Sweetness Follows: Notes on the Pedagogy of Critique in a Philosophy of Education Course

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INTRODUCTION

I have a problem in my teaching: even though the university I work for aims at forming critical thinkers, my students do not show much investment in a serious critique of the status quo. How come? While my capacity to perceive students correctly may be the issue, for the sake of this essay I will trust my perception and the anecdotal evidence from my colleagues, and instead explore the possibility that there is something amiss in how I venture to teach students to be critical. In the essay, I consider the *trivialization of critique* and the *critical powerless student* as its outcome. I propose an analysis of critique to help me develop a pedagogy that fosters criticality in my students.

THE TRIVIALIZATION OF CRITIQUE

Critique has become pervasive in institutional education talk. In the general agenda of education, critique is so widely claimed that it seems connatural with educational institutions. For example, in my university's general education committee, which seeks to reform our vastly unpopular general education requirements, there is a universal agreement that we should teach students to be "critical thinkers," but a variety of opinions on how this aim should be achieved. From K-12 institutions to colleges and universities, the claim to critical thought is pervasive and expected. This is what Jan Masschelein calls "the trivialization of critique." In his analysis, he denounces how critique has become the "general social programme" of education.[1] He writes: "The suspicion is that autonomy and critique can no longer be brought to bear against the existing social order and power, but have become part of that order and power."[2] When educational institutions unanimously claim critique as an educational aim, the production of

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students with critical thinking skills can be seen as "a specific form of subjectification operating as a transmission belt for power."[3] Trivialization of critique makes critique serviceable to its supposed object, because critique is inscribed in the workings of that which it wants to consider. Critique has become "the most common of commonplaces."[4] Masschelein's analysis shows that critique has been made functional to the system it wants to examine, because the power structuring the system produces forms of subjectivity in its own interests, and the critical subject is one of those. Now back to my students: perhaps like the virus contained in a vaccination, alive but attenuated, the critical subject produced by the educational complex is only dangerous enough so as to fully immunize the body from further contracting that which it builds protection against.

THE CRITICAL POWERLESS STUDENT

One consequence of trivialized critique is the phenomenon of the "critical powerless student," which is the student who has attained enough critical knowledge about the situation but seems to have no clue as to how to transform it and perhaps also no desire to. The "critical powerless student" is first described by literary theorist Aleksandra Perisic.[5] She introduces this concept in relation to a classroom experience: while discussing the events of the assassination of Michael Brown by the police and the consequent uprisings in Ferguson, Missouri, she saw something in her students she had not fully realized until then. She writes:

> I asked my students for their opinions on what was happening in Ferguson and for some possible solutions. My students' reactions were twofold: most of them agreed that Mike Brown should not have died; they were critical of the U.S. justice system and the country's long and troubled history of race relations. Yet, they also thought there was nothing they could do about it. They held a firm belief that it was those in power who needed to instigate change.[6]

Students in her class discussion were not unaware of the problems

shaping the tragic event of the murder of a black teenager and the consequent acquittal of his murderers. They simply expressed that they did not feel it was a problem they had; they did not feel they could have any relation to it or effect on it. Their understanding of how things work was accurate for the fact that people in positions of power hold responsibility to amend the situation, but it was also limited and hopeless. To their instructor, they did not seem open to considering the role of civil society in instigating change, to pondering the function of protest or even of simply political participation at large. What they seemed to lack was a desire to really understand what was going on and to seek for ways to impact it.[7] Awareness of a problem does not necessarily help one deal with it and transform its conditions. Perisic comments: " … we are increasingly producing students who are critical, but who feel powerless, especially outside of existing institutional frameworks."[8] It may be that universities are simply working to create a subject still caught in the disempowering logic of our times: the critical powerless student. An accurate outcome of our institutional intents, the critical powerless student cannot imagine anything from a standpoint external to her own frames of reference and can be perceived as not caring enough about the thing of concern.

In my own classroom practice, I have noticed this phenomenon time and again. By way of example, in what follows I offer a brief narrative of a moment in which I became aware of the stark inadequacy of my teaching for critique. This moment taught me that I needed to seriously reconsider how I was teaching and what I was hoping my students would learn. I was teaching a philosophy of education course where we had spent two months reading Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Dewey. That day I had shown them a video representing *Kidzania* (a role-playing theme park in which children imagine themselves as laborers in a realistic miniature world) and had asked them what they thought of it.[9] My expectation was that, of course, they would be critical, considering that we had read much in the literature about progressive pedagogy, and that the thing I was asking them to evaluate was quite unambiguously (at least in my view) opposite to it. I had wished them to see the absurdity of defining child's play and fulfilment in adult terms, to react in horror to the

creepy use of ankle monitors, to resist the glorification of market behaviors and the making of customers loyal to brand from an early age and so on. To my surprise, the students offered an enthusiastic support to the *Kidzania* project and were absolutely unable to see how it was problematic. They had not even tried to question what I was showing them. I had to ask myself, what went wrong? What should have been put in place for this critique to go differently? It was clearly not enough to give students an object and ask them to critique it, even after having read and analyzed many texts and ideas that had a bearing on what I was hoping to see critiqued. What is critique? Was I educating for it well in that course? Or, was I rather immunizing my students to it for good, by exposing them to a weakened version of it, inoculating them with an attenuated pathological agent and causing them to develop an adaptive immunity to critique for the future?

PEDAGOGY OF CRITIQUE

What I describe in this section stands somewhere in between the models of critical thinking and critical pedagogy. Not much has changed since Nick Burbules and Rupert Berk stated that each of these traditions regards the other as insufficiently critical: upholding the virtues of epistemic examinations may neglect the larger power dynamics at play in defining knowledge, and on the other side critical pedagogy can be seen as indoctrination. Critical Thinking needs to be questioned in terms of social accountability, and Critical Pedagogy needs to be able to challenge its own presuppositions. Rather than siding with one or the other, it makes sense to think in terms of "criticality as a *practice* — what is involved in actually thinking critically, what are the conditions that tend to foster such thinking, and so on."[10]

In what follows, I analyze the concept of critique to outline a pedagogy which fosters, rather than hinders, it. My working definition of critique is as follows: *To critique something means to see it as a given in relation to the structures that make it possible, and to envision other ways for it to be.* When I critique an object, I consider it as something that is a *datum*, a thing given to me about which I will

have to ask, what are its conditions of possibility? Once I have seen those, I will have to imagine how else the thing could be in relation to its conditions or in opposition to them. This second movement of critique requires that I care enough about the object or about the things that the object affects, and that I have an imagination attuned to utopia. According to my working definition, critique cannot be practiced constantly, because it is slow and dispendious, but it is something that persons can engage in quite regularly as they go about their daily life.

Social theorist Luc Boltanski conveys that there are, indeed, two modes of critique: critique practiced in everyday life and metacritique. As ordinary practice, critique is an empirical activity rooted in a specific community and it consists of describing the fabric of the ordinary. Critique practiced in everyday life is in relation to the type of critique expressed by theory, that is *metacritique*. This type of critique considers the social order, through an "approach to society as a totality construed critically," with the aim of unveiling the modes at play in it (and specifically, for Boltanski, these are modes of domination).[11] It is important to clarify the relation between ordinary critique and metacritique because it is what we do in higher education classrooms. A philosophy of education course, by dealing philosophically with educational questions, aims to show how real life experience and theory are deeply related in ways partially known and in part still unknown to students and to ourselves.

Critical theories are in relation to ordinary critiques because they basically consist in encouraging the actors to "acknowledge what they already knew but in a sense without knowing."[12] Critique as theory allows for an examination of implicit understanding. Such examination feels like an unveiling or unmasking of structures that were already present even when un-acknowledged. Echoing Dewey's idea that reflexivity in thinking makes the implicit explicit, Boltanski connects both ordinary and meta-critique to a purpose of reflexivity that comports "humans reviewing their actions and those of others and making judgments on them."[13] Reflexivity is the mark of critical activity and it shows the moral dimension of critique. Practicing critique, he writes beautifully, "renders reality unacceptable," in that it reveals its structure and it allows for a judgment of it.

In the tradition on the Frankfurt School (from where Boltanski writes) there is an expectation that things seen by the critical gaze will prove to be morally problematic, because the structure of reality is deeply flawed by unequal distribution of resources and power. Here is where a consideration of pedagogy will have to insert a caveat. Any expectation of critique ending in a precise interpretation would erase the element of utopia that for Masschelein has to shine through the act of critique.[14] When we teach with the expectation or hope that our students develop a critical capacity, we should not expect a determined (however correct) set interpretation to guide them. In this sense, Boltanski's beautiful expression that "Critique renders reality inacceptable" shall be amended.[15] Critique makes it possible to see that acceptance of reality is normally implicit and unexamined. Critique awakens one to see that the "yes" uttered in the acceptance of reality could – but does not have to – be also a "no," if what one sees cannot be accepted. Critique will open up rather than close down interpretations and will elicit the thinker's sense of affective connection and care for the object of critique.

The position of critique is a position of exteriority. For Boltanski, the move to exteriority can be seen as a thought experiment that consists in "positioning oneself outside this framework in order to consider it as a whole."[16] He believes, and I agree with him, that frameworks cannot be grasped from within. He writes that "this imaginary exit from the viscosity of the real initially assumes stripping reality of its character of implicit necessity and proceeding as if it were arbitrary (as if it could be other than what it is or even not be)."[17] The reality one is immersed in is viscous, that is thick, sticky, and it inhibits flowing. The comfort of daily actions and automatisms becomes a trap that hinders the free movements of thought. Exteriority is the position reached when stepping out of it (i.e., of the reality observed) to consider it as a whole. Once stepped-out, one will ask: why is it so and not otherwise? The thing is disrobed, unveiled of its necessity (which is the type of necessity that comes from factual being) and considered as not necessary, perhaps accidental: as something that could not be at all or be different. That is, as something that demands justification.

In my course of philosophy of education one of the major themes is

school and schooling. Schooling is the reality in which my students find themselves, and as such it is thick, sticky, and movements in it are not easy. Stepping out of it will require an intentional effort. One way to encourage this is through the following exercise. I ask them to try and explain schools to an alien. What is it that schools do? And how would you justify schools to someone who has no idea and has never seen one? What would you say to describe and explain this weird habit we have of letting our kids be taken hostage and kept in a place other than home for eight hours a day for at least thirteen years, placed in the custody of other unrelated adults?

This is a difficult question for them to think about. It is difficult because I request that they suspend the necessity of the ordinary and instead try to think as if it were not necessary. Stepping out is challenging, yet it must be done in order to gain a critical perspective on it. The angle that is reached allows for a privileged perspective. This perspective is fruitful because the external standpoint is the condition for theory. I realize that I do not ask my students enough, and not enough intentionally, to position themselves outside of the thing that is being studied. A good way to make my pedagogy of critique more real is to include more intentional moments of personal and collective attempts in which we try to reach the place from where theory is possible.

Displacement is a condition for theory.[18] An ancient historian, Herodotus, is credited to have been one of the first writers to connect *theoria* with displacement and also, incidentally, to have in the same paragraph used "to philosophize" as a verb.[19] Herodotus uses the term *theoria* to describe the cause for which Solon, an ancient sage, travels to Egypt. Solon, Herodotus says, "is philosophizing" because he has endeavored to journey the world for no other purpose than seeing it. The relation between displacement, theory, and philosophizing is established. The classicist Silvia Montiglio explains that "*theoria* is the contemplation of a spectacle from a distance," and the term is eventually chosen by philosophers after the fifth century for the contemplative life.[20] She suggests that *theoria* should be taken to signify a "higher degree of involvement than that of a spectator in the object of one's contemplation."[21]

The person able to theorize is a person who has stepped out of the

thing she wants to study and *sees it*: she doesn't *watch it* as one watches television or a spectacle. The position which makes theory possible is not that of a voyeur, or a watcher, but it is tangled with interest and care. The movement is of detachment but not of estrangement. Megan Laverty writes in an article about the necessity of humanities that having words to describe human worlds is good, even though we are often confronted with the limits of language (and of thought). The challenge, she notes, "is to stay with the difficulty and not deflecting it by resorting to ready-to-hand ideas. Such easy notions give one the feeling of being right, but … they corrupt consciousness in the sense that they move it away, rather than closer, to reality."[22] Laverty indicates that detachment from concepts and systems is necessary, but difficult. Theory consists in "moving away" in order to "move closer" to the thing. Finding detachment makes theory possible through a process of de-familiarization which is only a part, a necessary part, of critique. As a movement, it is not complete in itself, but it is part of a swinging by which the thinker gets away from the thing she wants to understand and comes back closer to it, reminded of the ineradicable bonds that tie her to it.

This consideration brings me to what Boltanski characterizes as an equally important moment of critique. After having reached exteriority, the thinker will "restore the thing to its necessity" that has now taken on a "reflexive, general character in the sense that the forms of necessity identified locally are related to a universe of possibilities."[23] The thing that the thinker had detached herself from, the object that had been made not necessary, is now to be returned to its state of reality in view of the possibilities discovered by the thinker. Necessity of the thing will be seen in its relation to possible other ways for it to exist in different ways. The object is not, in this second step, accepted as unavoidable (as it was before critique started), but it is not either considered completely accidental, as no critique will do away with the prime fact that the thing exists and has, in its own way, a factual, and not ideal, necessity.

Let me return to the "explain school to an alien" exercise I asked my students to complete. Encouraging them to find a place of detachment from where to consider it should be but one part of the exercise. The thing considered

as arbitrary as, say, schooling, can be restored to its necessity (coming from the fact that it exists and is a given and an object of experience) in relation to new possibilities. Now that we have tried to think of schools as not necessary, we have unveiled the justifications needed to believe that schools are what they are; therefore, it is now possible for us to judge and imagine for schools a different way of being. Once the experience is appraised critically, it will be possible to be transformed by it.

Critique is a movement in two parts: seeking exteriority in relation to the object, and returning the object to its necessity once seen in the light of possibility. Stepping outside the thing and reaching exteriority does not change the fact that the thing we are trying to understand is also something we are deeply entangled into. No theoretical gaze can erase the bonds of belonging between the thinker and the thing. They can be temporarily suspended, but like an elastic band they will pull one back with newer strength. It is then even more vital that we allow the imagination, as faculty of the possible, to be informed and encouraged by what we saw while theorizing. I need to highlight this last note, because I think that therein lies a salvific connection to the thinker's sense of desire to actually affect change. In some ways, critique is not complete if its bitterness is not followed by the sweet retrieval of the bonds of connectedness and care we nurse for what we are critiquing. Without it, we stay paralyzed and powerless because we cannot access the source of desire to imagine and work for change. Sweetness has to follow.[24]

CONCLUSION

In my experience, "Here, read Rousseau and now go be critical of current schooling," does not work. How come, I have asked, my students seem immunized from critique rather than positively educated in it? In my teaching, I seemed to expect that, by simply being exposed to ideas and being given an object to critique in light of those ideas, one should be able and desire to do so. A closer look at critique has allowed me to see that there are two moments in it, connected and equally focal: *exteriority* and *possibility*. A careful pedagogy will

have to highlight *both moments* and structure them in ways that allow students to practice them and see their meaning. No previously scripted forms of possibility shall be expected of the person doing the critique, because this would countermine the purpose of critique itself. This remark is especially meaningful for classroom practice, where the expression of critique will most likely be evaluated and graded by the instructor. It will have to be made repeatedly explicit that critique is not expected to match a set vision. It will need to be made abundantly obvious that agreeing with the instructor - or with her perceived ideas - is no guarantee of a good critique or grade, and vice versa.

If anyone were to take away from this essay that critique is taught in step one, step two and three, and this is a way to make sure students become critical, they would be missing my point. They would be taking small weakened doses of it, just enough to be successfully immunized for the future. More than a prescriptive blueprint of pedagogy as a technique, my reflection wants to sketch one image of what I take critique to be, and of how understanding it this way can impact my own pedagogy. Even when I sound more prescriptive, what I want to recommend, and to remind myself of, is maintaining a sense of openness and care throughout the long, watchful and delicate process of critique practiced with students.

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1 Jan Masschelein, "How to Conceive of Critical Educational Theory Today?," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 38, no. 3, 355.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Alexandra Perisic, "Caribbean Philosophy and the Challenge to Neoliberal Imagination," *Lápiz, Proceedings from the 2015 LAPES Symposium*, no. 2 (2015), 57.
6 Ibid.
7 As it happens in pedagogical situations, there may well be a chasm between what the instructor perceived and what happened for the students. In writing this essay and describing the "critical powerless student," I build an image that hopefully helps me understand a quandary in my own pedagogy. While I believe that my interpretation is plausible, I want to remind myself and the reader that I can claim no special

access to the reasons why a student does or does not respond to my pedagogy in the way I hope for. The repetition of "to seem" in the above paragraph tries to express my awareness, and perhaps also a bit of frustration, at this chasm, and to also maintain that the inadequacy of my knowledge will still allow me to theorize more appropriately and in a critical manner, that is aware of its own limits.

8 Perisic, "Caribbean Philosophy," 57.

9 I first learned about this very successful chain of theme-parks from an article on *The New Yorker*: Rebecca Mead, "When I Grow Up: The theme-park chain where children pretend to be adults," *The New Yorker*, January 19, 2015.

10 Nicholas Burbules and Rupert Berk, "Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences, and Limits," *Theories in Education*, eds. Thomas S. Popkewitz and Lynn Fendler (New York: Routledge, 1999), 355.

11 Luc Boltanski, *On Critique: A Sociology of Emancipation* (Oxford: Polity, 2011), 3.

12 Ibid., 4.

13 Reflective thinking is thinking *per se* John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1916/44), 146. It is nothing else than a "better way of thinking" compared to other ways of thought in which we engage, in John Dewey, *How We Think. A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1933/98), 3. When we say "think it out" we suggest that "an entanglement must be straightened and something obscure cleared up" through thought (6). Reflective thinking consists in the movement of disentanglement and bringing out (which, I may note, surprisingly recalls the Latin root of education, *e-ducere*= to lead out). It happens when "thought implied is made explicit" because reflection consists in the rendering explicit the "intelligent element in our experience" (Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 146).

14 Jan Masschelein, "How to Imagine Something Exterior to the System: Critical Education as Problematization," *Educational Theory* 48, no. 4 (1998): 521–530. He writes: "For me, the challenge for critical pedagogy today is to construct a critique that is not informed by any representation (of the possible or of the original potential)" (525). Masschelein expresses a certain distrust towards prescriptive takes on critical pedagogy: the anti-capitalist mission, however worthy, makes education instrumental to its enactment and therefore betrays the very starting point of critique, that is, the idea that everything can be subject to it.

15 Boltanski, *On Critique*, 5.

16 Ibid., 7.

17 Ibid., 8.

18 On how this plays out for philosophers of education, see how Claudia Ruitenberg argues that, indeed, searching for positions of defamiliarization promotes philosophical thinking itself, in "Distance and Defamiliarisation: Translation as Philosophical Method," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 3 (2009): 421–435.

19 He tells how Solon the sage has traveled from Athens through Egypt and has arrived at the court of the king Croesus. The king greets him by saying, "My guest [*xenos*] from Athens, we have heard much about you in Sardis for your learning and wisdom [*sophia*] and for your travels [*plane*]. We hear that as one who loves learning

and wisdom [*hos philosopheon*] you have journeyed the earth, for the sake of seeing it [*theoria*]. So now I want to ask you who is the happiest man you have ever come across" (Herodotus, *The Histories*, I.30.2).
20 Silvia Montiglio, *Wandering in Ancient Greek Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005).
21 Ibid., 131.
22 Megan Laverty "'There is No Substitute for a Sense of Reality': Humanizing the Humanities," *Educational Theory* 65, no. 6 (2015), 649.
23 Boltanski, *On Critique*, 8.
24 The reference, here and in the title, is to the R.E.M. song "Sweetness Follows" (track six, *Automatic for the People*, Warner Bros Records, 1992, album).