

Awaiting Education: Friedrich Nietzsche On the Future of Our Educational Institutions

Ansgar Allen

Volume 24, numéro 3, 2017

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070606ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070606ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Allen, A. (2017). Awaiting Education: Friedrich Nietzsche On the Future of Our Educational Institutions. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 24(3), 197–210. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070606ar>

Résumé de l'article

The republication of Nietzsche's lectures "On the Future of Our Educational Institutions" invites reconsideration of Nietzsche's thought on education. Though there is much in these lectures that might appeal to those struggling for the future of the humanities, or for the future of education more generally, I argue against their use in the attempted redemption of the humanities or education. Consideration of "Schopenhauer as Educator", published two years later, brings out Nietzsche's growing hostility to education. Education in modernity is a lost cause, Nietzsche argues. It is beyond redemption because (1) true teachers can no longer be found and (2) we are almost incapable of educating ourselves. At best we might attempt to educate ourselves against the age, which includes the challenging task of educating against our selves. From this position, which holds out little hope for the future of education as it is currently configured, if the modern educator has any functionality left, it is to serve as a symptom of decline.

Awaiting Education: Friedrich Nietzsche on the Future of Our Educational Institutions

ANSGAR ALLEN

University of Sheffield, UK

Abstract: The republication of Nietzsche's lectures "On the Future of Our Educational Institutions" invites reconsideration of Nietzsche's thought on education. Though there is much in these lectures that might appeal to those struggling for the future of the humanities, or for the future of education more generally, I argue against their use in the attempted redemption of the humanities or education. Consideration of "Schopenhauer as Educator", published two years later, brings out Nietzsche's growing hostility to education. Education in modernity is a lost cause, Nietzsche argues. It is beyond redemption because (1) true teachers can no longer be found and (2) we are almost incapable of educating ourselves. At best we might attempt to educate ourselves against the age, which includes the challenging task of educating against our selves. From this position, which holds out little hope for the future of education as it is currently configured, if the modern educator has any functionality left, it is to serve as a symptom of decline.

Introduction

The recent republication of Nietzsche's lectures *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* invites reconsideration of Nietzsche's early educational thought (Nietzsche, 1910/2016). This paper remains largely confined to the years 1872–1874, dating from the delivery of the lectures to the publication of *Schopenhauer as Educator*. This period is of interest as Nietzsche explicitly engages with the question of education, reflecting no doubt that he was still a university employee at this time and was confronted with education in its institutional form on a daily basis (both as university professor and as school teacher). This paper departs from previous scholarship concerning Nietzsche and education by emphasising Nietzsche's growing hostility to education as a historically accrued set of practices and beliefs. The challenge Nietzsche poses is so radical, I argue, and so unsettling, that those working in educational institutions characteristically fail to acknowledge its full (and devastating) consequences for themselves and their profession.

Anglo-American educational interpretations of Nietzsche have tended to present Nietzsche as a "liberal educator par excellence" (Rosenow, 2000, p. 675; 1989), where Nietzsche's educational stance is defined by a vision of the authentic individual, the free spirit, who concerns himself with himself for the sake of humanity. Even when there is stronger emphasis on the negation of "man" in his current form, this is interpreted as a matter of individual self-overcoming without the necessity of confronting, overcoming or negating education more generally (see, for example, Hillesheim, 1986). More recent scholarship has found Nietzsche hostile to mass education, but with the accompanying argument that this does not place contemporary education beyond redemption.

We can both “listen to” Nietzsche’s philosophy, and “ignore its claims about the detriments of mass education,” as we reformulate mass education so that it satisfies more radical forms of selfhood (Bingham, 2001, p. 338).¹ More self-consciously “post-structural” interpretations of Nietzsche have appeared (Peters, Marshall, & Smeyers, 2001), but have been criticised for “watering down” the less palatable bits of Nietzsche’s philosophy in order to mount a critique and rescue of contemporary education from neoliberalism and economic subjugation (Rosenow, 2004).² Other deployments have adopted Nietzsche to the cause of democratic education, or a version of it, that incorporates some kind of quest for higher culture.³ So, for example, over a series of papers, Jonas (2009; 2013; 2016) has sought to rehabilitate Nietzsche and make him useful to present-day democratic societies, most recently by arguing that in *Schopenhauer as Educator* Nietzsche develops a vision of human excellence and flourishing which balances the needs of the many with the cultivation of individual greatness. This vision could be applied with modification to present-day democratic societies, Jonas argues, that would better serve collective wellbeing if they expended more effort generating the conditions necessary to support the cultivation of great educators, who have achieved a level of intellectual and spiritual harmony that will allow them to serve as exemplars for the rest of us, raising us up by the force of their example. Jonas suggests that, in the context of Nietzschean scholarship more broadly, this is a somewhat heterodox interpretation, though scholars outside the philosophy of education (e.g., Young, 2010; 2014) do mount similar arguments against “anti-communitarian” interpretations of Nietzsche. Certainly within education the overall direction of his critique—using Nietzsche to save education in some way (and thereby save us)—is hardly unusual in papers dealing with the educational implications of Nietzsche’s thought.

Against the overall thrust of such readings, which render Nietzsche subservient to the overall project of educational critique (that is driven by its commitment to education before all else), this paper will argue that Nietzsche provides good reason for suspecting that modern education is beyond redemption. We should certainly not look to our educators in the hope they might supply cultural exemplars and thereby help us escape our condition. If the modern educator has any functionality left, Nietzsche argues, it is to serve as a symptom of decline.

Nietzsche and the Educational Promise

If we were to attempt a more unsettling reading of Western education, it might claim—drawing perhaps from Heidegger’s Nietzsche—that the basic architecture of Western education (like Western metaphysics) is promissory (Heidegger, 2002). In this way, education delivers us to perpetual disappointment, having us oscillate between hope and despair, between ideals that are gradually “proved unattainable” and our “despondent and timid revival[s] of antiquity,” by which we continue in search of ideals that would redeem us, though they remain forever beyond our reach. All of this “engenders a restlessness, a disorder in the modern soul,” Nietzsche argues. It excites “apathy and disgust” (1873–1876/1997, p. 133), and delivers us to a “passive nihilism” (1906/1906/1968, §22), a fruitless wandering and a “joyless” existence (1873–1876/1997, p. 133). This is how education diminishes us whilst promising to raise us up.

It seems odd, then, that in his youth even Nietzsche appears susceptible to the promise of a true education. Nietzsche begins by claiming in the first lecture “that I, like you, would listen to anyone who promised to teach me” about the future of education (1910/2016, pp. 3–4). But here, as in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872/2003), there is no clear argument for or against metaphysics (see Porter, 2000) and the promises that are made in its name. Nietzsche’s position is more ambiguous. Although the lectures mobilise metaphysical concepts, this deployment is perturbed by their

content (itself perturbed by their form: a fictional account reporting a conversation between a philosopher, his companion, and two students). Hence their main character, the philosopher, at one point falls into a frenzy directed at those who would associate the “true education” of which he speaks with some kind of idealism:

Anyone pleased to call this demand “idealistic,” or indeed related to any “ideal” at all, no doubt hoping to fob me off with some kind of compliment, deserves the answer that what we have at present is simply villainous and disgraceful. Someone freezing in a barren wasteland who demands warmth will practically go out of his mind if he is accused of being idealistic. (1910/2016, p. 64)

This places a question mark on the idea that Nietzsche is seeking to defend some kind of ideal education, or educational ideal, from its recent debasement by all that went by the name of culture in his century. Admittedly, as his characters submit German institutions (its schools and universities) to sustained attack, they do hint throughout their discussion at the possibility of a solution, one that involves rebuilding education on an entirely different value base. German culture is itself completely corrupted, Nietzsche tells us, and so must be entirely reconstituted. Hence education cannot appeal to existing culture; it awaits something, someone else, perhaps the coming of a great teacher who will guide us out of our current predicament because we are no longer able to guide ourselves. In the lectures, it awaits the philosopher’s revered friend, who approaches but never arrives, since the last and promised sixth lecture is never given, a lecture that might have resolved the discussion and revealed what a true education should work towards and orient itself by. The solution to the crisis of education that Nietzsche indicates is not finally described. The great educational teacher, who will lead us out of this mess, never arrives. This point is easy to miss, indeed we are determined to miss it, since as educators, educational employees and educational critics we are defenders of education ourselves. We must believe that a redeemed profession will eventually triumph against everything that debases education in our eyes.

As such, these lectures are at risk of being co-opted. Because they appear at first sight to offer a typical defence of “true culture” against its corruption, they can be mobilised in a defence of liberal education that guards against instrumentalism and promotes education as a process of refinement and self-transformation. In the lectures, we encounter a humanism of sorts: We come across the conceit that judges social existence by the extent to which it hinders or assists the perfection of individual human beings as self-realising subjects. We also come across an old nineteenth-century fear that an increasingly democratic society threatens the highest cultural achievements to date because it enshrines the values of the ordinary, the mediocre, because its needs are of the moment, because it is focused upon the present. These lectures appear to bolster the old idea of a liberal education, the idea that culture and literature must be defended by a learned class to keep society healthy, give it purpose, and orient it to the future (see Knights, 1978). Since traces of those ideas can certainly be found within the lectures, they can be read as a forthright though idiosyncratic defence of true culture and true education. It seems that even Nietzsche, the great iconoclast, agrees that culture must be protected by an elite vanguard of likeminded, highly-educated people (see Jonas, 2016; Young, 2010).

For this reason, these lectures and related works deserve further attention. The ensuing commentary seeks to explore Nietzsche’s hostility to education on multiple fronts. I do not foreground my own arguments, though they are sometimes implied. It seems more important to explore the radical nature of Nietzsche’s own confrontation with education, as a warning to those who use Nietzsche but remain unperturbed.

The Lectures: A Failure to Deliver

We might suspect these lectures *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* of more devious intent. As such they would be less easily co-opted by current interests. We could perhaps even sense an element of parody operating within them, where the educational good they seem to defend is undermined by its exaggeration and eventual denial. Nietzsche's position is at the very least ambiguous. In the fourth lecture, Nietzsche refers to their overall form as that of "marionette theatre" (1910/2016, p. 53)—suggesting that he, himself, is at one remove from the puppet show he has assembled. Later, in a letter, he suggests they were "disguised as a farce" (1996, p. 109). Nietzsche was certainly conscious of their failure to provide what they promised to deliver. In a following correspondence, he recognises they "break off suddenly" after "such a long prelude, with the thirst for real new thoughts and proposals tending more and more to end up in mere *negativis* and prolixities" (1996, p. 112):

One gets parched while reading them, and then there is nothing to drink at the finish! What I had in mind for the last lecture—a very droll and colourful scene of nocturnal illuminations—was not exactly suitable for my Basel public, and it is certainly a good thing that the words stuck in my throat... [T]he last lecture will certainly never be worked out. (p. 112–113)

Read as a self-conscious failure to deliver, these lectures might hinge on the Cynic gesture found halfway through of the old philosopher's dog that bites one of the two students who come running over.⁴ They have been eavesdropping but emerge from their hiding place when the philosopher and his companion break off their conversation and prepare to depart. Launching themselves upon these two unsuspecting figures, the students are desperate to hear more about the future of education, but their efforts to embrace the philosopher "end in complete failure... A strange and horrible tussle in the dirt ensued between man and dog" (Nietzsche, 1910/2016, p. 57). It would seem that the two younger men fail to understand the significance of this event:

In the name of everything cultural and pseudo-cultural! What is this stupid dog doing here? Away, damned cur, uninitiated and never to be initiated! Away from us and our innards, too! Retreat in silence, silence and shame! (p. 59)

If the dog constitutes a Cynic interruption, it casts doubt on the possibility that the philosopher and his companion can lead the students to higher things, to a fuller conception of culture and education. Upon this reading, where the true education that all await is lampooned if only briefly, the philosopher's remark a page earlier could be inserted straight into *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett, 1956/1986):

It has grown dark. You know who we're waiting for, but he won't come now. We have stayed late for nothing. We should go. (Nietzsche, 1910/2016, p. 58)

The point about this kind of wait is that the promised object never arrives. We wait and we become parched while waiting. As we thirst, we begin to wonder if we might occupy ourselves better whilst waiting, resourcing ourselves less and less on the promise that a great teacher will arrive and rescue us. This reading of the lectures is tempting indeed, as they do assert over and

again the near impossibility of the arrival or revival of a “true education.” The number who will ever attain it is “unbelievably small,” and “to achieve even this small quota” would be impossible unless “a great mass of people” were not first “tricked, seduced, into going against their nature and pursuing an education.” The “ridiculous disproportion between the number of truly educated people and the size of our monstrously overgrown educational system” must be concealed. This is the “real secret of education” that must never become known (Nietzsche, 1910/2016, p. 14). It is necessary that so many under-labourers labour in pursuit of the promise of education, so that the few may attain it, though even then the promised few are almost destined to fail. At the same time, too many of the under-labourers and followers of the educational promise fall into the trap of believing themselves to be one of those few; the philosopher’s companion included. They believe themselves to already have that promise, to be people of promise, promised people. They forget that they are still waiting, believing they have arrived.

We can perhaps detect here a growing ambivalence with regard to the promise education makes. We can see, or at least read into these lectures the makings of a farce: four philosophically-minded people wait, bemoaning their current predicament, filling time with commentary but doing little to move beyond it. They remain there, expectantly waiting, positioned at the end of a small plateau, when it might be better for them to move on.

No Teachers: The Stars Have All Gone Out

Similar themes recur in *Schopenhauer as Educator* published two years later. Nietzsche confesses his earlier desire for a philosopher-teacher (read Schopenhauer) who would bring order to his disordered modern self. Yet, at the same, time Nietzsche recognises that in modernity “men have become so complex and many-sided” that it is no longer possible to “mould the whole man” according to a single philosophy or “planetary system.” Being so multifaceted now, men “become dishonest whenever they speak at all” (1873–1876/1997, pp. 131–133). These moderns are made of too many divergent component parts, and as such, cannot deliver themselves those teachers they need.

Schopenhauer as Educator is not entirely pessimistic, however. The essay remains beholden to the idea that redemptive men might still be made, men who would guide us out of the morass of our times. And we might read it at that level, as an attempt to outline that project of redemption, and set out its key stakes. The problem with this more positive, optimistic reading is that it satisfies our desire all too soon to save education from itself. We find all too easily in Nietzsche some kind of affirmation of that mission, our mission, where “every gesture [of his] which is not clearly a denial counts as agreement” (1873–1876/1997, p. 139). In this context, our context, it is worth attending to the pessimism of *Schopenhauer as Educator* more closely.

Firstly, Nietzsche states that he, himself, is *not* one of the redemptive men we have been waiting for. As a non-redemptive man, Nietzsche can only gesture to what the redeemers might do for us. Here Nietzsche’s failure to fully substantiate the redemptive project that is hinted at, elliptically and speculatively, throughout *Schopenhauer as Educator* bears comparison with the omission of the final sixth lecture already discussed. His failure or refusal to attempt a full solution to the problem he outlines is symptomatic and entirely consistent with his position, which we might describe as a form of resolute, unflinching perception; an awareness of the sheer magnitude of the difficulties we are faced with.

Unlike Nietzsche, who would hope to tolerate a world without ultimate sanction, those modern men he describes in *Schopenhauer as Educator* feel themselves to be somewhat splintered, and seek all too urgently to find firm footing somewhere, anywhere. Anticipating Nietzsche's famous passage in *The Gay Science*, we know how they are doomed to drift without fixed horizon, for that horizon was wiped away with the death of God. This earth was unchained from its sun; there are no fixed orbits now, no fixed reference points remaining (see Nietzsche, 1887/1974, §125). We desire them more desperately for that reason:

Never have moral educators been more needed, and never has it seemed less likely they would be found; in the times when physicians are required the most, in times of great plagues, they are also most in peril. For where are the physicians for modern mankind who themselves stand so firmly and soundly on their feet that they are able to support others and lead them by the hand? A certain gloominess and torpor lies upon even the finest personalities of our time, a feeling of ill-humour at the everlasting struggle between dissimulation and honesty which is being fought out within them, a lack of steady confidence in themselves—whereby they become quite incapable of being signposts and at the same time taskmasters for others. (Nietzsche, 1873–1876/1997, p. 133)

Even the finest personalities of our time are incapable of being signposts, taskmasters, or teachers of others, Nietzsche argues in this extract from *Schopenhauer as Educator*. Moral educators, who can promise to deliver us from ourselves, are needed so urgently because they are so desperately absent. None, not even the best, stand so firmly and soundly on their feet that they can deliver what they promise—all are cast adrift in the great problems of our times. Here then, Nietzsche remains at the very least ambivalent about the educational promise, and the extent to which teachers can point us towards it.

Though Nietzsche once yearned, as he writes, for “a true philosopher as an educator who could raise me above my insufficiencies insofar as these originated in the age,” and “in this condition of need, distress and desire ... came to know Schopenhauer” (1873–1876/1997, p. 133), he would not be satisfied for long. We can already detect his growing dissatisfaction with Schopenhauer's work in *Schopenhauer as Educator*, an essay in which Schopenhauer's philosophy is conspicuous by its absence. As Nietzsche's adopted educator, Schopenhauer serves a different function, offering the example of his life (as Nietzsche imagined it) where Schopenhauer suffered alone for his philosophy, a philosophy of gloom and deep pessimism. Schopenhauer's example drove Nietzsche, as he later reflected, to a path that would involve great suffering of his own. It drove him “to scepticism against everything I had previously defended and held worthy of high esteem—including the Greeks, Schopenhauer, and Wagner—against the genius, the saint—the pessimism of knowledge. By means of this *detour* I arrived at the *heights* with the fresh wind” (1873–1876/1997, p. xix). Nietzsche was prompted by Schopenhauer to embark on a process of self-overcoming, questioning his earlier allegiances, moving beyond them—a deeply painful process entailing the “complete overturning and conversion of his being” (1873–1876/1997, p. 153). As Nietzsche later wrote in *Ecce Homo*, we find depicted here not “Schopenhauer as Educator” but “Nietzsche as Educator,” or at least Nietzsche struggling to educate himself (1908/2004a, p. 58).

Nietzsche suggests that his greatest teachers were people he had to overcome, and finally become absolutely disappointed by, a process that is already well underway in *Schopenhauer as Educator*: “When in those days I roved as I pleased through wishes of all kinds, I always believed that at some time fate would take from me the terrible effort and duty of educating myself” (1873–1876/1997, p. 130). Nietzsche hoped he would discover a philosopher who could be his ultimate guide, an educator in whom he would have more faith than he had in himself. This “educating

philosopher of whom I dreamed” would see into his very being, and bring out what was already latent within (1873–1876/1997, p. 131). To his dismay, Nietzsche found one can “run through all Germany” with this need in one’s heart “and fail to find what one is seeking.” Against this profound absence, nothing “displays the arrogant self-satisfaction of our contemporaries more clearly,” Nietzsche claims, than the fact that most are basically satisfied with what education now offers (1873–1876/1997, p. 131). Modern education obeys the principle “more the better” without questioning what it works to offer more of. More schools, more teachers, more scientists. But to what end? The question itself appears simple, but there is nobody left qualified to answer. There are no educators remaining who might be its exemplars. There is no higher maxim to which they might appeal, and so we are left “consuming the moral capital we have inherited from our forefathers, which we are incapable of increasing but know only how to squander” (1873–1876/1997, p. 132).

Nietzsche’s growing suspicion of our need for a teacher, of what that need does to us, returns in later work, as Zarathustra famously pronounces: “One pays a teacher poorly if one remains only a student” (1883–1891/2008, p. 68). Zarathustra attacks not only the continued faith and devotion of his followers, but so too their initial act of faith. His followers were too willing, too reverent, too needy, too dependent from the outset. It is a fault Nietzsche can understand, since he has seen it in himself, as he declares again in a retrospective discussion of his early work (see his Preface to the 1886 edition of *Human, All Too Human*). He admits to using figures such as Schopenhauer or Wagner as proxies, as if they were teachers and companions of “enchanted intuition” worthy of his respect, though he claims that he was also, at the same time, “clear-sighted enough” about their “incurable” faults. To believe in these great educators, to entertain so much falseness, was the price he paid for his truthfulness. It was a necessary act of “self-deception” and “self-preserving cunning,” for he could not yet quite reconcile himself to the fact that none such great spirits or exemplars existed (1878/2004b, Preface §1).

Without Teachers: The Problem of the Self-Educated

It would seem that without fixed horizons, and with no great leaders or teachers, the student must fall back upon his or her own resources. There is nothing else upon which to cling. And yet, having declared that true teachers no longer exist, Nietzsche does not allow us to assume that we might educate ourselves, at least not without considerable difficulty. It seems that prior training is necessary, but that, precisely, is what is lacking. Those who seek independence without sufficient training (those who have not been taught) are too vulnerable to the atmosphere of the present: it “continually soaks into us through countless capillaries, with our every breath.” Its influence is almost impossible to escape, for “no solitude is lonely and distant enough to put us out of reach of its clouds and fogs” (Nietzsche, 1910/2016, p. 69).

There is little space here to outline the problem of the self-educated in any great detail. Suffice to say, Nietzsche’s argument appears to hang on the idea that the self-educated will fail to disentangle themselves and set out alone, since they do not have the strength, and are not sufficiently prepared for the barren wilderness that the self-educated must presumably endure. Those attempting to educate themselves will form themselves, perhaps despite themselves, for the moment rather than against it. This is how the educational promise weakens and domesticates the self-educated, Nietzsche argues. It isolates those attempting to tear themselves from unthinking adherence to tradition, and so lift themselves up. It exhausts and confuses those who seek to

become independent, or self-reliant; those who wish to better themselves without subordinating themselves to a higher authority.

Nietzsche's account of this process is narrated at length (1910/2016, pp. 79–80). The complex descent he describes passes through various stages of disappointment to the ironic scepticism and incessant busyness that Nietzsche claims to detect in his contemporaries. These stages can be viewed as symptoms of despair, disavowed and buried within the self, a condition that afflicts those who have for so long fervently desired true education, and pursued it in themselves, but have remained disappointed. They hide from themselves and conceal the fact that they have failed, and must fail, because the stars that would guide them “have all gone out” (p. 80). Each stage of disappointment is, in its own way, the outcome of an educational promise that cannot be realised if the guides, teachers, or cultural exemplars are absent, and if we have not yet learned how to forge out alone.

Confined to the moment, lacking the strength to become truly free, educated people attach themselves to “delusions of freedom” (Nietzsche, 1910/2016, p. 79). There is, nonetheless, growing bad conscience on that account. The failure of moderns to educate themselves from nothing, to release themselves from the accumulated effects of tradition, eventually manifests in “educated” people as a “flight from themselves, a desperate self-annihilation” carried out by those who have internalised their “rage against a culture that no one was willing [or able] to show them how to reach” (p. 81). Educated distractions abound, but nothing manages to stifle our sense of inadequacy:

The same sigh gushes forth from our degenerate literature and the senselessly bloated book-scribbling of our scholars... Whole mountains of printed pages are shovelled on but memory refuses to be stifled, and every so often it repeats the refrain: “Man of degenerate culture! Born to education, and raised in miseducation! Helpless barbarian, slave to the present, lying in the chains of the passing moment, and hungering—always, eternally hungering!” (p. 81)

These “educated” people and lovers of culture require educators but none appear. They know not how to educate themselves. But they hunger for education and culture. Half-starved, in pain, they cannot see what is to be done.

Without Teachers: To Educate Against the Age

If education is still possible in some form, in any form at all that might be worth pursuing, it must, for Nietzsche, be radically oppositional, and should avoid both the desire for a teacher and the conceits of the self-educated. The challenge as outlined below is actually rather visceral: Each student (where the masculine is used by Nietzsche as the default) must “gain insight into his own want and misery, into his own limitedness.” Through such enquiry—which is agonising in the root sense in that it takes the form of a battle—the follies and ineptitudes of the individual and so too the age must become known. The student must feel the sheer magnitude of the task, nearly to the point of resignation. This student must realise there is no easy way out, no quick rescue from “the profound depression he feels at the valuelessness of his existence” (Nietzsche, 1873–1876/1997, p. 142).

The meaning of education, for Nietzsche, is defined in opposition to almost everything that constitutes education in his time. A Nietzschean declaration for education only makes sense insofar

as we constitute education so that we “educate ourselves *against* our age” (1873–1876/1997, p. 146). By implication, to the extent that our age remains beholden to the promise of education, we must educate ourselves against education, strange as that may sound. Indeed, in this strange formula is where we might locate Nietzsche’s ambiguity regarding the question of education. Almost by definition we will, as educated beings, strain to understand the invitation that is announced here.

One way of interpreting this statement (to educate against our age) is to say that education remains promissory with Nietzsche, and yet the promise is of an entirely different type, with very different consequences. There is no connection between the educational promise of an as yet unrealised good and the expectation that all submit themselves to being its servants. This is how the educational promise typically functions in Western education, where those pursuing it have no choice but to make use of the materials at hand, remaining within the institutions and procedures that define what it means to become educated. This relationship is what makes the educational promise so domesticating in its current form (as I have argued elsewhere; see Allen, 2017). Committing us to a process of never-ending labour, it has us defer gratification in a way that makes us more reliant on and subservient to what is given. Dubious situations are put up with as necessary (or at least not fatal) interruptions to the pursuit of higher ends. To the extent we become critical, even cynical of this predicament, ours is a mere cynicism of means, not ends, as Sloterdijk (1988, p. 186) puts it. The ends remain unperturbed. A more radical response by those educating themselves against the age would, one presumes, perturb ends as well as means, as Sloterdijk might say. Or in Nietzschean parlance, those educating themselves against the age must be prepared to “be an enemy” to those they love “and to the institutions which have produced” them. They must prepare themselves to be “for long thought an ally” of powers they abhor, since they will be consistently misread according to those very ends they seek to question (Nietzsche, 1873–1876/1997, p. 153).

Schopenhauer, we are told, did attempt to educate himself against his age. This made him a useful example of what one must attempt, and what one must be prepared to give up. In Schopenhauer’s work, Nietzsche claims, we find the effects of that battle; not in his achievements but in the scars it gave him, which is why Schopenhauer viewed through his writings “can be used as a mirror of his age.” Through Schopenhauer, “we possess the advantage of really *knowing* this age,” Nietzsche continues. We should not find fault in Schopenhauer as if that were an argument against his importance as a teacher. We should seek out his faults and learn from them, admiring Schopenhauer precisely because of his faults, precisely because he made himself so susceptible. As Nietzsche puts it, it is “not due to a fault in the mirror if everything time-bound in his age appears as a disfiguring illness, as thin and pale, as enervated and hollow eyed, as the recognisable sufferings” of Schopenhauer’s philosophy, of his attempt to stand apart, and his “untimeliness” (1873–1876/1997, p. 146). Schopenhauer’s disfigurement was an achievement, and so too was Nietzsche’s, we are tempted to infer. This approach seems to endorse a relation between student and educator that is entirely different to that relationship which is usually encouraged, where the success of education is somehow reliant on the goodness, benevolent intent, commitment to truth, or moral wisdom of the educator. Instead it implies that the student would do better to look to the educator for faults and symptoms, not examples of good practice or moral guidance. The example your educator sets is not that of the moral exemplar, or even that of the accomplished philosopher, but that of one sick with the problems of the age.

To educate ourselves against our age is a disturbing prospect, Nietzsche admits, and we should become disturbed, because this disturbance is a prerequisite for transformation. But it should not take the form of an outburst. Our refusal must be as measured and disciplined as it is forceful, directed against the world outside as much as it is reflected within: to educate against the age is also to educate against oneself. The student can overcome the present only “by overcoming the present

in himself' and "must deliberately under-assess" the present, since we are given to overestimate its merits (1873–1876/1997, p. 145). For guidance, Nietzsche repeats, we look to "the Schopenhauerean image of man," where this figure "*voluntarily takes upon himself the suffering involved in being truthful*." He seeks the "complete overturning and conversion of his being." His anger is so unusual, and his suffering so uncharacteristic, that he will be misunderstood by his contemporaries. Each truth he utters, each "utterance of truth" he makes, "seems to other men a discharge of malice" (p. 152, emphasis in original). They fail to see how much must be negated if we are to be educated, truly educated, so as to travel beyond our current predicament.

Here we encounter again Nietzsche's growing suspicion of the idea that one must depend upon another for guidance or nourishment in the form of an exemplar or goal to work towards. The educator should instead be approached as a symptom of failure and decline, and in rare cases (such as Schopenhauer) as a sign of how one might struggle against and within such a context of decline at great personal risk and disfigurement. This educator is recognised as a "fellow sufferer" (1873–1876/1997, p. 143), which is how Nietzsche approached Schopenhauer, by seeing in him both the sickness of his age and the possibility of doing battle with it. The greatest educators are, according to this logic, the greatest sufferers, since they suffer "from the deficiencies of the age more acutely" than most (p. 145). They will bear the worst scars, and will perhaps seem more ill than any other person with the sickness of our time.

This vision is almost ascetic in its glorification of self-mortification, in its subjugation of the present to a higher purpose, in its determination to rescue us by applying redoubled attention to the extent of our sickness; it appears Christian to the extreme. But in the last analysis, this student's commitment is to suffer from life so as to become better aware of it. The student realises that he (or she) is otherwise "in danger of being cheated out of himself," distracted from asking painful questions: "why do I live? what lesson do I have to learn from life? how have I become what I am and why do I suffer from being what I am?" (Nietzsche, 1873–1876/1997, p. 154). In answer to the question "To what end do you live?" the model student, which is the worst kind of student, replies with pride: "*To become a good citizen, or scholar, or statesman*" (p. 155). But this answer only evades the question by deferring to the protocols of the day. Those answering in this way remain trapped by objectives they cannot attain, properly define, question or overcome.

Those educating themselves against the age must undermine our most basic conceit: the idea that modern man offers the best standard of judgement. The student must come to know that, as the unfortunate product of modernity, he (or she) "is his first sacrifice" to himself. This student will gain strength from "forgetting" or overcoming the self, not in labouring for some Christian hereafter, or secular replacement, which must always be a projection from our present, and hence conceit (Nietzsche, 1873–1876/1997, p. 155). Unlike his or her contemporaries, who must believe for the sake of their conception of education that the educational promise will one day deliver, and as such is something worth striving for; the student who educates himself against the age knows that the educational promise is unrealisable by design and malicious in its effects. As an unrealisable objective, it manages to inspire ceaseless activity, endless labour in pursuit of an educational good that will never become manifested. It is a projection designed to distract us from our enslavement to it. Those who educate themselves against the age will seek to overcome the projections of their contemporaries, their promises to themselves, by stepping outside the promised space of education.

The Educator's Last Lesson: To Function as a Symptom

Nietzsche's formula, *to educate against the age*, is a beguiling idea. It is also still a promise of sorts. To his credit, Nietzsche recognises its promissory nature: Could this be, he suggests, just another "intoxicating vision granted us only for moments at a time, and then leaving us all the more painfully in the lurch and prey to an even deeper dissatisfaction"? Intoxication and nausea, a little light and then so much darkness—is that all we can expect? Can Nietzsche, as he says, "demonstrate that this ideal *educates*"? (1873–1876/1997, p. 156, emphasis in original)

There are obvious dangers: Are we not at risk of living so discontentedly that we become, as Nietzsche puts it, "uncertain of how to act and therefore daily more feeble and unfruitful"? (1873–1876/1997, p. 156) Who can survive such global discontent and yet remain committed to their own existence? Surely an institution of some kind is necessary for the otherwise solitary wanderer to ensure those pursuing a "true education" (of a Nietzschean sort) do not "die from premature exhaustion or even become alienated from their great task" (p. 176). At this point Nietzsche concedes that his work is hardly begun. He recommends that the first thing a student will require is "rugged and inflexible manliness" (p. 180), but this hardly helps his case.

Nietzsche recognises that he risks launching us upon another metaphysical cycle of intoxication and disappointment "as old as ideals themselves" (1873–1876/1997, p. 156), as a result of which we are constantly thrown back on our inadequacies (as things to fear, rather than the stuff of life). When we reflect, when we pause for a moment and take the measure of our existence, there is the horrible realisation that "we are not the mankind towards which all nature presses for its redemption" (p. 159). We realise that "we can contribute nothing to the production of the man of redemption: that is why we *hate* ourselves as we usually are, and it is this hatred which is at the root of that pessimism which Schopenhauer had again to teach our age" (p. 161). Hoping that a great redeemer might save us, we find ourselves lying in wait, prone to paralysis and despair.

Nietzsche recognises how we are trapped by the idea of redemption, by the hope of redeeming man, or at least redeeming the moment as a substitute. We are trapped, Nietzsche argues, because redemption is near impossible from our current predicament (culture is too broken), and because the desire for redemption as it is conventionally felt is itself already set up to cause disappointment (as a metaphysical object that is unrealisable by definition). The educator certainly will not redeem us, at least not as a well-meaning guide to better things.

Are there any other redeemers? Yes, apparently. At times, Nietzsche falls for what he elsewhere suspects, and so we are told that there may still come to existence "those true *men*, those who are no longer animal, the philosophers, artists and saints" (1873–1876/1997, p. 159, emphasis in original). But this risks becoming nothing more than wish-fulfilment, or self-consolation, as Nietzsche admits in his Preface to *Human, All Too Human*, quoted above. And besides, who would recognise those "true men" if they did arrive? Instead, Nietzsche gives us a secondary task as we wait, and this task appears crucial to understanding his conception of education: "[I]n the meantime we have our task and our circle of duties," he writes, as we "unwearyingly combat that which would deprive *us* of the supreme fulfilment of our existence," which is not to become saints, since that is beyond us, but to become "Schopenhauerean men ourselves" (p. 161).

It would seem that even an immoralist of Nietzsche's stature—able to mount such a brazen critique of everything that counts for education in modernity—is unable to negate education without also affirming it in some form. And in doing so he gives us a more immediate and achievable aim. For the author of the *Untimely Meditations*, a conception of education as access to higher culture persists; it is embodied in his vision of the occasional genius or saint. But this great

redeemer is so occasional that its recurrence cannot be relied upon. In this context, Nietzsche turns to Schopenhauer. He does not hold Schopenhauer aloft as if he were himself one of the saints or great redeemers we have been waiting for. Indeed, Schopenhauer's residual philosophy is not worth following, as Nietzsche indicates by giving it scant regard. Only Schopenhauer's awkward example is worth emulating. As his teacher, Schopenhauer showed how much Nietzsche would have to suffer for his philosophy if that philosophy was to succeed in overcoming everything that is to be educated against. This seems to be the nub of Nietzsche's argument against education (as it is commonly conceived) and against educated people (as they are commonly manifested): they will not entertain the suggestion that they themselves may be part of the problem—a problem against which Nietzsche mobilises the activity of a philosopher, a Nietzschean philosopher-educator, who does not learn primarily from books, because that leads to scholarly distraction, nor from others in a way that defers to their point of view. Rather, “most of the instruction he receives he has to acquire out of himself” and his own suffering for truth (1873–1876/1997, p. 181). This is where the work of education begins, Nietzsche argues, closer to home, often too close for comfort. The student inspects the educator, and the student inspects the self for signs of disease, for manifestations of the problems of the age. These are the problems the student must bring to full expression, as one is said to sweat out a fever by encouraging its symptoms. The student looks to the self for symptoms of illness and, refusing palliative care, suffers them in order to discover just how ravaged we are. This does not deliver the student into a despairing or melancholic state—it stimulates the student, who now realises the extent to which we must ourselves be “revolutionized before a revolution could take place” (p. 140).

References

- Allen, A. (2017). *The cynical educator*. Leicester, United Kingdom: Mayfly.
- Beckett, S. (1986). *Waiting for Godot*. London, United Kingdom: Faber and Faber. (Original work published 1956)
- Bingham, C. (2001). What Friedrich Nietzsche cannot stand about education: Toward a pedagogy of self-reformulation. *Educational Theory*, 51(3), 337–352.
- Fennell, J. (2005). Nietzsche contra “self-reformulation”. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 24(2), 85–111.
- Heidegger, M. (2002). Nietzsche's word: “God is dead”. In J. Young & K. Haynes (Eds.), *Off the beaten track* (pp. 157–199). Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1943)
- Hillesheim, J. W. (1986). Suffering and self-cultivation: The case of Nietzsche. *Educational Theory*, 36(2), 171–178.
- Jonas, M. (2009). A (r)evaluation of Nietzsche's anti-democratic pedagogy: The Overman, Perspectivism, and Self-Overcoming. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 28(2), 153–169.
- Jonas, M. (2013). Overcoming *ressentiment*: Nietzsche's education for an aesthetic aristocracy. *History of Political Thought*, 34(4), 669–701.
- Jonas, M. (2016). Advancing equality and individual excellence: The case of Nietzsche's “Schopenhauer as educator”. *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 33(2), 173–192.
- Joosten, H. (2013). Learning and teaching in uncertain times: A Nietzschean approach in professional higher education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 47(4), 548–563.

- Joosten, H. (2015). Excellence for all: A Nietzschean-inspired approach to professional higher education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 47(13–14), 1516–1528.
- Knights, B. (1978). *The idea of the clerisy in the nineteenth century*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (1968). *The will to power* (W. Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage. (Original work published 1906)
- Nietzsche, F. (1974). *The gay science: With a prelude in rhymes* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage. (Original work published 1887)
- Nietzsche, F. (1996). *Selected letters of Friedrich Nietzsche* (C. Middleton, Trans.). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Nietzsche, F. (1997). *Untimely meditations* (R. J. Hollingdale, Trans.). Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1873–1876)
- Nietzsche, F. (2003). *The birth of tragedy* (S. Whiteside, Trans.). London, United Kingdom: Penguin. (Original work published 1872)
- Nietzsche, F. (2004a). *Ecce homo: How one becomes what one is* (R. J. Hollingdale, Trans.). London, United Kingdom: Penguin. (Original work published 1908)
- Nietzsche, F. (2004b). *Human, all too human* (S. Lehmann, Trans.). London, United Kingdom: Penguin. (Original work published 1878)
- Nietzsche, F. (2008). *Thus spoke Zarathustra: A book for everyone and nobody* (G. Parkes, Trans.). Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1883–1891)
- Nietzsche, F. (2016). *Anti-education: On the future of our educational institutions*. New York, NY: New York Review of Books. (Original work published in English translation 1910)
- Peters, M., Marshall, J., & Smeyers, P. (Eds.). (2001). *Nietzsche's legacy for education: Past and present values*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Porter, J. I. (2000). *The invention of Dionysus: An essay on the birth of tragedy*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Ramaekers, S. (2001). Teaching to lie and obey: Nietzsche on education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 35(2), 255–268.
- Rosenow, E. (1989). Nietzsche's educational dynamite. *Educational Theory*, 39(4), 307–316.
- Rosenow, E. (2000). Nietzsche's educational legacy: Reflections on interpretations of a controversial philosopher. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 34(4) 673–685.
- Rosenow, E. (2004). Nietzsche's educational legacy revisited: Review essay. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 23(2), 189–202.
- Sloterdijk, P. (1988). *Critique of cynical reason* (M. Eldred, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Steel, S. (2014). On the need for Dionysian education in schools today. *Educational Theory*, 64(2), 123–141.
- Yacek, D. W. (2014a). Going to school with Friedrich Nietzsche: The self in service of noble culture. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 33(4), 391–411.
- Yacek, D. W. (2014b). Learning to see with different eyes: A Nietzschean challenge to multicultural dialogue. *Educational Theory*, 64(2), 99–121.
- Young, J. (2010). *Friedrich Nietzsche: A philosophical biography*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Young, J. (Ed.). (2014). *Individual and community in Nietzsche's philosophy*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

Notes

¹ Others have critiqued this emphasis on individual self-reformation: Fennell (2005) does so but in an attempt to save us from the “nihilism” and eventual denial of education he sees within it; Ramaekers (2001, p. 266) does so but in an attempt to promote a form of self-critique that asks each educator to “articulate what he or she stands for” in a pluralistic context. Strategies clearly vary depending on how Nietzsche’s work is interpreted. What remains the same, however, is the determination to make Nietzsche useful to education and, if necessary, protect education from those aspects of Nietzschean thought that cannot be rendered subservient to the project of educational critique and improvement.

² Working in a similar direction, *The Birth of Tragedy* has been applied to argue that education should achieve a better balance between Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies. Joosten (2013) believes this will enable professional educators to better cope in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing environment. Steel (2014) argues for the incorporation of “Dionysian education” into schools, claiming this will help offset an overly rationalised education system on the one hand, and the “restless idleness, and the sloth” that the modern day classroom produces on the other, when it does not succeed in promoting the ego of the aspiring student (p. 139). Steel realises that a Dionysian encounter must involve the destruction of the “individualized ego-self”—at least for the duration of the orgy—and so poses a fundamental challenge to subjectivity as we know it. But Steel nonetheless insists “ways must be found” to overcome this difficulty (p. 123), believing it is still possible to introduce Dionysian education to contemporary schools through leisure, the suspension of schoolwork, and the cultivation of a “celebratory atmosphere” that will allow an “emptying of the self” to occur. Surely, Steel argues, “the atmosphere of friendship and community that exists in many schools still offers such possibility,” where the “inclusive, democratic quality of the Dionysian festival,” in turn, makes it “amenable to mass public schooling” (pp. 139–140). Here, as before, the great edifice of public schooling remains intact.

³ Yacek (2014a) discusses the extent to which “self-overcoming” could be tied to the practices of a revived democratic education and deployed in schools. Elsewhere, Yacek (2014b) argues Nietzsche can be used to improve the teaching of empathy in multicultural settings. Joosten (2015) claims Nietzsche can be used to reconceptualise the recent European policy drive to secure “excellence for all” and thereby make excellence in education (reconceptualised as “rising above oneself”) a more meaningful objective. Educational revival, improvement, and substance—this is what Nietzsche is made to offer.

⁴ The ancient Greek term for Cynic literally means dog-like, where Diogenes, the most famous ancient Cynic, actively mocked and attacked would-be followers: “Other dogs bite their enemies, but I my friends, so as to save them” (Diogenes, 2012, p. 24).

About the Author

Ansgar Allen (a.allen@sheffield.ac.uk) is a lecturer in education at the University of Sheffield, UK. He is the author of *The Cynical Educator*, *Benign Violence: Education in and Beyond the Age of Reason* and (with Roy Goddard) *Education and Philosophy: An Introduction*.