thought that have come down to us. We can perhaps pass by such thinkers as Augustine and Aquinas in order to highlight the pivotal figure of Descartes in the shaping of the modern consciousness—that is, in laying the way for an understanding of the individual that has fed into ethics and epistemology over the past four centuries (on both sides of the English Channel). We cannot ignore Rousseau, who, while he must be the most familiar philosopher to anyone interested in education, is probably underestimated in terms of his importance in shaping modern ways of thinking—our ideas regarding childhood and the natural world, of course, but also modern political conceptions of freedom and equality. To echo words of Charles Taylor, Rousseau lays the way for our understanding of ourselves as beings with inner depths, depths to which reference must be made in our assessments of right and wrong and in our sense of our place in the world—he provides, in other words, the basis for the characteristically modern value of authenticity. The figure of Kant, so much influenced by Rousseau, is pivotal for the divergence in philosophy between Anglophone and Continental traditions that is to follow, for most philosophers will place themselves somehow or other in relation to him. But the way that they read him will be markedly different. To anticipate the outcome of the story a little, the idea of rational autonomy in modern analytical philosophy of education owes much to Kant, but so too does Lyotard's understanding of the sublime. No understanding of twentieth century French or German philosophy could be complete without reference to the legacy of Marx, especially in relation to Critical Theory and the work of the Frankfurt School but also in certain respects in Sartre's existentialism, for example, and generally in the climate of thought in France in the

1950s and 1960s. A more influential figure today, however, is Nietzsche. Poststructuralism comes about in part as a complication or unravelling of the structuralism of Saussure and Levi-Strauss, but in so doing it draws extensively on the influence of Nietzsche. (Nietzsche was influenced by Emerson and Thoreau, and they in their turn by Asian thought.)

This somewhat absurd 'listing' of names provides no tidy, linear history of influence. These are simply pointers to what might be called an inheritance of European thought, the beneficiaries of which are to be found all over the world. To reiterate the point, geographical boundaries will not suffice as the basis of comparison. Hence, to enable a comparison that is significant for philosophy of education, I shall focus especially on aspects of poststructuralism. Curtailing the discussion in this way is justified insofar as poststructuralism is most commonly identified today with Continental philosophy, arbitrary as this may be.

Postmodernism, postmodernity and poststructuralism

In what ways, then, might ideas drawn from poststructuralist thinkers (such as Derrida, Foucault, Levinas, Lyotard) have a bearing on the understanding of educational policy and practice? Reference to the 'postmodern' has become commonplace in educational research, but it is problematic in at least two respects. In the first, 'postmodernism' has become a trendy catchword, used to excess and with a lack of precision by both its advocates and its detractors. Things are made worse here by the assumptions that are made about what it implies, of which more will be said in the ensuing paragraphs. Second, the term is rightly used about a loose and fairly broad range of developments— in art and literature, film, music and fashion design, in cultural studies as well as philosophy itself. Architecture has provided seminal and iconic examples of what postmodernism is. There is a problem in applying the term to philosophy, however, in that the thinking that has been so influential for postmodernism is not necessarily periodized in quite the way that we find in the related developments in art, etc. If it is the thinking of Derrida, Foucault, Levinas and Lyotard to which reference is to be made, then 'poststructuralist' is the more precise and apt expression. At the same time it is worth drawing a distinction between postmodernity (as a period in time—characterized

by information and communication technology (ICT), simulation and virtuality, fragmentation and massification, and so on) and postmodernism (as this range of ideas and practices influenced by poststructuralism). None of this is to deny that, as a matter of fact, the term 'postmodern educational theory' has become common in educational research, but it is to regret this to the extent that this usage is vague and burdened with misleading assumptions.

Misleading assumptions

Let us begin here by enumerating some of these assumptions—regarding cultural and epistemological relativism, personal identity and narrative, language and power—in order to show how these diverge from the poststructuralist ideas upon which they claim to draw. It is appropriate to consider popular interpretations of these postmodernist themes in the light of the criticisms they have attracted and in relation to the poststructuralist thinkers with whom they are commonly associated.

In the first place there is the assumption that postmodernism must somehow reject the past. The past has been characterised by its false certainties—about God, king, country, the rationality of man, progress—all of which are now called into question. In fact the possibility of certainty, of truth itself, has been exposed as a chimera, in what seems to be a thoroughgoing *scepticism* (see Standish, 1995). Scepticism about truth leads to *relativism*, of both epistemological and ethical kinds, and in both individual and cultural forms. Knowledge claims and the traditions that go with them are then nothing more than the expression of power interests, however covert or unwitting these may be. What is 'true' in one culture (or for one person) is not 'true' for another: what is 'true' is synonymous with what is 'taken to be true'. So too, ethical standards are relative to cultures (or individuals), such that *we* have no right to criticize what *they* do (and *you* have no right to pass judgement on the values *I* hold)—hence the familiar complaints: 'Aren't you being judgemental?' 'Aren't you bringing values in?'

Doubts of these kinds often carry with them a further set of assumptions to the effect that, if there can be no certainty and no ethical objectivity to values, then ultimately we live in a world without values. (Curiously, the reductive assertion that all is power is itself presumed to be somehow innocent of value judgement!) The

consequence is a prevailing *nihilism*. Educational research in this vein is often characterized by a cynicism bent on exposure of the presumptions and pretensions of modernity. Sometimes such assumptions are grafted onto concerns for injustice; sometimes they provide the rationale for a commitment to releasing the 'play' of language and thought—perhaps with suggestion of emancipation.

Manifestations of these tendencies can be seen readily enough in some of the exaggerated forms that otherwise potentially coherent kinds of educational research can take. Thus, because there is no ultimate truth, 'constructivism' takes it that learning is a matter of the child creating her own knowledge. Similarly, 'narrative research' is sometimes understood to involve the creation of one's life story, or perhaps, because we know that what is studied is never independent of the researcher, the construction, somewhat narcissistically, of the researcher's own life-story. (Further confusion arises here in the equivocation over 'story' as fiction and non-fiction.) As a third example, hinted at above, arguments on the part of multiculturalists sometimes lose coherence in their pieties of 'respect for the other' and their mantra of 'recognition of difference'.

But if these misleading assumptions involve fallacious readings of poststructuralist thought, how are we to move towards a more accurate understanding? What are the characteristics of poststructuralism?

Central preoccupations of poststructuralism

Poststructuralism is pervaded by a concern with the relation of language to thought, and as such it relates to the so-called linguistic concern of twentieth century philosophy. This is a turning of philosophical attention within Anglophone traditions—for example, by J. L. Austin and by the later Wittgenstein. It involved moving away from foundationalist assumptions of the primacy of logic and towards a more subtle recognition of the varied nature of language and of its deep influence, its pervasive implication, across the range of human practices. On the Continent such sensitivities were already well developed in the work of Nietzsche, who had himself read and been impressed by similar thoughts in Emerson and Thoreau. Heidegger's thinking, in the decades following the publication of his masterwork, *Being and time* [*Sein und Zeit*] (Heidegger, 1927), moved towards the emphasis on language as fundamental to our

being. Language is not well understood as a means of communication—as if, as Aristotle had thought, ideas first exist in some kind of abstract form and then are coded into words in order for us to convey them to others. For in what form do those ideas first arise? Where do they come from? As Heidegger provocatively puts the matter, man does not speak language: language speaks man. Language is the wellspring for our thought and our being as human beings. With this disturbance of the relation between thoughts and words, the way is opened also to a weakening of the distinction between philosophy and literature.

Poststructuralist thought is indeed concerned with the relation of knowledge and power. Once again Nietzsche's writings lay the way for this, especially for the work of Foucault. But the point of the power-knowledge connection has less to do with the ways in which particular power interests conceal their operations under the cloak of a supposedly natural language (though, to be sure, this does happen): it is that any form of discourse enables certain ways of thinking even as it (perhaps surreptitiously) excludes others. Power, however, is not necessarily bad, and exclusion is inevitable and not necessarily to be regretted. One thing that this reveals is the inevitably partial nature of our language and thought—the impossibility of a comprehensive or total understanding. It should encourage a more subtle and discriminative thought, alert to the effects of exclusions as well as appreciative of the possibilities that specific forms of discourse enable.

Given the pervasive and essential presence of language in human life, and given the very nature of language itself (of which more below), it follows that notions of stable identity and development are unsettled. Thus, to the extent that educational theory has grounded itself in the ideas of developmental psychology, in conjunction with learning theory understood in terms of unilinear progression, it needs to be rethought. But far from justifying the excessively subjective vocabularies of self-creation, this should lead to something more like humility in recognition of the extent to which language creates us. And far from being a flight from objectivity, this will be a more rigorous recognition of the way things are. In a very real sense we are formed by the words that we have available to us, and what these words are will be determined by the kind of upbringing we have. There is then, it is true, a culturally relative aspect to this: an education in French and an education in Japanese cannot be the same (though this is

emphatically not to imply that they are impermeable), and there can be no education that is linguistically or culturally neutral. But this, again far from collapsing into epistemological relativism, should lead us to a heightened sensitivity to the significance of cultural initiation, with the various kinds and degrees of richness that such initiations can put within the range of learners, and with their various forms of exclusion or neglect.

It is right to see poststructuralist thought as conditioned by antifoundationalism, but this should not occasion the assumption that certainty is thereby forfeited or that truth disappears. (One does not, incidentally, have to be a poststructuralist in name in order to take this view. Habermas's antifoundationalism, for example, has greater continuity with an Enlightenment faith in reason.) Wittgenstein devoted a set of writings to the exposure of the confusion that surrounds, on the one hand, the hyperbolic assertion of certainty and, on the other, the scepticism that is expressed in reaction to this. The much vaunted 'suspicion towards metanarratives' (of which more below) is tantamount to a rejection of totalising explanations, including those that are foundationalist. Thinking of this kind is post*structuralist* in the manner that it undermines also the comprehensive patterns or organizing ideas that are found, for example, in Saussure's linguistics or Levi-Strauss's anthropology, or for that matter in G. E. Moore's metaphysics.

The above points illustrate that poststructuralism is by no means tied to the (critique of the) particular conditions of postmodernity, though it may be the case that these insights have been made more accessible by social change. There are, however, two concepts associated with poststructuralism that are more particularly pertinent to the times in which we live, and in view of their educational relevance it is appropriate to acknowledge these here. In the first place, there is Baudrillard's idea of the *simalacrum*: in the commodification and image management of postmodernity, the very distinction between what is real and what is simulated, fictive or imaginary becomes hard to sustain —a process exacerbated by the new technologies with their capacity to create virtual reality (see Baudrillard, 1983). The other is to be found in a coinage that aptly captures aspects of the contemporary world and that manifests a prescience in relation to the changes that education policy and practice have undergone in the twenty-five years that have followed its introduction: Lyotard's concept of *performativity*. In the light of the

excesses of 'quality' control and accountability, of obsessive demonstration of 'efficiency and effectiveness', and of the pervasive effects of ICT, Lyotard's explanation of this idea seems particularly apt: 'The true goal of the system, the reason it programs itself like a computer is the optimization of the global relationship between input and output: performativity' (Lyotard, 1984, p. 11). By no means his best philosophical book, *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge* has been widely influential amongst educational researchers. It is lamentable, however, that many who have read it have failed to respond to its dark, sardonic tone and so have missed its frequent adoption of phrasings that express the very ideas it seeks to expose and warn against.

I mentioned earlier the eroded boundary between philosophy and literature. This carries with it the recognition that there is no purely philosophical or logical prose free from rhetorical effects; it may be a schooled insensitivity in reading that leads us to think that there is. There is a parallel problem amongst educational researchers who imagine that they are writing scientific research reports and that their language is somehow 'neutral' and 'objective'. The failure to read Lyotard correctly, identified here, is perhaps but one symptom of a general weakness in reading. If we ask 'Why has so much of the point of poststructuralism been missed in education? Why have the misunderstandings identified above developed?', the answer may be that readers have been hasty to slot these ideas into the ready-made categories of 1970s sociology of knowledge, of neo-Marxist exposures of the operation of power or of various versions of the politics of difference.

If so-called 'postmodern' educational research gets some of these matters wrong, how might this be done better? I shall try to do this by drawing out two dominant strands of thought. The first of these, which I shall thematize as the 'negative' strand, is to be associated especially with the influence on poststructuralism of Emmanuel Levinas; the second, 'affirmative' strand derives especially from Nietzsche. To speak of negativity and affirmation is not to imply a polarity. Both ways of thinking are of immense value for education.

Alterity and negativity

The relation to the other, or alterity, has come to be used too loosely in educational

theory and practice. How can the idea be refined and given greater import? Once again, our starting point here should be language itself.

Derrida's early work is known especially for its critique of Saussure's account of the logic of the sign. Drawing heavily on ideas from Levinas, Derrida reveals the ways in which any utterance, any sign, is characterised by dissemination, iterability and the structure of the trace. Dissemination refers to the fact that any particular usage of a word requires its being available to circumstances that are beyond the control of the person who speaks or writes. Words are iterable in the sense that any expression is logically available to repetition: words cannot occur uniquely in the way that an object or an event in the world can; their repeatability is essential. Socrates (in the *Phaedrus*) worried about the fact that words that were put down in writing were vulnerable to being severed from their author, and hence of falling into the wrong hands, whereas the presence of the speaker when words were uttered ensured that they were under control. But Derrida shows that the control that is presumed here is illusory to the extent that spoken words are themselves inevitably open to interpretation and repetition by those who hear them, in a manner that makes them by no means secure: in fact, words could not be otherwise. Ironically, spoken words have the characteristic of writing that Socrates fears. This is not, however, to despair at lack of control or certainty. On the contrary, this essential aspect of our words invites the humble recognition that we are part of meanings that go beyond ourselves: our words mean more than we can say, say more than we can mean. This is the condition of thought. The sense of our dependence on language is increased when it is recognized that the very words that give us out thoughts—that are the unavoidable medium of those thoughts—come to us from former usages that we cannot possibly know. This is a condition of there being language at all. Hence words are like *traces* of something that has gone before but to which we can never return. Our thinking, our identity, is traced in ways other to us, profoundly compromising and complicating ideas of self-knowledge and self-mastery. But to the extent that meaning is enhanced by what cannot be known—by the recognition of the necessary limits of our language and thought, and of the way that our selves are structured by these—this is an enriching negativity. The humility this warrants stands in stark contrast to the egocentric assumptions made in constructivist and narrative educational research.

Let us turn to another aspect of the negative. In various later writings, in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, for example, Lyotard (1991) ponders some of the ethical consequences of the tendency to override limits. One problem, he suggests, is that the contemporary world has inclined us towards a programming of our lives. The challenge that is presented today by processes of complexification *seems* to demand ever more extensive programmes of response. But human lives and practices must be understood less as programmes of action than as projects, with the open-endedness that the latter implies. The danger is that the programmatic orientation of thought produces a neutralization of 'the unforeseeable effects engendered by the contingency and freedom proper to the human project' (Lyotard, 1991, p. 69). A related tendency is also evident in the prevalence of rights-talk, so much a feature of contemporary conceptions of morality and politics. Lyotard's *Postmodern Fables* (Lyotard, 1997) presents a dystopian vision of a world in which the right to speak—in effect, the obligation to 'express oneself'—becomes inflated and domineering, suppressing forms of silence and withdrawal, and, with disastrous consequences, inhibiting sensitivities to what cannot be said. These are consequences that take away the very meanings that give rights their point: 'The human right to separation, which governs our declared rights, is thus violated' (Lyotard, 1997, p. 118). In the surreptitious, reductive incursions into the private that such ways of thinking effect, there is a kind of commandeering of the whole field of experience, the whole of ethics: everything is presumed to have a kind of 'self-evidence, as infallible as a totalitarian disposition can be. Infallible as for the ruin of self-containment' (p. 119). The undermining of the private realm is, furthermore, not a simple expansion of the public realm but rather its distortion, for what is expressed publicly should have its point and focus in relation to what is withheld.

As has been indicated, this negative strand of poststructuralist thought has its most powerful inspiration in the philosophy of Levinas, which in turn is profoundly influenced by Jewish thought. Crucial to the work of Levinas is the ethical distinction between the relation to others and the relation to the Other. The latter is usually given an initial capital to indicate an absolute relation to the other person, independent of particular characteristics, of factors that might differentiate this person from that person. Of course, there are ethical questions that relate to such differentiating factors— questions of social justice (say, to do with race or disability or the distribution of wealth

between social classes), of obligations relating to specific roles or situations, and so on. But these operate on what might be thought of as a horizontal axis. They are quasi-contractual in nature. One can discharge one's obligations, satisfy needs, settle one's debts, etc., in a kind of closed economy—an economy that can be totalized or regarded comprehensively. Such an economy is inevitably and desirably a part of our ordinary lives, but it can also encroach on them too much and take on distorted forms. It is possible, then, that the parent who pays for the good school, buys clothing of decent quality, and provides nourishing food, may feel that she has fully discharged her obligations; that the citizen who has paid her taxes, voted and never broken the law may be satisfied that she has acquitted herself in a responsible way; that the teacher whose class has met their learning objectives may go home content that she has done her job efficiently and effectively. But we can imagine also that each of these might become moral grotesques, whose characteristic vice is perhaps hubris. Is there not something virtuous about the parent (the citizen, the teacher, the lover…) who feels that she has never done enough, who has some sense of the infinite possibilities of her relation to the other. Is not the person who does not see things like this in danger of getting *the whole thing* wrong—and missing the point of citizenship, parenthood, love or education? Is there not something morally repugnant about the parent who thinks she has done enough? Recognizing this opens the way perhaps to thinking of this absolute relation to the Other.

Two points of difference from Martin Buber's *I-thou* relation may help Levinas's Other come more clearly into view. In the first place, the relation is not symmetrical. The first person usage, as both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein had both earlier emphasised, is crucial in ethics, such that 'I am responsible to you' is not to be understood to imply an equivalent responsibility on your part or on his or hers. The relation is something that singularises me: my absolute obligation to the Other is not something that I can pass up or pass on. It is to something that I must see as infinitely high, but also vulnerable and in need – as confronting me with an obligation that, paradoxically, deepens the more I answer to it. Levinas quotes words of Dostoevsky: 'Everyone is guilty before everyone, for everyone, and I more than the others' (Levinas, 1998, p. 146). This breaks loose, it should be clear, from any economy of satisfaction. Second, the relation is not one of cognition, and hence not one of recognition. The Other

comes to me as having depths that I cannot know, and in order not to do violence I must acknowledge this unknowability. This negativity is at the heart of things. It is the ethical relation *par excellence*. In contrast to the totalities or closed economies of the horizontal axis, this (vertical) axis points to infinity. Of critical importance, for Levinas, is the fact that, if this fundamental relation to the Other is overridden, the relations to others on the horizontal plane will also be corrupted. Quasi-contractual obligations etc. are not understood correctly if the economies within which they operate are not ultimately given their sense by the different terms of this infinite relation—hence the poverty of the self-satisfied citizen, parent, teacher or lover.

Levinas's writings constitute a sustained attempt to show the primacy of ethics over ontology: that is, that the efforts of philosophers (and others) through the ages have tended to go astray as a result of their preoccupation with stating *what is the case* (Is this a table? Are there other minds? What is the condition of man in a state of nature?). Such is the pervasiveness of the infinite relation to the Other that the very conditions of these ontological approaches are revealed to be metaphysically unsound. This is a challenge not only to positivistic ways of thinking—especially those that take there to be priority of fact over value—but also, for example, to the very different and ethically rich enquiries of Heidegger into being itself.

Levinas expresses these ideas in a philosophical idiom that runs together abstract argument with examples of remarkable immediacy and perspicuity, in which appear such quasi-Biblical figures as the widow, the orphan and the stranger. His thinking has been likened—contentiously, to be sure—to a kind of negative theology. Certainly Derrida's writings of the 1990s, which constitute more direct engagements with Levinas, are increasingly religious in character and bear something of this negativity. His *On the Name* (Derrida, 1995), for example, includes a reading of the poem *Der unerkandte Gott* (*The unknowable God*) by the seventeenth century German Protestant mystic Angelus Silesius, while extensive discussions have related to the religiously resonant themes of hospitality, the gift and friendship. In Lyotard's work of the 1980s also, a related negativity becomes apparent in his treatment of the immemorial—supreme examples of which are, first, the suffering of the holocaust, memorialization of which inevitably reduces and distorts, and second, childhood itself, which is recollected by the adult only on pain of a kind of anthropomorphism. Once again it is the tendency

to override this negativity—the forgetting of this forgetting—that constitutes the grave threat to our ethical lives.

The account of this negative strand of postmodern thought should serve to illustrate its remoteness from the misleading assumptions sketched at the start of Section Three. What now of poststructuralism's affirmative strand? Here we turn again to Nietzsche.

Affirmation

It was said above that postmodern educational theorizing tends towards nihilism. There is a popular view of Nietzsche that takes it that, with the 'death of God', this was his manifesto. This is to turn Nietzsche upside down.

Nietzsche's sustained preoccupation with nihilism can be understood, as Deleuze (1983) has shown, through the identification of three kinds. Thus, *negative nihilism* characterizes the kind of denial of this world that is found in (certain forms of) Christianity. Although he represents Jesus at times as a formidable adversary, he regards this denial of life as a contemptible weakening of the human spirit. A second kind is *reactive nihilism*, typified by the stance of the rebel. This also Nietzsche condemns on the grounds that the rebel is too dependent on the very thing that is opposed. Hence he too is understood in terms of negation. Finally, there is *passive nihilism*, the position of the person who lives comfortably, who perhaps opts for a risk-free life of tranquillity, comfort and prosperity, with its conventional tokens of success—typically the life of the bourgeois. Such a life, Nietzsche believes, represents a last stage in the draining of the human spirit. As must be clear then, Nietzsche speaks of nihilism as something to which he is vehemently opposed. But what is also clear is that for Nietzsche there can be no ready-made values. Such established or received values devalue themselves. Indeed, God has 'died' because he has devalued himself in becoming assimilated to the conventions and satisfactions of respectable bourgeois life. What is needed instead is a 'transvaluation' of values, in favour of standards that one takes up as one's own. Nietzsche' work as a whole is committed to showing how this might be done.

In the process Nietzsche laments the ways in which, in a culture that has divested itself of the sustaining myths of earlier generations (with their implicit

acknowledgement of the limits of knowledge), and where all is subjected to a kind of abstract reason (the blame for which he attaches to a certain image of the thinking of Socrates), education itself is drained of life:

> The images of myth must be the demoniac guardians, omnipresent and unnoticed, which protect the growth of the young mind, and guide man's interpretation of his life and struggles. The state itself has no unwritten laws more powerful than the mythical foundation that guarantees its connection with religion and its growth out of mythical representations. Let us now, by way of comparison, imagine abstract man, without the guidance of myth— abstract education, abstract morality, abstract justice, the abstract state; let us imagine the lawless wandering, unchecked by native myth, of the artistic imagination; let us imagine a culture without a secure and sacred primal site, condemned to exhaust every possibility and feed wretchedly on all other cultures—there we have our present age, the product of that Socratism bent on the destruction of myth (Nietzsche, 1993, pp. 109–10).

Elsewhere, Nietzsche associates this weakness with a certain foundationalist fallacy of psychological explanation that he caricatures contemptuously:

> To trace something unknown back to something known is alleviating, soothing, gratifying and gives moreover a feeling of power. Danger, disquiet, anxiety attend the unknown – the first instinct is to eliminate these distressing states. First principle: any explanation is better than none (Nietzsche, 1962, 'The Four Great Errors': p. 62, #5).

Nietzsche criticises the culture that confronts him, but his purpose is not destructive. He warns against the *ressentiment* that can so deplete the spirit and so detract from the living of life in its fullness, and that contributes so much to our petty meanness in our daily lives. *Ressentiment* refers to the negativity of looking back, whether with nostalgia or with regret or remorse, or of looking forward obsessively such that the present disappears in wishful thinking for a future that never arrives. The

affirmation of life that contrasts with this is sometimes amplified in Nietzsche by reference to states of intoxication or of the dance. These are states not of self-conscious assertiveness but rather of losing oneself in absorption in what one is doing, of divesting oneself of one's burdensome ego. It is not that this absorption can take only intoxicated forms: the involvement of an artist in her work, of an engineer in solving a problem, of a student in writing an essay or a teacher with her subject, might all be examples of this intensity. Indeed the teacher's role might be seen as 'a conductor of intensity', as of an electric current that passes through subject matter, teacher and students. Such absorption is a condition for a culture's vitality and value, and for the education that sustains it.

Nietzsche has been a major influence on the work of Foucault (see, for example, Peters and Wain, 2003), but the themes of affirmation that have been adumbrated here are more evident in the work of Deleuze and in the middle phase of Lyotard. It is here especially that we can find pointers towards a revitalized educational practice (see, for example, Bearn, 2000; Blake *et al.*, 2000, ch. 7; Williams, 2000). But it is time to extend these remarks in order to ask what other developments might be supported by these negative and affirmative strands of poststructuralism.

How might education be changed by these thoughts?

To begin with, there is an important job to be done in terms of dismantling the oppressive and totalizing structures that have come to dominate educational practice in many countries. On the face of it, 'oppressive' and 'totalizing' appear more or less conventional political terms. What is at issue here is much more a matter of the colonizing of thought by performativity. The consequences of this colonization are that we are progressively disabled from thinking in certain ways—ways that are vital to education, as they are to the pursuit of truth itself. But beyond this dismantling, what further recommendations can be identified?

First, there are implications for the curriculum and assessment. The negative strand points to the fact that the substance of what is taught needs to be planned and presented to students in such a way as both to avoid any suggestion of comprehensive coverage and to indicate infinite possibilities. Thus, elementary arithmetic is not only of transactional usefulness but opens onto the whole of the calculus. One does not teach

history with a view only to meeting examination criteria but with a sense of the intrinsic fascination, and through demonstrating the way the field opens the more it is pursued. Of course, examinations and their criteria can be designed so that they sensitively reflect this, and so that they do not dominate everything that goes on in the course of instruction. But plainly, under the influence of mistaken notions of objectivity, rigour and accountability, the trend is commonly against this.

It follows, second, that the selection of topics and texts to be studied should be such that they are resistant to a univocal reading. In other words, the content that is presented to students should not be something that they are merely to take in and regurgitate, or that they imagine they understand comprehensively; neither should it be deemed incidental and merely the vehicle for skills-acquisition (even if these are 'critical skills'). Curriculum content needs to be such that it opens onto questions— questions that are sometimes intractable or disturbing and with which the teacher is seen to be engaged (with fascination, puzzlement, with a struggle perhaps). The purchase of these remarks obviously depends on the stage of education: they seem more obviously applicable in the university than the infants' school. But even in the latter it is possible to adopt approaches that are orientated in this way, and in any case whatever goes on at this stage should be bracketed by these larger aspirations for education as a whole.

As a third point, the ethical implications of poststructuralism are such that moral education or citizenship education will cease to be the province of a particular aspect of the curriculum, for virtually everything will be understood in these terms. It is perhaps not too much of an exaggeration to say that all education is moral education, all education is citizenship education – for if morality and citizenship are taken with sufficient seriousness, they can be seen to extend across one's life as a whole. This is not to legitimate 'cross-curricular themes': it is that the point of education as a whole cannot be considered in isolation from these matters.

The broad significance of the ethical also has a bearing upon the way in which educational research is undertaken and understood. While at present the 'ethics of educational research' tends to be understood in terms of the problems to which the codes of practice are addressed, it is the value of what is taught and learned (and how this is done) that should be at the heart of research. The prevailing empiricism of research practice is revealed as all the more inadequate.

A fourth point leads us to consider more directly the visions of good practice that these strands of poststructuralism prompt. In contrast to the idea of the teacher with her portfolio of skills, the good teacher is likely to be someone who sees herself as in service of her subject, of goods towards which she seeks to lead the learner. The curriculum is a mode of the relation to the Other. Once again there must be some strong sense that *what* is to be learned is not merely incidental. Of course, there may be facets of the curriculum—say, word-processing skills—that are to be seen in an instrumental way, but these will need ultimately to be subsumed within a larger sense of value. It follows also that the idea of the teacher as facilitator, at best providing the students with the ability to learn-how-to-learn, is an abnegation of what the teacher should be about.

If there are suggestions of traditionalism in what is said here, this is not entirely to be resisted. But it needs to be remembered that any academic tradition worth its name is far from settled in its procedures and preoccupations. Although it is likely to be assembled around the reading of certain texts and sets of problems, these will not be static. They will characteristically be open to rival readings and critical disputes, marked by divergences between paradigms. A tradition will also have its own *avant-garde.* Such is the very life of a tradition and something of this should bear upon education as a whole, its presence increasingly evident as learning progresses. Friction between perspectives can spark the intensity of involvement mentioned above.

Poststructuralism will not yield any tidy rules for good practice that teachers are simply to learn. There are no recipes for being a conductor of intensity. But this is not to say that nothing can be done. Teacher education needs to be divested of bad ideas of effective performance (sometimes dignified as 'professionalism'); teachers can be made aware of some of what is said here (of the potential openness of what is studied, of the value of intense absorption), and they can be led to experience these themselves; they can be inspired examples of good practice; they can be encouraged, with careful guidance, to develop sensitivities and skills relevant to the rhythms of teaching—to understand, like good comedians, the importance of timing, to pace the class and create the space for response; they can learn when to intervene and when to hold back, when to be direct and when indirect. The possibilities for a revised teacher education here are rich enough. There is correlative scope for a rethinking of educational research.

Having, illustrated, in this long third part of this discussion, something of the

importance for these strands of poststructuralism, I return, in the final section, to the geography of Europe in order to say something about the institutionalization of philosophy of education there and the presence of the kind of thinking considered above**.**

Contemporary philosophy of education in Europe

The contemporary institutionalization of philosophy of education in Europe is the product of three main factors: political factors (from the pressures of performativity to the fall of the Berlin Wall), the robustness of indigenous traditions and the hegemony of the English language. Inevitably the *lingua franca* of most conferences is English. While there is a significant body of work in Spanish and the Scandinavian languages, it is only really the German tradition that has maintained independence in the face of this dominance. Hence, those in the field almost inevitably find their work drawn into these channels of publications, the preponderance, of course, being in English.

British analytical philosophy of education, the form that is most commonly identified, rightly or wrongly, with Anglophone traditions in Europe, tends to describe itself in terms of a history that is relatively recent, spanning the past forty years. In contrast, the German tradition has an illustrious and long background. (Both Kant and Hegel were required to teach courses on education.) Its approach in recent decades has continued to pay reverence to that background, with articles typically beginning with a delineation of the heritage of thinking that leads to the consideration of the topic at hand. While German philosophical thinking about education has had considerable influence in Japan, its most obvious influences within Europe have perhaps been in the Scandinavian countries, where strong indigenous traditions of philosophical enquiry into education have interacted fruitfully with developments in both the UK and Germany. *Bildung* is, of course, a sustained theme of this work (see, for example, Loevlie *et al.*, 2002). While the Anglophone and German traditions have tended to pass one another by, there has recently been a new will, through conferences and publications, to bridge this divide. The European Educational Research Association has its Philosophy of Education Network in which the coming together of these traditions has been evident, and other conferences have also fostered this. Another recent venture

has brought these traditions together in order to examine the idea and role of critique in democracy and education in the decades since the Second World War (Heyting and Winch, 2004).

The enormous influence of Gadamer and Habermas, and the growing importance of Luhmann, indicate ways in which German traditions extend beyond poststructuralism. Conversely, if one turns to the country that is most obviously poststructuralism's provenance, France, philosophy of education is noticeable by its absence—though there has been growing interest in recent years. The main reason for this is the nature of French policy for education and the preparation of teachers. (In other countries also, of course, the numbers of people in the field have been drastically affected by such policy factors.) This has not prevented French poststructuralist thought from having extensive influence on philosophy of education, in Europe and around the world, just as traditions from other countries have done. I do not claim that those who are working with these ideas will necessarily recognize what they are doing in the terms I have presented in the previous section.

These brief comments underline once again the problematic nature of any comparative account that takes Europe as its starting point. While Europe must in a sense be seen as the place that exports 'the philosophy of education' to the rest of the world, there is more than a danger here of a one-sided story being told—not to mention one-sided stories within that story. I shall not at this stage indicate the connections and distinctions, the multiple influences and cross-fertilizations, that a better account would need to cover, except to register one apparent and somewhat ironic repression—the influence, mentioned so far only in passing, of North America. Surely no account of philosophy of education in Europe can be given without acknowledgement of the major importance of John Dewey, of the background of pragmatism before him, and of other aspects of American thought. But that clearly requires another paper, and a further puzzle about where to begin.

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