4. Deep Fun

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Abstract:

Nietzsche advanced a sustained criticism of the common religious belief that we must suffer through the present life in order to receive apay-off in the next. We see the same "future-pay-off" mentality in education due to the instrumental approach to pedagogy, which is also standard in the philosophy for children tradition.I argue that we ought to make a concerted effort topromote intrinsic value in education instead. A.S. Neill, founder of the famous "free school" Summerhill, shows that play is intrinsically valuable and logically prior to the work of learning. Children enjoy engaging in spontaneous activities that don't ultimately matter, especially if they provide humor, wonder, awe, insight, or community. The philosophical novel, when written, taught, or read playfully, has potential to furnish this intrinsic value, thereby offering a promising way of seizing the moment in education.

Keywords:

Friedrich Nietzsche; A.S. Neil; philosophical novel; play; intrinsic value

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I. A Thought Experiment

Today is the last day of your life. Later today when you're crossing the street you'll be hit by a bus. Slam! You're dead on contact.

That's the bad news.

The good news is: it's not the end. There is life after death.

But whether or not this is really good news depends on you. The afterlife isn't anything like the heaven envisioned in so many religions. Instead, you will be returned to the beginning of your existence, when you were conceived in your mother's womb, and you will live your whole life all over again, exactly the same, down to every detail. When the last day arrives, and you go to meet the bus that kills you, you will again be returned to the beginning. This will continue happening forever.

Does this come as good news to you… or bad news? Do you relish the thought of living your life over again? Does the news inspire you to live your life any differently? Take a moment to think about it: you will live this very moment an infinite number of times…..

How do you feel about that?

II. Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence

Friedrich Nietzsche first introduced the above thought experiment, which is known as the "Eternal Recurrence."[i] It was central to his scathing religious criticism: Christianity asks people to suffer through their earthly life in order to earn a reward in the next. Nietzsche hated the "future pay-off" mentality this myth produces. He proposed a new myth, hoping it would inspire people to seize the moment and start living to their fullest potential right now.

I retell the myth here for the purpose of criticizing, not religion, but education, which is full of the same "future pay-off" mentality. In the proverbial olden days of our grandparents, it seems to have been widely believed that students must suffer through school in order to earn their reward in the next life—the life after graduation—when they would face the world of adult responsibilities. Our own era is supposed to be more enlightened. We strive to make school fun. But we are still convinced that students must learn their lessons in order to receive their future pay-off.

I argue that teachers ought to make a concerted effort to replace this mentality with something like Nietzsche's seize-the-moment alternative and that the philosophical novel is one promising way to accomplish this.

III. The Alleged Instrumental Value of the Philosophical Novel

The idea of bringing the philosophical novel into the classroom is already a gutsy departure from tradition. We have to be grateful to the brave pioneers, especially Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp, who developed and promoted this idea in the first place. Nevertheless, we clearly see the future pay-off mentality in their pedagogy. For example, Lipman writes:

> The text of the future must therefore be a new hybrid genre (although not so new as all that, when we recall Plato's earlier dialogues), a work of art that has a specific job to do—to be consummatory in providing the experience in which reflection will take place, and to be instrumental in providing trails leading toward that reasonableness and judiciousness that are characteristic of the educated person.[ii]

Lipman conceives the philosophical novel as an instrument for accomplishing a clearly envisioned goal. The "educated person" stands out there in the future, waiting to be realized.

Explaining what motivated him to write his landmark philosophical novel, *Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, Lipman writes,

> Putting it bluntly, it appeared to me that children could be induced to study logic only by bribing them with philosophy....The impact of such a literature upon today's children might not be immediately noticeable. But the impact upon tomorrow's adults might be so considerable as to make us wonder why we withheld philosophy from children until now."[iii]

In a similar vein, Sharp writes:

> It is for this reason that the *novel* is the primary vehicle to bring philosophy to children in elementary school in a disciplined fashioned. To the extent to which education is preparation for further experience, it must acquaint the child with the fact that the world is full of complexity.[iv]

Sharp casts the philosophical novel as an experience designed to prepare students for further experiences. She and Lipman both seem to have a clear picture of what students will need in their future life. They uphold the philosophical novel as an excellent vehicle for getting them from here to there.

I'll call their approach—which is widespread in the philosophy for children literature[v]—the instrumental approach. I argue against it on the grounds that, like all manifestations of the future-pay-off mentality, it is a kind of robbery. By making a child focus on things that are supposedly useful in the future, you steal the intrinsic value of the present.

IV. The Intrinsic Value of Play

John Dewey writes: "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself."[vi] I take this mantra, which he stated on more than one occasion, very seriously, more seriously than maybe Dewey himself took it. I interpret it along the lines of A.S. Neill, founder of the famous "free school," Summerhill. Neill writes:

> It is time that we were challenging the school's notion of work…. I am not decrying learning. But learning should come after play. And learning should not be deliberately seasoned with play to make it palatable.[vii]

Key to Neill's radical critique of education are his contrasting concepts of play and work. While he presented no systematic analysis of these concepts, I offer the following interpretation.

Play is an activity enjoyed spontaneously for its own sake. It is intrinsically valuable. For example, my daughter plays dolls. Playing dolls is an end in itself for her. There is no further reason to do it. When she has free time she chooses to play dolls simply because it's fun.

Work, on the other hand, is an activity undertaken for the sake of something else. It is instrumentally valuable. For example, my daughter dreams of being able to play songs like "Moonlight Sonata" on the piano. In order to achieve this goal someday, she is going to have to practice her scales. Practicing scales holds no interest for her and she would never choose to do it if she didn't see it as a necessary step toward achieving her goal.

Of course, one might set objectives during play. For example, my daughter might say—"Let's see how many of these plastic cups we can stack up." Likewise, there are clear objectives in board games. The difference between an *objective* and a *goal*, in my sense, is that the later is significant and the former is not. When you're playing, it doesn't ultimately matter what happens: the cups fall down and you laugh about it. When you're working, it does ultimately matter what happens; you devote yourself with serious determination to accomplish something important to your life.

Crucial to the notion of work is that the goal is self-chosen. If someone else chooses the goal and forces you to take the steps toward accomplishing it, then we have, not work, but slavery, or at least tyranny. With the possible exception of dire health and safety issues, Neill doesn't want to see teachers imposing their goals on students.

Neill's idea is that learning is work because it is goal-directed. If you want to pass first grade, then you have to learn how to read. A child who has no interest whatsoever in reading but dreads the prospect of flunking will put his nose to the grindstone.

In our enlightened times, teachers try to make the work of learning palatable by seasoning it with play. For example, they divide the class into teams and have them race to construct sentences out of words on cards—or some such. Neill makes the extraordinary claim that such seasoning should not be done. Why?

Because it deceptively misrepresents the circumstances, thereby creating an inauthentic relationship between the teacher and the students. Children are fully capable of working toward the

goals that they themselves choose. In fact, they get a great deal of satisfaction (as do we all) from successfully taking the steps necessary to realize their dreams.

This analysis enables us to understand Neill's other extraordinary claim—that work should come *after* play. Chronologically, work comes after play because children begin life without any goals. But work comes after play due to logical dependence as well. Work is slavery unless the goals are freely chosen. When will children have the opportunity to dream up some goals for themselves if not during play? During play children imagine, try things out, and find out what they enjoy. They discover and develop their passions. These passions make their goals meaningful and sustain their effort to achieve them.

This is not to say that we engage in play *in order to* find our life goals. This, after all, would make play instrumentally valuable. Play is an end in itself whether or not it produces any passions. Presumably, much of the time it doesn't. And, paradoxically, if you try to play *in order to* generate passions, you're not playing any more. Play is essentially spontaneous and goal-free. But if one has a passion, chances are it has its root in play.

Since instrumentally valuable activities are highly dependent on intrinsically valuable activities, education should include and even stem from intrinsically valuable activities.

V. The Philosophical Novel

There are many different kinds of intrinsically valuable activities. Though play is the prime example, it is usually the prerogative of young children. As we grow older, we become interested in more structured activities, such as sports, gardening, or artwork. These are all great things to do at school, not because they will somehow prepare the student for their afterlife as an adult, but because they allow the students enjoy their lives right now.

The same goes for reading fiction. Just as sports or gardening or artwork is not for everyone, reading fiction is not for everyone. But those who enjoy it can pass many happy hours with a good book. What makes it so enjoyable? That is, what gives it intrinsic value? Without claiming to be exhaustive, I propose that the following five qualities are regularly found in good fiction:

1. Humor. Fiction has given me some of the greatest belly laughs of my entire life.
2. Wonder. It's fun to figure out puzzles—whether it's a traditional mystery, or just trying to understand why people act the way they do.
3. Awe. Fiction takes us amazing places we cannot otherwise go and introduces us to amazing people we cannot otherwise meet.
4. Insight. Fiction shows us truths about people and the world. When we recognize truths we nod with satisfaction.
5. Community. While reading fiction, we connect ourselves to the author and to all the other people who have read or are reading the same book.

I propose that all of these qualities are valuable for their own sake. They may have instrumental value as well. For example, studies have shown that laughing is good for your health. Likewise, a truth you learn from fiction may help you get through a job interview someday. This is neither here nor there as far as I'm concerned. The point is that the qualities of humor and insight are precious even if nothing further ever comes of them.

If education needs to offer intrinsically valuable activities, and reading good fiction is an intrinsically valuable activity, then education needs to offer good fiction. But why the philosophical novel?

My argument is that the philosophical novel is especially well suited to deliver the five qualities listed above. Humor, because it reveals the ultimate absurdity of the human condition. Wonder, because it examines the most intractable mysteries known to human kind. Awe, because its cast of characters is the set of brave and awe-inspiring intellectuals who challenged the status quo and inspired the progress of Western civilization. Insight, because it explores the greatest ideas human beings have ever thought about. Community, because, by addressing the enduring questions that occur to anyone who is seeking the good life, it unites us.

Philosophical fiction offers all of these things and more—things one enjoys right now. It need not accomplish anything outside of itself in order to be wholly good and worthwhile.

We do well to treat philosophical fiction as an intrinsically valuable activity, not only as readers and as teachers, but also as writers. Whether we are writing philosophical novels for young children, old children, or full-grown adults we are engaging in a spontaneously creative activity akin to play. Carl Jung famously said that "The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct acting from inner necessity. The creative mind plays with the object it loves."

VI. Why Not Both?

The central objection to my argument will be that I have presented a false dilemma: since the philosophical novel has intrinsic value, it must not have instrumental value. Most advocates would insist that it has both. For example, John Thomas writes:

> Gareth Matthews has shown us the intrinsic value of doing philosophy with children, and this is accepted by the Philosophy for Children program. But the doing of philosophy has another role to play—developing reasonable human beings.[viii]

Thomas may insist that he takes the instrumental approach for a very good reason, namely, to get philosophy into school curriculum. With so much bad curriculum out there, surely we should make any argument we can to convince educators that philosophy makes a better alternative.[ix]

My reply is that the philosophical novel cannot be taught both instrumentally and intrinsically because one cannot simultaneously both work and play. Work is goal-directed and play is not. When philosophy is play it has mere objectives, not goals, and those objectives (such as determining whether or not God exists, whether or not to switch the trolley track, whether or not someone has committed the fallacy ad hominem) do not ultimately matter.

I will grant that someone who sets out to teach philosophy instrumentally may accidentally produce intrinsic value; in fact, this may happen a lot. That is, one may intend to run a class in which students work on developing philosophical skills that they can use in the future only to find that many of them are simply playing around instead. But this makes for a frustrating teaching experience.

Conversely, philosophy can be work, and it can be good work. Students in an instrumental philosophy class may accept their teacher's goals and enjoy taking steps toward achieving it. Everyone has to work sometimes and enjoying it is a very great thing. But enjoying your work is not the same as playing.

Playing is the spontaneous, directionless fount of passions. Like all great art, you know it when you see it. And we need to be doing a lot more of it, especially at school. Not only should students do a lot more of it, teachers should too. It's sad when teachers work while their students play because it means that they aren't authentically engaged with one another. They may as well not be in the same room together.

VII. Conclusion

When I was in fifth grade, a woman came to my school a few times a week for several weeks to read Madeline L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time* with some of us. Who she was and how I was selected for this miraculous activity I will never know. Perhaps she was a student of Matthew Lipman, or at least influenced by his work. Perhaps she got into my school by making the argument that her philosophy class—that's what it was, though I don't recall whether she used that word with us—would help us become more reasonable, more ethical, better citizens, educated persons, etc.

Looking back, I feel so grateful to this woman for giving me one of the best educational experiences of my life. I will never know what *she thought* she was trying to accomplish. But do I think she made me more reasonable, more ethical, a better citizen, an educated person, etc? I'm afraid not—not at all! Instead, I feel she gave me the joy of childhood. So much of my childhood was caught up in "the junior rat race"—getting good grades, excelling in sports, etc. Of course, I remember fun times—swinging on swings, catching salamanders, paddling canoes. But that fifth grade philosophy class was *deep* fun. And it set a kind of standard that I sought after from then on. My tiny, tentative philosophical thoughts were somehow confirmed. I went on to have some philosophical conversations with friends. I went on to read other philosophical books. I went on to wonder about,

and question, and laugh at a great many things. And these were some of the most precious moments of my childhood—moments I would be delighted to relive over and over again for all eternity.

Gareth Matthews' argument for the intrinsic value of philosophy consists in a multitude of anecdotes showing how much fun philosophy can be. He came to philosophy for children in his effort to explain philosophy to adults. He writes, "It occurred to me that my task as a college philosophy teacher was to reintroduce my students to an activity that they had once enjoyed and found natural, but that they had later been socialized to abandon."[x]

Philosophy is natural and enjoyable. And that's why we should do it with kids—in and out of school. Instrumental arguments may serve the noble ends of getting philosophy into the schools, but the ends don't justify the means. As long as educators think their job is to prepare students for that illusive future pay-off, they cannot seize the moment. When it comes to philosophical fiction, we should take our cue from the child, who, as Nietzsche puts it, "is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a sport, a self-propelling wheel, a Sacred Yes."[xi]

Notes:

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[i] "What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: "This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more; and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence - even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!"
Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus?... Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life to crave nothing more fervently than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal?" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, s.341, tr. Walter Kaufmann, http://archive.org/stream/Nietzsche-TheGayScience/Nietzsche-GaySciencewk_djvu.txt).

[ii] *Thinking in Education*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991; 2nd edition, 2003, 221-2.

[iii] "On Writing a Philosophical Novel," *Studies in Philosophy for Children*, ed. A.M. Sharp and R.F. Reed (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), p. 5-7.

[iv] "A Novel Approach to Philosophy for Children," *Momentum* 9(2), pp.33-7.

[v] For example, Thomas E. Wartenberg writes: "Getting children to master the rules for having a philosophical discussion provides them with some f the most basic skills they will need no matter what else they go on to study. So as well as allowing them the m to discuss issues and questions that really matter to them, philosophy also provides them with an important set of cognitive and behavioral skills that will be applicable throughout their education" in *Big Ideas for Little Kids*, (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), p. 33. Likewise, Robert Fisher writes: "There is no better preparation for being an active, responsible and creative citizens than for a child to participate with others in a community of enquiry founded on reasoning, freedom of expression and mutual respect," in "Philosophical Intelligence: Why Philosophical Dialogue is Important in Educating the Mind" in *Philosophy in Schools*, ed. Michael Hand and Carrie Winstanley, p. 103.

"[vi] *My Pedagogic Creed*, http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/My_Pedagogic_Creed#ARTICLE_TWO._WHAT_THE_SCHOOL_IS . Dewey also makes this point in *Democracy and Education*, 1916, p. 239.

[vii] *Summerhill*, http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk/pages/school_policies.html.

[viii] "Development of Reasoning in Children through Community of Inquiry," *Studies in Philosophy for Children: Harry Stottlemeier's Discovery*, ed. Ann Margaret Sharp and Ronald F. Reed (Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 102-103.

[ix] Karin Murris makes an argument for introducing philosophy as a foundational, compulsory subject that "deliberately resists the temptation to offer instrumental reasons" in "Autonomous and Authentic Thinking through Philosophy with Picturebooks," *ibid*., pp. 105-118. Although her argument is different from mine, to the extent that it relies on the notion of authenticity, it is compatible.

[x] *Philosophy and the Young Child,* (Harvard University Press, 1980), p. vii.

[xi] *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, tr. Thomas Common (Dover, 1999), p. 55.

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