

# Nietzsche's Philosophy of Education: Rethinking Ethics, Equality and the Good Life in a Democratic Age (Mark Jonas & Douglas Yacek)

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*Review of*

## *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Education: Rethinking Ethics, Equality and the Good Life in a Democratic Age*

*by Mark Jonas and Douglas Yacek, New York: Routledge, 2019.*

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PETER FITZSIMONS

Since the 1980s, there has been an upsurge of interest in the relevance of Friedrich Nietzsche's writings on the subject of education, with much of the debate carried out in philosophy of education journal articles and a few more extended engagements in book form. Interest has focussed mainly on ethics as a fundamental concern of education, with controversy stemming from competing interpretations of what Nietzsche was saying and attempts to discredit him with attributions of aristocratic elitism, anti-democratic sentiments, and a nihilistic approach to truth and morality. In this new book, Jonas and Yacek acknowledge the controversy surrounding Nietzsche's philosophical legacy and the challenges inherent in his style of writing, but are intent on revealing how his ideas might influence modern education and democracy in a positive way. Their central thesis is that Nietzsche's conceptions of individual and social flourishing, along with his criticisms of the negative impacts of modernity, help us to rethink some problematic assumptions that have corrupted our current values and ideals. These include assumptions about what is worth striving for in a mass consumer culture, what it means to educate well in a society committed to equality, and how we can lead a meaningful common life in an increasingly connected but troublingly competitive social landscape. With that focus, the book is well located in a growing Routledge book series titled *New Directions in the Philosophy of Education*, devoted to building bridges across different traditions and practices in exploring a different future for philosophy of education.

The authors are clearly well versed in Nietzsche's texts as primary sources for their work, interpreting from their own translations of German texts where preferred. With a fine-grained analysis of his writing, they draw extensively on earlier educational philosophy and academic debate about the meaning and significance of Nietzsche's ideas for education to propose a coherent philosophy that underlies and unifies Nietzsche's corpus in a consistent way. They delve deeply into the text to illustrate their observations, often pointing to passages preceding or following popular quotations to rebut common interpretations of what Nietzsche's writing means. Jonas and Yacek confront, head-on, the characterisations of Nietzsche as a thoroughgoing relativist, a radical individualist, an unyielding elitist, and an opponent of democratic education by, in their own words, "employing Nietzsche as a dialogical partner for improving democratic education today" (p.18).

Apart from the introduction and the conclusion, the book is laid out in a strategic series of paired chapters. The first of each pair provides theoretical analysis of a significant Nietzschean philosophical doctrine, while the second—referred to by the authors as “practical”—outlines what they see as educational implications of Nietzsche’s thinking about the concepts dealt with in the previous chapter. Each chapter pair deals with a well-known theme in Nietzschean scholarship as we are led through the doctrine of perspectivism, the doctrine of self-overcoming, the doctrine of the order of rank, and the doctrine of *ressentiment*. The treatment is often by way of dealing with what the authors see as common misconceptions about the doctrines in earlier philosophy of education publications. Although such an approach provides an informative and clear focus on existing and past discourse, it can sometimes feel too oppositional, enframing the reader within the imputed misconception rather than inviting a joyous sense of revelation and discovery in this rehabilitation of Nietzsche. Nevertheless, the treatment of the philosophical doctrines is thorough, and the “educational implications” chapters put paid to the often-heard criticism by teacherly folk: What does this have to do with education?

The first major theme dealt with in the book is Nietzsche’s doctrine of perspectivism which, according to the authors, has become a source of substantial confusion and misunderstanding among philosophers of education who claim that Nietzsche completely dispenses with the categories of “true” and “false.” The current authors argue that Nietzsche retains a concept of “truer” perspectives even if he rejects a correspondence theory of truth. Individual subjectivity, for Nietzsche, plays a central role in the process of acquiring and internalising knowledge. Rather than casting Nietzsche as a thoroughgoing relativist who would have all truth as lie, the authors have him as promoting a kind of empathy (quite distinct from pity). This involves seeing the world with different eyes: a kind of objectivity achieved through the accumulation of different perspectives to form “truer” perspectives and learning to see many of our cultural “truths” as lies. Although the project is social, educated individuals are those who can overcome life-denying cultural paradigms, requiring them to observe, think and express themselves in coherent and self-empowering ways. Education to this end is disciplined, well-rounded, and based on a rigorous engagement with exemplary others and their works. In educational terms, the authors outline a pedagogy of perspectival empathy, central features of which are familiar prescriptions for education—self-reflection, language learning, historical studies and philosophical dialogue—and a commitment to living a powerful and inspired life beyond the years of schooling.

Another notion commonly discussed in philosophy of education inspired by Nietzsche is his figure of the *Übermensch* as a metaphor for self-overcoming. The authors take issue with a frequent (mis)conception of self-overcoming as the ability to reject one’s own identity. The error, they say, stems from a misreading of Nietzsche’s conception of perspectivism and his repudiation of the transcendent self. Having diverse perspectives, they say, is not about arbitrarily changing socially defined lifestyles, but about choosing perspectives that increase and refine our knowledge and power. Far from being a denial of the self or a radical break with all of one’s personal and cultural values, self-overcoming describes the emergence of a vital and evolving self with impassioned knowledge. Self-overcoming is seen as a form of self-mastery that involves increasing human power and a notion of embodied reason. Again, the authors note the social focus of Nietzsche’s egoism in the exercise of self-control and temperance, so that one has the strength to behave with magnanimity and generosity, thereby making others stronger. This, they argue, is the nature of Nietzsche’s free spirit. The doctrine of self-overcoming requires teachers to overcome their desire to pity and protect their students from struggle. Becoming masters of ourselves means sublimating the internal passions that threaten empowerment, and cultivating the ability to think,

speak and write, in the profound sense that Nietzsche uses these terms. Pedagogy to this end is seen as providing immersive experiences in classical culture under the influence of exemplary writers and thinkers, and opportunities for struggle and learning in a culture that embraces such struggles.

The third doctrine examined in the book is Nietzsche's conception of the order of rank, a doctrine that commonly gives rise to accusations of elitism in his desire to create a political aristocracy in which the aristocratic few exploit the mediocre many. In a brave departure from many earlier analyses, the authors provide a number of textual extracts to argue for an egalitarian view of Nietzsche as wanting to establish a vibrant culture in which all individuals, no matter their innate level of talent or ability are given robust opportunities to maximise their potential. Nietzsche is credited with the belief that all individuals share a common existential reality: each person is unique and irreplaceable as a human being and in that sense all are equals, although not all will realise their potential. Nietzsche's "youthful souls" are the ones who respond to the challenge, unlike the masses who are unresponsive to the calling of their deepest longings. The truly aspirational figures, though, are the artists, philosophers, and saints who serve as liberators and redeemers of mankind, at least for those willing to be liberated. The challenge for the youthful souls, it is argued, is to struggle to change those institutions that produce the laziness and conformity that impedes growth. Rather than seeing Nietzsche as a radical elitist, the authors argue that his cultural vision is "partially egalitarian," a vision of happiness for all in which the flourishing of the many and the few is inseparable, with each person equal in their uniqueness. The recipe for education is to appreciate the diversity of talents and achievements as a means of personal and society flourishing, through what the authors call "inspirational emulation," a form of competitive peer-to-peer interaction for mutual self-empowerment. The "emulative classroom" is underpinned by a series of seven principles, in a celebration of excellence in the achievements of others (including one's prior self) and deriving inspiration from these achievements to pursue our highest selves.

The fourth chapter pairing deals with Nietzsche's doctrine of *ressentiment*, a French word used to describe an internalised and often subconscious feeling of inferiority that he believes pervades modern cultures. While Nietzsche believes that individuals of extraordinary talent and achievement can be sources of inspiration, he worries that instead of feeling inspiration, many people resent these individuals and seek to diminish others' success. The authors observe that political aristocracies are breeding grounds for *ressentiment*, and so are rejected by Nietzsche as a way of creating a higher culture. In other words, Nietzsche is not after an elitist society in which the few dominate the many. Instead, he is seen to prefer an "aesthetic aristocracy" in which the few ensure that the many are provided with a robust education for elevating both the few and the many, and the flourishing of the entire culture. Nietzsche, we are told, urges the many to become "active" individuals, defining themselves in terms of their own self-mastery, rather than "reactive," revenging themselves upon a hostile external world. The chapter on the doctrine of *ressentiment* provides a clear description of the elitist reading of Nietzsche's philosophy (although disagreeing with it), and a well-informed explanation of the Nietzschean idea of *ressentiment*. The harmful effects of *ressentiment* mean that educators need to support their students in finding a more empowering stance, and a greater sense of agency and self-confidence in their lives. A powerful remedy is proffered in Nietzsche's view of the tremendous psychological and social benefits that can come from the cultivation of gratitude. We are talking here about a particular type of gratitude, not driven by obligation or debt to others, but by becoming happy, healthy, and powerful in our unconditional gratitude towards others no matter what their actions.

The book concludes with Nietzsche's pedagogical vision for the good life as a common embrace of embodied wisdom. The vision, inspired by a passage from his *Human, All too Human*, calls for a society organised as a community of learning that celebrates the achievements of human reason, with the teacher as an ideal synthesis of virtue, beauty, health and knowledge. Nietzsche's silence about what this might look like in practice is interpreted by the current authors as an intentional provocation to find our own place in the collective effort to elevate culture, not to be his disciples. Zarathustra's words are recalled: "Now I bid you to lose me and find yourselves" (Z, *On the Gift-Giving Virtue*). Our authors respond to the challenge with the formulation of four principles based on the doctrines discussed earlier: empathy, self-mastery, emulation and gratitude. To this list, they add the diversity of human excellence, forming a set of values they believe are not only compatible with democracy but instrumental to fulfilling its promise. The final exhortation is for a commitment to the pursuit of wisdom in organising and justifying the lives we make for ourselves.

Overall, the book provides a comprehensive treatment of Nietzsche's philosophy of education based on a deep reading of his work, framed within an ethics of democracy. One criticism of the book's focus is the implied definition of education as being limited to pedagogical questions of school-based teaching and learning, i.e., "concrete ways in which Nietzsche's philosophy can enrich teaching and learning in modern democratic schools" (p. 19). This is especially pertinent to the chapters dealing with the educational implications of the various doctrines discussed. A broader view of education might encompass conceptions of being and becoming or what it is to become human, for example. The authors are aware of this, as they note quite early in the book Nietzsche's "compelling and coherent vision of human flourishing that aims to promote the excellence of all individuals" (p. 19). Some respite is provided in the concluding chapter of the book, though, in the authors' formulation of education as incorporating ideas about education as involving aspirations to the good life outside formal pedagogy.

Another criticism of the book is the authors' insistence on making earlier commentators wrong, both poststructuralist/Continental and analytic philosophers alike. Nietzsche's ideas, they say, are "largely misunderstood by contemporary interpreters" (p. 99) whose "standard view" is "not the correct view" (p. 102), but characterised by misunderstanding, misconstruction and misinterpretation. The "erroneous" commentators targeted are relatively small in number, with well over half the references more than twenty years old, several of whom pioneered the journal debates on Nietzsche and education during the 1980s. Closing down ambiguity and alternative perspectives is characterised as an attempt to "set the record straight" (p. 100), suggesting that the authors have privileged access to what Nietzsche really means. Admittedly, the authors' arguments are well supported, but their dialectical stance to those who have gone before is at odds with their call for unconditional gratitude and a democratic community of learning as commensurate with their use of Nietzsche as a dialogical partner for improving democratic education. Similarly, their definitive stance on the correct interpretation of Nietzsche precludes the spirit of agonism that will, no doubt, see philosophers of the future with fresh perspectives challenging the "correct" view in years to come.

In summary, this book is a challenging and informative read, representing a bold and original stance on Nietzsche's conceptions of truth and equality, and a revelatory exposition of Nietzsche as a champion of equality—albeit a qualified version of it. Emphasis on the educational implications of his work makes the book accessible to philosophers and practitioners of education alike. It would make an excellent introductory text for those involved in education wanting access to a normative reading of Nietzsche's philosophy. The reader can't help feeling, though, that the authors have been somewhat constrained by

their quest for the “correct” interpretation, resulting in reasoned (if somewhat pedantic) arguments for what they see as Nietzsche’s educational legacy. So, although the writing is quite accessible and well argued, there is something missing of the inspirational fire and the poetic beauty that we (mis)interpreters of Nietzsche have come to love.

### **About the Author**

**Peter Fitzsimons** has at various times been a teacher, a professional musician, a radio journalist, a factory manager, and more recently a management consultant in education, health and social policy. As an independent researcher, he has written one book in philosophy of education and a variety of journal articles on narrative and metaphor.