

The Canadian Beaver Confronts the Torpedo Fish: Performing Our Own Philosophy as Educators

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“Facing the Torpedo Fish: Becoming a Philosopher of Your Own Education” is an intriguing title, and my response will focus on three of its constituent parts: “Your Own Education”; “The Torpedo Fish”; and “Becoming a Philosopher of Your Own Education.”

YOUR OWN EDUCATION

If I look closely and honestly at my own education, I begin, as I suppose most people do, with early learning orchestrated by my mother. What stands out in my mind now about this early education may well not match what my mother undertook to do, or even what she actually accomplished. My perception of that education is best described as a fairly small set of practical guides to action, economically expressed in one sentence each. When, over thirty years ago, I lived for several months in Ghana, the local buses, referred to as “mammy lorries,” displayed these sorts of proverbs painted in large print along the sides of the buses. The one that I still remember is “Cunny man die — cunny man go bury him,” meaning it takes a sneak to know a sneak. These are the sorts of maxims that I connect with my own early education. One of the most forceful was “Never take anything from a man, because he’ll always want something back.” Of course, the idea that this advice was steeped in heterosexist presuppositions did not readily occur to me at the time. Nor was I even clear that there were sexual presuppositions; I knew from the tone of my mother’s voice that the “something” to be expected in return was certainly not nice, but beyond this, I did not have the vaguest idea as to its actual character. The only thing I knew for sure was the wisdom of receiving this advice in silence, no questions asked.

When I was a little older, my mother added, “It’s as easy to love a rich man as a poor man,” revealing on her part a less than totally exalted view of mankind. To my sister and I, when she felt we needed fresh air and exercise, and no doubt when she wanted us to conduct our incessant arguing and fighting elsewhere, she would admonish us to “Go out and blow the stink off.” This may seem to many like quaint country dialect, but given the reality of a farmhouse with no indoor plumbing, and a single weekly bath every Saturday night, I recognize in it now an imperative based on something as strong as justified true belief, grounded as it was in the overwhelming force of a thousand smelly inductions. Sometimes she recommended the appearance of modesty, as in “Never outdo a man in public,” more often daring in “It’s as well to be hung for a sheep as a lamb,” and occasionally a special brand of maternal respect, with “Never lie to your mother.” Ha!

Looking back on these maxims, I now identify as one of the most significant, “It’s no use looking poor and being poor too.” As a child, I understood that when she said this, she wanted me to dress better, especially for company. Now, however, I

recognize a whole extra layer of irony to this adage, namely, that if you are poor, then you cannot afford to look poor. If you are rich and choose to wear jeans minus knees or other segments, you may set a new fashion trend. Indeed, there exists an expensive line of jeans called “broken threads” which are essentially without what would have usually been considered vital parts. As my mother understood, the negative consequences of looking poor are most devastating for those who actually are poor.

To be a philosopher of my own education, then, I must be willing to examine this educational bedrock, as it seems to me to be, reflectively, critically, and compassionately, all at the same time. This does not promise to be an easy task; what it lacks in ease, it makes up for in personal elucidation, however. Evolving as I did, from this sort of background, how could I have turned out to be anything other than a feminist philosopher with a passionate commitment to deconstructing unjust systems of privilege, such as those based on sex and class? Now, to face the torpedo fish.

THE TORPEDO FISH

I shall begin this section of the essay by making some comparisons between Socrates’ account of educating and my own experiences as an educator. I shall then talk about what I find to be valuable in the torpedo fish metaphor and conclude this section by addressing my worries with the metaphor.

Some personal comparisons: Each time I return to the Socrates’ dialogues, I experience a sense of dismay at how inadequately my own teaching measures up against that of Socrates. Meno, for example, asks Socrates whether virtue can be taught. My students are not nearly as lofty-minded as those of Socrates. I do not mean by this claim to put my students down. They are in general warm, fun-loving, good-natured, compassionate people, many of whom are very smart and a joy to work with; I have a deep affection for them. But when they ask questions, they usually do not ask whether virtue can be taught, what the nature of virtue is, or even, in a more Socratic vein, whether I could help tease out their own muddled notions of virtue. Instead they ask how many pages their term paper has to be, will the Jane Roland Martin paper be on the exam, and are they allowed to use point form and first person in their writing for my course. One day last term, after what I considered to be a particularly riveting exchange among several students and myself, lots of hands went up, and I eagerly awaited questions such as “But should the schools become involved in moral education?” Instead, the first student to speak asked me whether my feet did not get cold, when I wore sandals without socks in December.

I am reminded here of an English teacher — probably the only real scholar to pass through the small secondary school that I attended. She was teaching *A Tale of Two Cities*, and paused for questions. The only question to emerge was what Madame Defarge was knitting as she sat by the guillotine — mitts, or socks, or what? Socrates seemed to be blessed with students who were intrigued by more philosophical issues. To put myself and my English teacher in a somewhat more favorable light however, it is worth noting that Socrates usually had the advantage of a one-on-one teaching situation. My English teacher had about a dozen students, and my class with the sandals query had 95.

I occasionally find one or two students in my classes who do who want to engage in a discussion about the nature of knowledge, for example; far from being exhilarated by such discussion, the remaining students are typically aggravated and hostile and they tell me so in no uncertain terms on my teaching evaluations. Here again Socrates seems singularly blessed in generating student responses which are conveniently piquant, allowing him to get on with the curriculum. Responses to his queries tend to take the form of “Assuredly,” or “So it would seem, Socrates,” while responses to my queries frequently meander far afield, squandering big chunks of my 50 minute period and revealing all too clearly my singular lack of skill in shutting down this sort of talk. Perhaps if I behaved more like the Socratic torpedo fish, I would generate better results.

This leads me to the question: Why is a torpedo fish worth cultivating? The metaphor of the torpedo fish, together with the more familiar metaphor of the gadfly, is an interesting choice. Socrates is an irritant, because he causes people to see that they do not have a sensible or coherent idea in their heads. Pre-Socrates, people are confident and self-assured. Post-Socrates, they are acutely aware of their own ignorance. Although bringing about this sort of transformation is a clear accomplishment from an educational perspective, it is also a very dangerous business, as Socrates himself was well aware. It is more dangerous for women than for men, in almost every society without exception, but Plato’s views on sex, radical and egalitarian though they were for his time, did not readily lead to an understanding of the relevance of sex in this context. Like all of us, Socrates was a selective irritant—he irritated people about notions of truth and goodness, while the institution of slavery slipped neatly through his net. His own use of a tied-down slave, whose value is manifest in the inability to run away, as a metaphor for true knowledge does not come up for critical examination.¹

I repeat that the philosophical work of the torpedo fish and the gadfly has been a dangerous business; academic freedom evolved to help shield scholars who advanced politically unpopular views from unjust recriminations. As an academic who did feminist research before it was popular or sensible to do so, I understand the importance of such.

What is worrisome about the torpedo fish metaphor? As a feminist academic working within a conservative backlash which would like to dismiss all sex- and race-conscious scholarship, for example, as mere political correctness, I am resistant to an open arms policy towards torpedo fish. There has been recent emphasis on the perceived right of the professor to be offensive as a pedagogical tool for stirring up the students to think more deeply and critically about issues. (See Wright, Fulford, de Toro, and Kimura, for further commentary on the importance of not tampering with the professor’s right to be offensive.)² Because almost every view will offend someone, it is not reasonable to vilify offensive speech as necessarily objectionable, harassing, or undesirable in some other respect. This does not entail that offensive speech has any profound pedagogical merits, however, as many people appear to believe. I am furthermore suspicious that those who promote it do so merely because they wish to ride roughshod over important moral concerns entailed by issues of sex

and race in language and that they are seeking a general immunity for any academic who speaks in sexist or racist ways. This suspicion prompts me to question whether the torpedo fish and gadfly capture as well as they might the notion of a good educator, in particular, the notion of a good philosophical educator. In and of itself, offending, stinging, or torpifying students is not necessarily a good thing.

Perhaps it is time for a new animal metaphor, like that of the beaver. The beaver appeals to me for several reasons: First, it is a powerful animal that can chop down enormous trees with its teeth. Second, although the chopping down (and destruction) of trees is part of what the beaver does, this is secondary to what the beaver does *with* the trees, which is the construction of dams and beaver lodges. (The torpedo fish, in contrast, appears to simply float around torpifying creatures, without any higher constructive goal.) Third, the beaver is a very gentle and social animal, maintaining relationships with other individual beavers over extended families.³ Last, but not least, the beaver provides me with a truly Canadian metaphor, eh? Now I move to the final section of my response.

BECOMING A PHILOSOPHER OF YOUR OWN EDUCATION

The verb “to become” is in this context somewhat undermined by the aura of passivity and privacy which haunt it. I prefer the verb “perform” which possesses a stronger sense of agency and of being in the public. How we perform is of course connected to what we have become, but as educators, the litmus test of worth is to be found in our performance. Performance has two distinct senses — first, putting on a show and second, causing something to be brought about.

Like Socrates himself, most of us are uncomfortable with a perceived link between teaching and putting on a show — this link brings too readily to mind the despised image of the Sophist. At the same time, most of us admit, however much we might prefer it to be otherwise, to the necessity of putting on some sort of show. In *As You Like It*, Jacques assures us that “All the world’s a stage,” and if this is true, it entails that every classroom is a stage and every teacher a performer; the question now becomes not whether we stage a performance, but whether our performance is good, bad, or mediocre.⁴ The bulk of my teaching, for example, is carried out literally in a theater because no other sort of room could effectively accommodate 95 students. Like many, I may be unhappy having my teaching construed as putting on some kind of act for my students; however, unless I am capable of at least rudimentary skills in putting on an act, such as good voice projection, effective eye contact even with those who try to hide at the back, expanded gestures that are large enough to be seen throughout the room, and enough attention grabbers to ensure that this number of students will notice what I do, then I have effectively flushed the possibility of education down the drain. So while I am uneasy about this sense of performance, I recognize in it a necessary condition to any form of teaching at all given today’s typical student-teacher ratios. I do not mean to suggest that I personally dislike this performance aspect of my teaching — to the contrary, I confess to enjoying it enormously. In fact, this was undoubtedly one of the features which attracted me to teaching from the outset. The word “confess” is instructive, however, for I remain uneasy both about the performance and my enjoyment of it.

Although I think that no educator can afford to entirely dismiss this first sense of performance, as in putting on a show, it is the second sense, the causing something to be brought about, which is more central to my general claim. In some fundamental sense, what we *do* as educators is more important than who we *are*; this simple belief lies at the heart of my preference of the term “performance” over that of “becoming.” I claimed earlier that the verb “to become” is undermined by the notions of passivity and privacy which characterize it. It is precisely because being a teacher consists primarily in *doing* a certain kind of thing and in doing it in a predominantly *public forum* that I prefer the verb “perform.”

It probably must also be admitted that an alliance between teaching and performing appeals to me for Peircean reasons. Time does not permit the luxury of detail here, but I shall attempt a few rough brush strokes. The ensuing discussion, I admit at the outset, is less a justification for my views than an explanation of them. “The meaning of any sign for anybody consists in the way he reacts to the sign” according to Peirce.⁵ That a performative notion is central to Peirce’s concept of sign is also evident in his claims that a sign “is not actually a sign unless it is used as such; that is unless it is interpreted to thought and addresses itself to some mind,” and that conventional signs “have certain effects on the conduct, mental and bodily, of the interpreter” (*CP* 4, 431).⁶

My characterization of teaching as performance borrows from Peirce’s analysis of signs in the sense, just noted, that its ultimate significance is to be measured in its effects. The neoconservative argument, heard with ever greater frequency of late, for protecting all speech, including sexist and racist speech, is that even if such speech is false, coming to recognize its falsity will be a step in arriving at the truth; in the long run, then, we will be better off to have aired even false claims.⁷ The neoconservative language suggests one monolithic “we” bound to reap the benefits of unrestricted freedom of expression. Peirce’s much more sophisticated theory, which links meaning to the effect of signs on the bodily and mental conduct of the interpreter (*CP* 4, 431), permits a breaking down of this falsely generic “we” into those of us who do in fact benefit from unrestricted freedom of expression and those who are victimized by it (*CE* 4, 431). This idea is further developed in the work of such feminist scholars as Dale Spender and Catherine MacKinnon, along with such critical race theorists as Mari Matsuda and Richard Delgado.⁸

Furthermore, Peirce’s pragmatic stance, in part embedded in his notion of rhetoric (see *CP* 2, 229, *CP* 4, 116, *CP* 4, 142, *CP* 8, 342, *CE* 1, 175, *CE* 2, 57, *CE* 4, 175, *CE* 4, 274, *CE* 57, and 75), to which he referred in one passage as “the highest and most living branch of logic” (*CP* 2, 333), allowed him to see that harm can be brought about in more ways than suggesting the truth of false ideas — harm can also be brought about by the force of the symbols in appealing to a mind (*CP* 1, 559). “The Sign creates something in the Mind of the Interpreter. . . . And this creature of the sign is called the Interpretant. It is created by the sign” (*CP* 8, 179), Peirce said. Because teachers are in the business of creating signs and appealing to minds, I see a strong Peircean potential for harm or good to come about as a direct result of the teaching performance, which will in part consist of choices for curriculum content, vocabulary, and symbolic imagery. Judith Butler’s notion of gender as a performance rather

than a biological given or an *a priori* sexual category is a powerful example of the force of symbols, bolstered, of course, by political ideologies, in appealing to a mind. Butler argues that we perform our gender under the stern directorship of compulsory heterosexuality.⁹

In the last analysis, I would urge that teaching is a moral enterprise, and that those of us who engage in it need to be held accountable for our performances on moral grounds. According to Peirce, the only actions to rightly escape moral judgment are those actions beyond the limits of self control. That which we can help should be subjected not only to moral appraisal, but also to critical appraisal and “the actions which we undertake in order to carry out our grander purposes [should be] based upon the most critical reflection” that we are capable of bringing to them (*CE* 5, 328). Like Peirce, I want to hold us morally responsible for the creatures of our signs created when we speak and others listen, when we teach and others learn.

To conclude, with which side are we to cast our lot — that of the beaver or that of the torpedo fish? As a Canadian supposedly much practiced in fence-sitting, I vote for both sides. I vote for the beaver because I want to push us as teachers to look carefully at the effects of our choices and our teaching, because I want to push us to ask what is constructed by our students from how we perform for them as teachers. I vote for the torpedo fish because it is frequently necessary in order to carry out what Peirce referred to as “our grander purposes” (*CE* 5, 328), to break up oppressive social structures as solid and complex as the best-built beaver lodge. For this task we need someone like Judith Butler who “concluded that trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it,”¹⁰ or someone like Socrates who “make[s] other people perplexed...and...torpifies whoever comes near and gets into contact with” him.¹¹

May the performing constructive beaver and the judiciously stinging torpedo fish live happily together, cheek by jowl, nudging us along in their separate ways, to perform as philosophers of our own education, in ways that truly contribute to carrying “out our grander purpose[s]” (*CE* 5, 328).

I WISH TO DEDICATE THIS ESSAY to my mother, Anne Mercy Cassidy Neely, whose teachings form its heart and soul.

1. Plato, *The Meno*, in *Plato's Meno in Focus*, ed. and trans. Jane M. Day (London: Routledge, 1994), 69.

2. A more detailed discussion of this and related issues can be found in Maryann Ayim, “Just How Correct is Political Correctness? A Critique of the Opposition’s Arguments,” *The Journal of Argumentation* (in press); John P. Wright, “Freedom to Discuss the Unthinkable,” *Windsor Star*, 31 Mar. 1994, A7; Robert Fulford, “Defending the Right to be Offensive,” *The Globe and Mail; Canada's National Newspaper*, 2 Feb. 1994, C1; Fernando de Toro, “Ontario’s Zero-tolerance Policy or the End of Academic Freedom,” *CAUT Bulletin* (June 1994): 15; and Doreen Kimura, “Universities and the Thought Police,” *The Globe and Mail; Canada's National Newspaper*, 28 Jun. 1994, A19.

3. Hope Ryden, *Lily Pond; Four Years with a Family of Beavers*, preface Dr. Jane Goodall (New York: William Morrow, 1989), 225, 119.
4. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. William George Clark and William Aldis Wright (New York: Cumberland Publishing Company, 1911), 260.
5. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 8., ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur Burks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958), 315. This book will be cited as *CP* with volume number and page numbers in the text for all subsequent references.
6. *Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce; A Chronological Edition: 1872-1878*, ed. Christian J.W. Kloesel, Max H. Fisch, Nathan Houser, Ursula Niklas, Lynn A. Ziegler, Don D. Roberts, and Aleta Houser (Bloomington, Indiana: Peirce Edition Project, Indiana University Press, 1986), vol. 3, 76. This book will be cited as *CE* with volume number and page numbers in the text for all subsequent references.
7. I borrow this term from Richard Delgado and David Yun, although many other writers now employ it. Richard Delgado and David Yun, "The Neoconservative Case Against Hate-Speech Regulation — Lively, D'Souza, Gates, Carter, and the Toughlove Crowd," *Vanderbilt Law Review*, vol. 47, No. 6 (November 1984), 1807-1825 and Dinesh D'Souza, *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 153.
8. Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980); Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Only Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993); Mari J. Matsuda, "Public Response to Racist Speech: Considering the Victim's Story," in *Words that Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment*, ed. Mari J. Matsuda, Charles R. Lawrence III, Richard Delgado, and Kimberle Williams Crenshaw (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993), 17-51. See also Richard Delgado, "Words that Wound: A Tort Action for Racial Insults, Epithets, and Name Calling," in Matsuda et al, *Words that Wound*, 89-110.
9. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
10. *Ibid.*, ix.
11. Plato, *The Meno*, 46.