

The education-socialisation conundrum or ‘Who is afraid of education?’¹

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In this article I ask whether it is possible to make a distinction between education and socialisation. Whereas socialisation is understood as the process of inserting newcomers into an existing order, education is characterised in terms of a concern for the individuality or uniqueness of the human person. In the Enlightenment it was argued that we could distinguish education from socialisation with the help of the idea of rational autonomy which was considered to be a universal potential of all human beings that could help them to make themselves independent from tradition. The critique of philosophical humanism has shown why rational autonomy should no longer be understood as itself beyond tradition. As a result education for rational autonomy becomes another form of socialisation. It is suggested that an orientation towards the future and, more specifically towards what comes to us from the future, might help us to maintain a distinction between education and socialisation.

Keywords: education, socialisation, rational autonomy, philosophical humanism.

Introduction

In this article I would like to make a case for a particular *use* of the word ‘education.’ This endeavour might be understood as an attempt to give an answer to the question as to what education ‘is.’ But instead of looking for some kind of essence of education – which, in my view, is a rather futile thing to do – I wish to explore how we might best understand and approach education and, more importantly, I wish to

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explore what kind of understanding of the notion of education might be relevant and maybe even necessary for our world today. I am aware that one of the conceptual difficulties of doing this already lies in the very word ‘education’ itself. This is not only because the word has many different meanings (or at least many different connotations). It is also because, in translation, it is connected to many different national and cultural histories and traditions. Think, for example, of the enormous differences encapsulated in the words ‘education,’ ‘Erziehung,’ ‘éducation,’ ‘opvoeding,’ and ‘utbildning.’ Language is always a limited and imperfect tool, but it is the best and only tool we have. When I use the word ‘education’ in what follows, it is not only to refer to what happens in schools, colleges and universities. It is not only about teaching and learning in classroom settings. Education, for me, is also concerned with wider questions about the formation of human beings and the ways in which they find their place in the world. From this point of view, it is important to introduce a distinction between *education* and *socialisation* – and in a sense what I will be saying in this article can be understood as an attempt to see whether it is (still) possible to make a meaningful distinction between these two notions.

Socialisation, education and the Enlightenment

In my view many educational practices are actually configured as practices of socialisation. They are concerned with the insertion of ‘newcomers’ into existing cultural and socio-political settings. This is not unimportant since it equips newcomers with the tools they need to participate in particular forms of life. Through this, socialisation contributes to social and cultural continuity. But we cannot be too naive about this, because such processes also contribute to the reproduction of existing inequalities, either unknowingly or, in those cases in which education is utilised to conserve particular practices and interests, also knowingly. Education is, however, not exclusively the servant of the existing order. There is an important ‘counter-current’ in the history of Western education in which the task of education is *not* understood in terms of discipline, moral training, insertion and adaptation, but where education is focused on what we might call the cultivation of the human person or the cultivation of the individual’s *humanity* (see, for example, Løvlie et al., 2003).

In the Western world one of the oldest and most prominent ways of thinking along these lines can be found in the tradition of what in German is known as *Bildung*.² *Bildung* stands for an educational ideal that emerged in Greek society and that, through its adoption in

Roman culture, humanism, neo-humanism, and the Enlightenment, became one of the central notions of the Western/Continental educational tradition (see Klafki 1986). Central to this tradition is the question of what constitutes an educated or cultivated human being. Initially the answer to this question was given in terms of the *contents* of education. An educated person was someone who had acquired a particular set of knowledge, values and dispositions. It was, in other words, the one who was properly socialised into a particular tradition, often a tradition of 'high culture.' An important step was taken when the activity of the acquisition of knowledge, values and dispositions became itself recognised as a crucial aspect of the process of *Bildung* (e.g., in the writings of Von Herder, Pestalozzi and Von Humboldt). From then on *Bildung* became understood as self-*Bildung*: *Bildung of the self by the self* (see Gadamer 2001).

The foundations of *modern* education were laid when the tradition of *Bildung* became intertwined with the Enlightenment, and it was here that Immanuel Kant played a crucial role. Kant, as we know, provided the classic definition of Enlightenment as "man's [sic] release from his self-incurred tutelage" and defined tutelage (or, in other translations of the word 'Unmundigkeit': immaturity) as "man's [sic] inability to make use of his understanding without the direction from another" (Kant 1992[1784], p.90).³ This immaturity is self-incurred, Kant wrote, "when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage" (p.90). This is why he argued that human beings should have the courage to use their own understanding – which Kant saw as "the motto of Enlightenment" (p.90).

The most important aspect of Kant's call for rational autonomy – autonomy based upon reason – was that he did not conceive of this capacity as a contingent historical possibility, but saw it instead as something that was an inherent part of human nature. Kant described the "propensity and vocation to free thinking" as man's "ultimate destination" and as the "aim of his existence" (Kant 1982, p.701). To block progress in enlightenment would therefore be "a crime against human nature" (Kant 1992[1784], p.93). Interestingly enough, Kant also argued that the 'propensity to free thinking' could *only* be brought about through education (see Kant 1982, p.710). Kant not only wrote that man "is the only creature that has to be educated" (Kant 1982, p.697); he also argued that the human being can only become human – that is, a rational autonomous being – "through education" ("Der Mensch kann nur Mensch werden durch Erziehung") (p.699). With Kant the rationale for the educational process thus became founded on the idea "of a certain kind of subject who has the inherent poten-

tial to become self-motivated and self-directing,” while the task of education became one of bringing about or releasing this potential “so that subjects become fully autonomous and capable of exercising their individual and intentional agency” (Usher & Edwards 1994, pp.24–25).

What is most significant about Kant’s intervention – and this is why we can say that Kant indeed marks the inauguration of modern education – is that he established a link between education and human freedom. Kant made the question of human freedom the central issue for modern education through his distinction between heteronomous determination and self-determination and through arguing that education ultimately had to do with the latter, not the former. But whereas on the one hand Kant opened up a whole new realm for education through and practice – and the idea that education should bring about rational autonomy has remained central to many educational theories and practices up to the present day (see, e.g. Winch 2005) – he closed off this opening almost before it could start. This happened along two, related lines. It was first of all because Kant only allowed for *one* definition of what it meant to be human. With Kant ‘rational autonomy’ became the marker of humanity, which left those who were considered to be not or not-yet rational – including children – in a difficult position. It was also because for Kant, as we have seen, rational autonomy was *not* understood as a contingent historical possibility, but a necessity firmly rooted in the nature of the human being. With Kant modern education thus became founded upon a particular *truth* about the nature and destiny of the human being.

For a long time the ‘closure’ entailed in the Kantian articulation of the foundations of modern education went unnoticed. This was partly because there was widespread support for the underlying belief that human beings are ultimately rational beings who strive for autonomy. This, after all, was very much the ‘agenda’ of the French, the German and the Scottish Enlightenment. Yet, and more importantly, the closure in Kant’s articulation of the foundations of modern education went also unnoticed because those who were excluded by this definition of the human being – those who were deemed to be irrational or pre-rational – lacked a voice to protest against their own exclusion, and they lacked this voice precisely because of the particular definition of what it meant to be human. They were excluded, in other words, before they could even speak or before they could even be acknowledged as capable of speaking (see also Rancière 1995, Biesta 2007a).

Education 'after' humanism

I have spent considerable time trying to 'unearth' the foundations of modern education. This is not only important in order to get a sense of the history of contemporary educational theories and practices – and I do believe that many such theories and practice, but also many of the psychological and sociological theories that inform education, are still part of this modern history. It is also because I believe that it is only through such an exercise that we can begin to shed a light on some of the most pressing problems of our time and can begin to understand the extent to which modern education is part of the problem rather than only part of the solution.

One way to make clear what I have in mind here is by means of a critique – or maybe better: a repositioning – of Kant. Whereas Kant thought that he had moved education away from tradition and socialisation towards autonomy and freedom, we now live in a world in which the Kantian idea of rational autonomy has been moved back from the 'side' of freedom to the 'side' of tradition (see e.g, Biesta 2005). There are not only important philosophical reasons why we should see rational autonomy as a contingent historical achievement rather than as a natural necessity or as the *telos* of history. I wish to claim that many of the most problematic clashes between different cultures and traditions⁴ in our time centre precisely on the question whether the modern, Western worldview is itself 'beyond' tradition or whether it should be seen as just one tradition amongst many. If we take the latter view – and I think that there are compelling reasons for doing so (see particularly Biesta 2005; 2006a) – it means, educationally speaking, that modern education becomes one more form of socialisation, viz., socialisation into a (or as some would argue: *the*) rational form of life. This does not automatically disqualify this particular form of life, but it does make clear that a choice for such a trajectory is indeed a *choice* – a choice that has to be made by someone – and not something that is self-evident or a natural necessity.

A slightly different way to expose what is problematic about the way in which the modern educational project was founded, is by looking at its *humanist* foundations. I use 'humanism' here in the philosophical sense of the word, i.e., as the idea that it is possible to know and express the essence or nature of the human being, and also that it is possible to use this knowledge as the foundation for subsequent action – in the sphere of education but also, for example, in the sphere of politics. Humanism, as Emmanuel Levinas has put it, entails "the recognition of an invariable essence named 'Man,' the affirmation of his central place in the economy of the Real and of his

value which [engenders] all values” (Levinas 1990, p.227). Modern education in its Kantian form is clearly humanistic since, as I have shown, it is founded upon a particular *truth* about the nature of the human being.

In 20th century philosophy humanism has basically been challenged for two reasons. On the one hand questions have been raised about the *possibility* of humanism, i.e., about the possibility for human beings to define their own origin. Important contributions along these lines have indeed been made by Foucault and Derrida (see, e.g., Foucault 1970; Derrida 1982). On the other hand questions have been raised about the *desirability* of humanism. This line has particularly been developed by Heidegger and Levinas (see Biesta 2006a for more detail; see also Derrida 1982, pp.109–136). For Levinas the “crisis of humanism in our society” began with the “inhuman events of recent history” (Levinas 1990, p.279). Yet for Levinas the crisis of humanism is not simply located in these inhumanities as such, but first and foremost in humanism’s inability to effectively counter such inhumanities and also in the fact that many of the inhumanities of the 20th century – “[t]he 1914 War, the Russian Revolution refuting itself in Stalinism, fascism, Hitlerism, the 1939–45 War, atomic bombings, genocide and uninterrupted war” (ibid.) – were actually based upon and motivated by particular definitions of what it means to be human. This is why Levinas concludes – with a phrase reminiscent of Heidegger – that “[h]umanism has to be denounced ... because it is not *sufficiently* human” (Levinas 1981, p.128; *emph. added*).⁵

The problem with humanism, so we might say, is that it posits a *norm* of humaneness, a norm of what it means to be human, and in doing so excludes all those who do not live up to or are unable to live up to this norm. At the dawn of the 21st century we know all too well that this is not simply a theoretical possibility. Many of the atrocities that have become the markers of the 20th century – such as the holocaust and the genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia – were actually based upon a definition of what counts as and, more importantly, of *who* counts as human. From an educational point of view there is also a problem with humanism. Here the problem with humanism is that it specifies a norm of what it means to be human *before* the actual manifestation of ‘instances’ (see below) of humanity. Humanism specifies what the child, student or newcomer must become, before giving them an opportunity to show who they are and who they will be. Humanism thus seems to be unable to be open to the possibility that newcomers might radically alter our understandings of what it means to be human. This means that at a fundamental level humanism can indeed only think of education as socialisation. As a result, humanism is unable to grasp the uniqueness

of each individual human being. It can only think of each newcomer as an instance of a human essence that has already been specified and is already known in advance.

As long as we see education through the lens of socialisation all this is, of course, not really a problem. Yet it is here that Kant remains important because he has left us with the idea that it might be – and in a sense *ought to be* – possible to make a meaningful distinction between education and socialisation. If we are committed to this distinction, if we are committed to what Foucault has so aptly referred to as “the undefined work of freedom” (Foucault 1984, p.46), then it becomes important to think again about ways in which we might be able to distinguish education from socialisation, both in theory and in practice, and to do so in a way that does not bring us back to humanism.

An education of the future

I believe that this is one of the major challenges before us, and in a sense my contribution in this article is mainly to make this challenge visible and to put it (back) on the educational agenda. After all, we now live in a world in which we can no longer maintain that the production of rational autonomy through education is innocent and unproblematic and simply lies ‘beyond’ socialisation. We have to see this tradition, this modern, Western tradition, for what it is: a particular tradition with particular strengths but also with important weaknesses. It is important, however, to see that the ‘solution’ or ‘way out’ of this predicament is not simply to say that all that we have are traditions. To postulate such a ‘communitarian universe’ – but maybe this is also the universe of Wittgenstein and Rorty – would, in my view, only affirm and perpetuate the clash of traditions that is so characteristic of our times. Here again I think that we should remain connected to the Kantian idea that it is important to think of education as something that is ‘beyond’ tradition, something that is post-traditional.

What this requires from education, so I wish to suggest, is first and foremost an orientation towards the *future*.⁶ In my view, the educational question is not how we can maintain and reproduce the current *status quo*; the educational question is not simply about how we can maintain and reproduce cultures and traditions; the crucial educational question is about what (or better: who) is coming towards us from the future, so to speak. The educational question is about the ‘newness’ that is trying to come into the world. Who is it that is trying to come into the world? It is here that we can locate educational responsibility and the responsibility of educators, as a responsibility

for the coming into the world of ‘newcomers,’ of ‘new beginnings’ and ‘new beginners’ – to use the words of Hannah Arendt (see Arendt 1977, Biesta 2006a).

Such an orientation towards the future allows education to remain post-traditional and orientated towards freedom. It is, however, not an orientation towards a freedom that is already known and pre-defined (such as the Kantian freedom of rational autonomy) but an orientation that, after Foucault, we might best characterise as an ‘undefined freedom,’ a freedom that needs to be realised again and again. From this point of view education ceases to be the place where we need to define what it means to be human *before* we can let others into our space. Instead, education becomes a place where the question as to what it means to be human, to live a human life, and to live such a life with others who are not like us, becomes the central question and also the central ‘task’ of education. It is precisely along these lines that education remains intimately connected to the question of democracy (see Biesta 2004, Biesta 2007b). And it is this orientation towards an open and unknown future, towards the coming into the world of ‘new beginnings’ and ‘new beginners,’ that makes it possible to maintain a meaningful difference between education and socialisation. Those who are afraid of the openness and unpredictability of the educational responsibility would probably want to fall back upon the more secure track of socialisation, either in their theories or in their practices. This suggests that education can only ever begin when we are willing to overcome our fear for the future and, more importantly, when we are willing to overcome our fear for education itself.

Concluding remarks

In this article I have asked whether we can still make a meaningful distinction between socialisation and something that is *not* socialisation – for which I have used the word ‘education.’ I have suggested that it is possible to make a distinction between socialisation and education at the level of the everyday practices of educators (in schools, colleges, universities, adult education settings, etcetera). Here, socialisation has to do with all activities that aim to provide ‘newcomers’ with the social and cultural tools that allow them to participate effectively in particular forms of life, whereas education – to put it briefly – has to do with a concern for the human person as, say, a unique individual. The deeper question, however, has to do with the philosophical underpinnings of this distinction. Whereas modern education, rooted in the Enlightenment and exemplified in the work of Kant, maintains

that it is possible to make a distinction between socialisation as heteronomous determination and education as a process that leads to rational self-determination and freedom, I have argued that Kant's idea of freedom as rational autonomy should itself be understood as a particular tradition. This means that education for rational autonomy can only be understood as a 'higher' or at least a different form of socialisation – not as something that itself lies beyond socialisation. My reasons for repositioning Kant have to do with the fact that his definition of what it means to be human excludes those who do not live up to or, more importantly, who are not able to live up to this particular definition. Here I have particularly mentioned children who, on the Kantian definition, 'by definition' have to be seen as pre-rational. But I also have in mind those with disabilities who, in an age of advanced medical technology, are increasingly struggling to get their 'definition' of what it means to be human accepted even, sometimes, before they are born. The limits of the Kantian idea of rational autonomy are therefore not only a philosophical problem; they have profound practical implications too. I have also tried to argue that we now live in an era in which this particular – modern, Western, Enlightenment – definition of what it means to be human has become exposed for the exclusions it has brought about and is continuing to bring about at a geo-political level. This relates to the wider problem of philosophical humanism which, because it aims to define what it means to be human, runs the risk of precluding ways of being human that cannot yet be foreseen from where we are now.

All this could be understood as a very 'postmodern' line of thinking in the bad sense of the word. It could be understood as a plea to do away with the achievements of modernity and Enlightenment. Yet this is not what I have been trying to say. My aim has not been to do away with Kant, but to *reposition* his contribution. My aim, more generally, has been to reposition the 'grand narratives' of Enlightenment and emancipation. In a sense to call them grand narratives – as Lyotard has done – is already enough, since it reminds us that the narratives of Enlightenment and emancipation are the stories that we have been telling ourselves and others to make sense of our human condition and our particular historical settings. Such stories are powerful stories, but they are stories nonetheless. They are not 'deep truths' that can do the work for us – they can help us to achieve particular things, but it is up to us to do the work, and to look at them in this way may be as much postmodern as it is pragmatic, and perhaps pragmatist.

I finally wish to emphasise that my plea for an orientation towards what comes to us from the future is not meant to imply that we should simply accept anything that arrives. I am not arguing that

we should do away with judgement – in education and in politics. I am only arguing that we should not try to judge before the event – we should not try to specify what students and children and newcomers should be *before* they arrive. We should let them arrive first, and only then engage in judgement. There is, of course, a risk entailed in this. There is, as Derrida would put it, a real risk entailed in trying to be hospitable (see Derrida & Defourmantelle 2000). But if we are not willing to run this risk, if we are not willing to overcome our fear for education, then education would disappear again and we would be left only with socialisation.

Notes

1. The subtitle of this article is an allusion to the title of a paper given by Jacques Derrida in 1980 in the context of a discussion about the place of philosophy in the curriculum for secondary schools in France (see Derrida 2004).
2. I do not have the space to discuss the complexities of this tradition, nor can I address the question of the translation of the concept of 'Bildung' into English or other languages. For some helpful clarifications, particularly in an English-speaking context, see Cleary and Hogan 2000; Biesta 2002; Løvlie et al., 2003; Prange 2004).
3. Kant used the word 'Mensch' in German, which should have been translated as 'human being' rather than 'man.'
4. I speak in a general sense about cultures and traditions, because I do not want to single out particular traditions as more 'traditional' than others. This is why I do not refer to, for example, religious traditions because although they figure prominently in many 'clashes' that characterise the times we live in, I do believe that for example the 'Western' or 'secular' or 'scientific' traditions are as traditional as the religious tradition is. This is not to suggest that they are all the same, either in their intentions or their effects. The only thing I do not want to claim is that there is a natural ranking order of traditions.
5. On the relation between Levinas's and Heidegger's humanism critique see Biesta 2006a, p. 12; Levinas 1990, p.281.
6. I am not suggesting, of course, that the past is not important, since it is crucial for education to ask again and again what we can learn from the past. For more on this point see Biesta 2006b.

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