

A Response to Avi Mintz

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There are multiple necessary responses to Avi Mintz's examination of Nietzsche's writings. My relationship with Nietzsche as ally leaves me little room to maneuver however, as his words resonate their far-too-true assessment: "the only critique of a philosophy that is possible and that proves something, namely trying to see whether one can live in accordance with it, has never been taught at universities: all that has ever been taught is a critique of words by means of other words."¹ On Nietzsche's terms, this response event must be other than an academic exercise in argumentation. I must consider if I live/can live in accordance with Mintz's thesis.

I begin then with a line-by-line response to the last paragraph of Mintz's paper. I am an educator who seeks to help my students become individuals *and* to develop skeptical dispositions (Nietzsche's free spirit). I existentially understand that suffering is vital and that it takes strength to suffer. I respect the wisdom of situatedness and feel the tension of acceptance as the necessary precondition for liberation. I answer Yes to whether I live in accordance with Mintz's aim: standing against education that creates/develops individuals-in-and-for-others, for the education of the free spirit.

Where I am less sure of a "yes" is with his call for a "firm, dogmatic, convincing inculcation of tradition" as the first necessary stage of his two-stage education.² I do not accept his presupposition that "destabilization can only come after the student has been given a dogmatic education which he has accepted uncritically, as there must be something firm which the student can call into question." I do not see how the need for the latter demands the former. In the second stage of Mintz's outline for the education of free spirits he shares what I read as a Nietzschean lament: "In our youth we take our teachers and guides from the time in which we happen to live and the circle in which we happen to move. For this childishness we have in later years to pay a heavy price: *we have to expiate our teachers in ourself.*" Mintz's use of ellipses omits the following Nietzsche: "we are thoughtlessly confident that the times we live in are bound to have teachers better suited to us than to anyone else and that we are bound to find them without much trouble."³ Earlier in *Daybreak* Nietzsche expresses concern that "*The most personal questions of truth — What am I really doing, and why am I, doing it — that is the question of truth which is not taught in our present system of education and is consequently not asked — we have no time for it!*"⁴ I would like more from Mintz's read of Nietzsche to understand Mintz's assertion that we need what he claims is an essential first stage of the education of the free spirit, uncritical acceptance of a dogmatic inculcation of tradition.⁵

I say a resounding *no* to Mintz's assertion that "when the educator is certain about the firmness of dogmatic education of the free spirit, he may inflict injuries upon the student." (She may versus she might? Permission versus possibility? The

necessity versus the inevitably?) The Nietzsche quotation Mintz invokes for his conception of “disciplined schooling” states that in the “task of education” there is a time when “the educator has to inflict injuries upon [the individual], or employ the injuries inflicted on him by fate.”⁶ “Bringing the injuries inflicted by fate to the explicit attention” of the student is a foundational presupposition of the Foundations of Education. I know that I have (all-too-often?) apologized for encounters that are messy, painful, shocking in their differences to students’ expectations or habits. Here I need operational definitions. Is Mintz advocating being the torpedo fish Ann Diller spoke of facing at PES in 1998? Or what Maryann Ayim characterized as the more constructive Canadian beaver that she countered Diller with? Or? Mintz does make a distinction between transitory harm and the harm of regression into herd values, but I struggle against a normative notion of inflicting injuries. I say no to the praxis of intentionally setting out to inflict injury upon a student. That in part rests on my reading of Nietzsche who reminds us to remember that one can never be all-too-certain.

For Mintz’s two stages of education there are two educators: “the first presents the body of knowledge; the second seeks to damage the body of knowledge and make suggestions.” Far from advocating the position of the importance of the educator, Nietzsche has us consider the teacher, no less than the shopkeeper, a necessary evil, an evil to be kept as small as possible.⁷ In this same work, Nietzsche asserts, “*There are no educators*. As a thinker, one should speak only of self-education. The education of youth by others is either an experiment, carried out on an as yet unknown and unknowable subject,” or a leveling principle, “*making the new being*, whatever it may be, conform to the habits and customs then prevailing.”⁸

It is Mintz’s second educator who “warns the student about self,” “gives subtle guidance” with “brutal honesty,” and takes *joy in recalcitrance* when a student stands firm in self in opposition to him.⁹ I affirm these Nietzschean golden-bricks that in part form an ethic of education evidenced as positive from the vantage point of the student and the culture. I acknowledge the negative dimension when viewed from the perspective of the teacher as an individual. “Who is a teacher is usually incapable of any longer doing anything for his own benefit, he always thinks of the benefit of his pupils, and takes pleasure in knowledge of any kind only insofar as he can teach it. He regards himself in the end as a thoroughfare of knowledge and as a means and instrument in general, so that he has ceased to be serious with regard to himself.”¹⁰ This raises the question of the education of the educators. Mintz attends to this by making the distinction between thinker-educator when discussing the task of the thinker “not as an educator but as one who has educated himself and who thus knows how it is done” (quoting Nietzsche, “The Wanderer and his Shadow”). This is a question beyond the scope of this essay, but that I take intensely seriously as I work on the Nietzschean project of individualization while being paid to profess in a College of Education that has as its primary focus the preparation of public school teachers.

Important questions linger as I reposition after the destabilization of taking Mintz’s philosophy seriously. I hear Nietzsche whispering to me as I try to be honest

to the task of a responding to Mintz, to the spirit of inquiry after truth: “No matter how far a man may extend himself with his knowledge, no matter how objectively he may come to view himself, in the end it can yield to him nothing but his own biography.”¹¹ “He is called a free spirit who thinks differently from what, on the basis of his origin, environment, his class and profession, or on the basis of the dominant views of the age, would have been expected of him.”¹² What did you expect from me? Have I evidenced that I was able to “get outside of [my] own culture’s tradition so that [I] may question, criticize, or reject it?” That I was able to “reevaluate morals, thereby reconsidering the nature of morality itself?” I remain on guard against *resentiment* and work against accepting that which is unacceptable. I ask nothing other of Mintz.

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Schopenhauer as Educator,” in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 187. Mintz wants a focus on Nietzsche’s “middle period,” works written between 1878 and 1882. The intended approach taken to this task is from a thought out of season written in 1874. As a sign of respect for the text under review, all other Nietzsche invoked will be from his middle period.

2. There is much in Nietzsche’s middle works that raise issue with this view of classical, formal education. See for example, Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, “So-called Classical Education,” trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), #195.

3. *Ibid.*, #495.

4. *Ibid.*, #196.

5. In the texts under consideration, there is much to counter this thesis. That does not imply that Nietzsche did not offer suggestions for curriculum that would develop the ways/means to a disciplined in-and-for-self process of individualization.

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), #224.

7. Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Wanderer and his Shadow,” in *Human, All Too Human*, #282.

8. Nietzsche, “Wanderer and his Shadow,” #267.

9. I am not clear whether there need to be two different educators or if there are two roles of an educator.

10. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, #200.

11. *Ibid.*, #513.

12. *Ibid.*, #225.