

Nietzschean Doubts, Wittgensteinian Musings

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It is interesting to see how a concept such as “the learned multitude,” which dates back to Spinoza can be brought to use so vividly and fruitfully and how some of his insights may be extremely helpful. The insistence of the essay for instance on the limitations of theoretical thoughts, is just one example thereof. Quite a few of the topics touched on from Puolimatka elicit some further thought. I will not go into detailed exegesis of Spinoza’s position, as this essay presents itself within a philosophy of education context I will discuss some of the crucial points relevant to education.

First, there is the matter of the metaphysical and religious commitment which is often held, so the author claims, to be beyond intellectual challenge. He asserts, “Rival assumptions are regarded as irrational and those holding them as fundamentally ignorant.” Given this statement, there is more than one reason to refer for clarity in this matter to Ludwig Wittgenstein. With the concept of the “form of life,” Wittgenstein indicates what he considers to be the bedrock of our “language-games.” One can be marked off, insofar as it can be spoken of, as all of what we hold as most fundamental. It is given, and because of that, justification comes to an end. The “certainty” of the “form of life” is not carried by knowledge but is a priori for that knowledge. Thus, our acting is embedded in a matrix of certainty that precedes our knowledge (the matrix of knowing-and-doubting and knowing-and-“making a mistake”). The “given” is a whole: it is the “language-and-the-world.” We cannot place ourselves outside of it. I argued elsewhere that Wittgenstein’s observations are not only relevant for epistemology but also for ethical, anthropological, metaphysical and of course religious beliefs.¹ Thus, the commitment the author speaks of surely presents itself in this range. And let me recall that for Wittgenstein differences concerning this “bedrock” will cause us to call another person a fool and a heretic.

Is this helpful, at least at first sight to identify what the author has in mind, where he argues that Spinoza on the one hand and Edwards and Pascal on the other see each other as self deceivers, as fundamentally misguided, beyond reach of a compromise? It is helpful, at least, in some sense. But then there is a remarkable turn in his argument where he expresses that self-critical awareness of the structure of such ultimate commitment presents a challenge to religious education. In my opinion, what he says about “the limitations of theoretical thought” is quite correct and I also agree with the urge to abstain from a dogmatic over-simplification of rival views. It is not clear from this, however, where the essay really wants to go. That one should increase one’s critical awareness is hardly anything anyone can seriously doubt, neither can one disagree concerning Puolimatka’s advice to avoid stereotypical characterizations of the representatives of opposite views. Surely this cannot mean to try to reach an Archimedean point. The possibility of this he denies himself. If he is just arguing that ultimate commitment is necessary, why is he so reluctant then to

accept the two “camps,” that is if he takes seriously enough the claim that they do belong to different sides. Possibly of course they do not qualify for Wittgenstein’s criteria and only then one could seriously engage with their presumed living in a different world. But this is what he at least professes. In all other cases there is room for discussion as there is enough sharedness of the “form of life.” Evidently the consequences for a conception of religious education are going in opposite directions. Accepting that one has to start somewhere, makes one immune from serious doubts about this belief. As Wittgenstein argues: If we try to doubt everything we would not get as far as doubting anything — “The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty.”² But also, and perhaps even more importantly, at the base of our belief lies, according to Wittgenstein, our acting and it just does not make sense seriously to doubt its ground. This however does not seem to me a matter of faith, a concept the author refers to, that I take to be an explicit conceptualization of the situation in which one locates one’s actions. Here one thinks primarily of matters bestowed upon us where revelation, rituals, a particular practice, and so on and so forth play an important part. I will leave this as the confusion this conceptual quibbling gives occasion to is only a minor issue.

Second, the essay then moves to Thomas Kuhn and again the concept of faith plays a distinctive role. Now, it is one thing to say that there are areas in which the consciousness of the practitioners function without ultimate rational control and quite another to claim that this matter can be reduced to an incompatibility concerning the metaphysical assumptions. But it becomes worrisome where the author claims that a Kuhnian account tends to lead to relativism since ultimate presuppositions are taken as beyond rational evaluation. There are good reasons for fighting such relativist notions: that there is no objective knowledge, that truth is as you see it, that “what is true for you” is one thing and “what is true for me” is another, that different groups (races, classes, nations, religions) have different knowledges.³ But surely, Kuhn is not doing any of this, on the contrary. This incidentally is not to claim that Kuhn fully is in accord with the Wittgensteinian stance but that is another matter. So I take it that Kuhn is endorsing an epistemological position (postfoundationalism) which comes down to the belief that there are no foundations of knowledge, no grounds exterior to ourselves that guarantee the truth of our factual claims, and no suprahuman warrant for universal truths in the realm of ethics. And seriously what are the arguments against this?

Third, the final avenue the essay leads us toward metaphysical issues and their relation to teaching. Again one wonders what Puolimatka means where he contemplates that such a stance could be excluded from education or where he claims that it may be possible to know something without being able to prove the truth of one’s knowledge claim conclusively. Perhaps it is just a mistake to use the concept of “knowledge” here, but even then one remains in doubt about what it is he exactly has in mind. And the suggestion that “because intelligent people disagree with each other on what they regard as good grounds...[though] no definite solution is in sight,” again is not helpful at all: what kind of solutions can possibly be envisaged here? There may be occasion to interpret the absence of a metaphysical perspective

differently and to applaud, as the author does further on, a pluralistic situation in which rival standpoints may freely compete with each other through educational and cultural expressions, although this can hardly be seen as a discovery of the truth. Surely, one could embrace a Nietzschean perspectivism here, but clearly this would imply to give up the search for *the* truth, and that is not what the author wants to do.⁴

Finally a fourth point that may be asked is how a case has been made for the possibility of making explicit those assumptions basic to all human inquiry, although I do agree that there is benefit to be found in studying their explanatory power. Is it after all truly possible to go beyond the limits of our language, surely that is not something the author wants to argue for or does he really wants to question whether, as Sheridan Hough protests, we can see beyond our own corner or horizon?⁵ Let me conclude, as strangely enough all my worries do not seem to result in a single doubt about what the essay finally implies: I too will gladly endorse the author's wisdom not to bypass religious and world view issues in educational contexts. As we value and respect those who are entrusted to us, it is therefore perhaps wise to bypass concepts such as "the learned multitude."

1. See, for instance, Paul Smeyers and James Marshall, eds., *Philosophy and Education: Accepting Wittgenstein's Challenge* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995).

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty/Ueber Gewissheit*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright. Trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), section 115.

3. See for a further discussion chapters 1 and 2 in Nigel Blake, Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith and Paul Standish, *Thinking Again: Education After Postmodernism* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1998).

4. This matter is discussed in the forthcoming book by Nigel Blake, Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith and Paul Standish, *Education in an Age of Nihilism* (London: Falmer Press, 2000).

5. See Sheridan Hough, *Nietzsche's Noontide Friend: The Self as Metaphoric Double* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 78.