

Review of

The Lucid Vigil: Deconstruction, Desire and the Politics of Critique

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Lucidity and the Social Bond: The Time and Place of Critique in Education

Misunderstandings, misreadings, and dismissals of deconstruction and, more generally, the work of Jacques Derrida have been persistent both within and outside academic circles. In spite of previous attempts to show that deconstruction is affirmative and not destructive (Derrida, 1997), that it involves a serious engagement with scholarly work and not a random attack on it or a celebration of incoherence (Naas, 2002), and that it does not spell the end of agency or subjectivity (Peters & Biesta, 2009), Derrida's work on deconstruction continues to be lumped in with relativism and the desire to undermine the search for truth.

Concerns about "alternative facts" and other "post-truth" inventions during the Trump regime produced a new series of attacks against alleged "postmodernists," including Derrida. In a 2017 interview, Daniel Dennett declared "the postmodernists ... responsible for the intellectual fad that made it respectable to be cynical about truth and facts" (Cadwalladr, 2017). In his 2018 *Post-Truth*, Lee McIntyre called postmodernism "the godfather of post-truth" (p. 150), and explicitly discussed deconstruction's role in it:

the notion of truth itself was now under scrutiny, for one had to recognize that in the act of deconstruction, the critic was bringing his or her own values, history, and assumptions to the interpretation as well. This meant that there could be many answers, rather than just one, for any deconstruction. The postmodernist approach is one in which everything is questioned and little is taken at face value. There is no right answer, only narrative. (p. 125)

In this context of accusations about cynicism and willy-nilly questioning, Stella Gaon's central claim that deconstruction is driven by "the *desire* for an unrelenting, lucid vigilance with regard to the (impossible) conditions of critical reason itself" (p. 12, italics in original) is timely and relevant. In *The Lucid Vigil*, Gaon argues that deconstruction involves a serious, scholarly commitment to critique that does not spare any position from which a critique is offered. Moreover, she explicitly connects deconstruction to postmodernism by arguing that the postmodern attitude, defined by Lyotard (1979/1984) as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (p. xxiv), should be understood not as a free-floating "mood of scepticism" (Gaon, 2019, p. 69) but as a commitment to a questioning and critique driven by a vigilance for the "deconstructive potential" (p. 69) of any principle, standard, or assumption that grounds a claim.

The Lucid Vigil is unabashed in its use of the trope of light, lucidity, and Enlightenment, not because Gaon is not aware of the feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial critiques of Enlightenment thinking, but because a wholesale dismissal of the Enlightenment values of reason and lucidity would be disingenuous. Gaon writes that "this desire for clarity and revelation" is a "desire which we 'heirs' of the enlightenment cannot *not* share" (p. 46). Putting the desire for critique at centre stage is educationally significant because it shows that the ability to critique, or mastery of the tools and

techniques of critique, is not enough. Critique as a technical competency can be taught and assessed, but the desire for and commitment to critique may educationally be more elusive. I will return to this point.

Sticking Our Head Back into the Text

One of my most vivid memories of my time as a PhD student is the day I found and began to read John Caputo's *More Radical Hermeneutics* (2000). I did not know much about this "Jacques Derrida" whose work he discussed, but I had been studying hermeneutics in the work of Gadamer and Ricœur. I had been unable to understand how and why the hermeneutic attempts to understand an object of interpretation, and the cyclical return to interrogate earlier interpretations, would ever come to an end, and what would justify such closure. Then I stumbled upon Caputo's description of Derrida's uncompromising and unrelenting commitment to tracing the trace, interpreting the interpretation, and critiquing the critique: "Derrida sticks our head back into the text whenever hermeneutics comes up for the air of living speech, its eyes bulging and a look of panic on its face" (p. 54). *Finally!* I thought. *Someone who understands that, if one takes critique seriously, nothing can be declared off limits for critique, and the critical process has no end.*

I therefore appreciate Gaon's insistence on the lucid vigil as a "radical, ethical-political critique ... without apology, without guarantee and without respite" (p. 251); that is, as a desire for sticking our head back into the text. One of Gaon's key claims is that critique is driven by a desire that cannot be justified from within the mode of critique, i.e., reason. Critique's reliance on reason cannot rationally justify itself. Gaon seeks to understand the genesis of the desire for critique; that is, the force that sets it in motion and keeps it going. Gaon turns to psychoanalysis and, in particular, the work of Jean Laplanche to answer the question. In short, it is the tension between the subject's undeniable heteronomy and the subject's need to understand itself as coherent and autonomous that gives rise to the desire for reason:

On one hand, the subject will always *already* have depended on another person (an other), and so the need to account for itself and thereby to complete itself in a non-contradictory way can never be satisfied. On the other hand, the subject so constituted will be continually driven to try. (p. 242)

Although Gaon acknowledges that there is "no ultimate basis on which to insist that subjectivity must be constituted in the way that Laplanche, following Freud, describes" (p. 242), she does not subject psychoanalytic theory to the deconstructive scrutiny she advocates. In fact, she makes the strong claim that "a psychoanalytic account is indispensable" for understanding "the nature of the force that opens critique to its own possibility" (p. 15). Obviously, Gaon is compelled by the explanation that desire is the force that sets and keeps critique in motion. However, as I will discuss in the next section, there are other forces, such as faith, that can explain the movement of critique. In my view, *The Lucid Vigil* is strongest when it shows the questions that remain in any substantive philosophical and educational theory, rather than when it answers questions through psychoanalytic theory.

Critique, Faith, and the Social Bond

Surprisingly, among the many texts by Derrida that Gaon has studied, she does not cite the essay "Faith and Knowledge" (1996/2002). And yet, this was the essay that came to mind most prominently as I read Gaon's book. In the essay, Derrida explains why reason cannot ground itself:

the foundation of law – law of the law, institution of the institution, origin of the constitution – is a “performative” event that cannot belong to the set that it founds, inaugurates or justifies. Such an event is unjustifiable within the logic of what it will have opened. (p. 57, italics in original)

Or, the way Gaon puts it:

this desire for clarity and revelation ... must be explained, not merely announced, if we are to appreciate fully the normative force of Derrida’s work ... [T]here is something *in* or *of* the desire for Enlightenment – the desire *for* reason – that is in principle incapable of being “lit” or illuminated *by* reason. (2019, p. 46)

In other words: the logic driving critique cannot begin itself; something external to it is required. Gaon calls this something external “desire”; Derrida calls it “faith.” Derrida (1996/2002) emphasizes the extra-rational *faillb* and, more specifically, the appeal to faith and trustworthiness in every knowledge claim, which keeps reason tethered to its supposedly irrational opposite. Derrida describes “the experience of faith, of believing, of a credit that is irreducible to knowledge and of a trust that ‘founds’ all relation to the other in testimony” (p. 56). Lest the concept of “testimony” seem irrelevant to the domains of critique and science, Derrida makes explicit that he considers every scientific and critical claim a form of testimony:

the “lights” and Enlightenment of tele-technoscientific critique and reason can only suppose trustworthiness. They are obliged to put into play an irreducible “faith,” that of a “social bond” or of a “sworn faith,” of a testimony (“I promise to tell you the truth beyond all proof and theoretical demonstration, believe me, etc.”), that is, of a performative of promising. (p. 80)

The testimony and promise inherent in any truth claim are that I have the evidence (i.e., that which is perceptible or apparent) to support my claim, that the source of my knowledge is revealable, can be made visible, and thus become the object of a lucid vigil. However, what Derrida’s explanation brings to the fore is that the desire for critique also implies the desire for a social bond required for the critique to be an address. The work of science and critique is never done by isolated individuals, as their knowledge claims are intelligible only as an address or “testimonial pledge” (p. 66).

Gaon’s conclusion is that undertaking “a radical ethical-political critique” must be done “without apology, without guarantee and without respite” (p. 251). That a radical ethical-political critique comes with no guarantees and must be philosophically unapologetic about taking aim at even the most cherished grounding assumptions is clear. However, whence the impatience that suggests that there can be no “respite” from critique? Especially in light of Gaon’s interest in educational theory and thus, one can assume, in educational contexts, I want to argue that there are occasions and encounters in which we decide that this is not the place or time for critique, not because we believe that critique ought to cease – which it should not – but because we believe that the desire for and commitment to the social bond must, in that place and time, override the desire for and commitment to critique. Sometimes, trust must be restored before critique can proceed.

To return to Caputo’s evocative description, “sticking our head back into the text” may be a good philosophical move, but it is not necessarily a good pedagogical one. While teaching critique may well require that the student is sent back to the text, one of the key pedagogical questions is when, where, and how this should happen. If a student comes up for air from a critique, their eyes bulging and a look of panic on their face, it would be terrible pedagogy not to suggest a break and a moment of reflection on why that critique was so challenging, before returning to the text. Philosophically, respite from critique may suggest a lack of vigilance, but pedagogically, respite from critique may be exactly what a responsible and faith-ful relation to the student requires.

I am partial to an understanding of philosophy of education as “situated philosophy.” As Burbules and Knight Abowitz (2008) explain: “Situated philosophy is decidedly not the view from nowhere. It is, and recognizes itself to be, a practice always carried out by real, material people in all their imperfections and circumstances” (p. 269). It offers a way out of the perennial tension

between the ideas that we are all philosophers who only happen to apply our tools to educational problems, or that we are educationists seeking a philosophical underpinning for issues of policy and practice to which we feel commitments on other grounds. (p. 271)

Philosophy of education understood as situated philosophy is aware of its context, and suffused with an appreciation of the particularity of each student, teacher, curriculum, and temporal and geographical location of an educational encounter. This attentiveness to particularity means that there is an awareness of the context of critique, as well as the way in which it affects the social bond. A philosophical analysis that shows the challenge of teaching “properly” deconstructive critique, but that focuses only on the demands of critique and disregards the demands of teaching, is an analysis that is insufficiently situated in education.

Hypocritique and Postmodernism

Any critique that does not attend to its normative grounds it is hypo-critical in the sense that it limits its range of critique and stops short of turning its critical powers on itself. This fate, argues, Gaon, befalls three influential schools of educational theory, which she calls “neo-modernist,” “anti-modernist,” and “anti-postmodernist.” All three schools have an interest in critique, but none of them attends to its inability to justify its substantive, normative ends through its own critical approach. If I were to summarize Gaon’s discussion of educational theory, it is that educational theory has never been postmodern, and that even those who considered themselves postmodern have, at best, been anti-modern.

What Gaon calls “neo-modernist” educational theory is critical pedagogy that maintains clear modernist commitments, whether in the form of neo-Marxist emancipatory goals (e.g., McLaren, Giroux), Deweyan progressivism, or a Vygotskian theory of self-determination. What Gaon calls “anti-modernist” educational theory, it seems, is educational theory that may appear postmodern in its commitment to “small narratives,” but fails to subject this commitment to further critique. Gaon discusses work by Ellsworth, De Castell, and Arcilla, but it should be noted here that she limits herself to work from the 1990s. “Anti-modernist” educational theory understands the critiques of the Enlightenment, but goes too far in drawing the conclusion that philosophical commitments should be replaced by political ones, and universal standards by particular narratives. In doing so, it either becomes completely untethered from, or disavows, its necessary grounding in ethical-political ideals.

“Anti-postmodernist educational theory,” finally, relies in one way or another on Habermas’s discourse ethics and communicative action. In spite of claims by Habermas and Habermasians that this work focuses on communicative “procedures” and thus escapes the need for metaphysical commitments, Gaon writes that “Habermas must either concede the relativism of discourse ethics, or he must support the autonomy of the moral sphere on the basis of a metaphysically determined concept of transcendental reason” (p. 159).

In discussing these – and only these – three types of educational theory, Gaon seems to take it as a given that education (and educational theory and philosophy) is still centrally concerned with emancipation, whether understood as liberation from dependence on external epistemic authority, or as political liberation, as a rational-critical project. In fact, she states:

The normative project of education has long been understood as the attempt to inculcate a spirit of “critique.” Importantly, however, this means that “Critique” in the meta sense cannot be discarded, because it is the condition of possibility for such standards and ideals. (p. 63)

In other words, because of education’s unshakeable commitment to students’ emancipation, educational theory ends up investing in rational standards of truth and political ideals of justice which it cannot, in turn, open to further critique. As I discussed in my introductory section, Gaon writes that

we are all heirs of the Enlightenment in the sense that we all share the “*desire* for clarity and revelation.” The mistake modernists make is that they come to believe that the desire can be fulfilled. The desire for clarity and revelation, argues Gaon, must be coupled with a lucid vigilance that reminds us, every time we come to be too invested in rational standards of truth or political ideals of justice, that these standards and ideals themselves must be subjected to further critique.

As I noted, Gaon’s objects of critique in her chapter about “anti-modernist” educational theory are from the 1990s; the same goes for her examples of neo-modernist (1980s and 1990s) and anti-postmodernist critique (1990s). It is striking that Gaon does not discuss more recent work in philosophy of education, including work that may, in fact, meet her bar of postmodernism. There is no mention, let alone discussion, of educational thinkers and works that have grappled seriously with the challenge of infinite deconstructive potential in a context that often asks for practical application and prescription. Biesta and Egéa-Kuehne’s (2001) edited volume *Derrida and Education*, Peters and Biesta’s (2009) *Derrida, Deconstruction, and the Politics of Pedagogy*, and numerous other articles and chapters that are situated in education and use Derrida’s work to interrupt the self-evidence of education’s emancipatory goals are all conspicuously absent from *The Lucid Vigil*.

Arousing Desire in Education

In light of the centrality of desire in Gaon’s analysis and argument, it is surprising that she has not included the work of educational scholars whose work is attentive to the role of desire. I am thinking, especially, of the work of Gert Biesta and Sharon Todd.

Biesta (2019), for example, argues that “the educational task consists in arousing the desire in another human being for wanting to exist in and with the world in a grown-up way, that is, as a *subject*” (p. 53). The grown-upness of the existence Biesta refers to “is not a suppression of desires, but a process through which our desires receive a reality check, so to speak, by asking the question [whether] what we desire is desirable for our own lives and the lives we live with others” (p. 58). In order to give desire this central role in education, Biesta refers to Gayatri Spivak’s (2004) conception of education as an “uncoercive rearrangement of desires” (p. 526).

In the context of Gaon’s argument, the precise way in which Spivak proposes this conception of education matters. Spivak (2004) is not referring to all education, but rather to university education in the humanities. Moreover, she is referring not to any uncoercive rearrangement of desires, but to a particular rearrangement of desires in the context of global inequality and common mechanisms of human rights activism that leave in place the assumption of superiority on the part of those in a position to help, and the assumption of subalternity on the part of those receiving the help. The particular rearrangement of desires Spivak is after, then, involves the “uncoercive undermining of the class habit of obedience” (p. 562) among the subaltern, typically in the Global South, as well as the uncoercive undermining of “the sense that one is better than those who are being helped” (p. 564) among the dispensers of humanitarian aid, typically in the Global North. In other words, Spivak’s conception of the “uncoercive rearrangement of desires” has a clear emancipatory goal and, as such, risks foreclosing its deconstructive potential. Gaon would insist that Spivak’s goal in humanities education is political and that this political, emancipatory goal must itself remain open to critical scrutiny and “lucid vigilance.”

However, Biesta (2019) takes up the conception of education as an “uncoercive rearrangement of desires” more generally, and without Spivak’s political objective. Rather, writes Biesta, “much of the work of the educator is about creating time, space and forms so that students can encounter their desires, examine their desires, select and transform them” (p. 60), enabling them to become agentic subjects of their desires rather than being merely subject to them (p. 59). While Biesta ascribes to the educator a normative role in deciding when to interrupt students’ desires and confront them with the resistance of the world, he does not prescribe the political ends of such interruptions.

Importantly, the term Biesta (2019) uses for this form of education is “arousing.” This, indeed, is a term appropriate to desire: we arouse it, awaken it, perhaps light or fan it. Gaon argues that the desire

for critique is explained by the psychoanalytic theory of the subject. However, educationally, a desire for critique is not a given. In fact, educators may encounter students who have little desire for critique, for being vigilant to deconstructive potential – especially if they have already been socialized into expecting a practical pay-off in education. While the philosophical question may be how the desire for critique can be *explained*, and how any explanation of this desire is, itself, object of further critique, the educational question is how desire for critique and faith in the social bond required for it can be *taught*. This is an especially important question in a context in which the obsession with assessment and assessability drives competency-based curricula based on the conceit that all educationally relevant human qualities or attributes can be understood as competencies (Ruitenbergh, 2019). The desire for critique is not a competency and cannot be taught or assessed as such. It cannot be trained or instructed, but must be awakened, lit, aroused.

Moreover, as I have argued, the desire for critique must come with an attunement to when and where critique is deployed and with what consequences for the social bond. Gaon writes in her Conclusion:

What is political about deconstruction ... is that it discloses the irreducible violence that inheres in every moral claim, edict, or law ... Deconstruction cannot establish what we ought (legitimately) to do and, indeed, any political theory that tries to do so will, by virtue of that fact, have already repudiated the critical impulse behind it for the sake of its political end. A rigorous deconstructive analysis, therefore, cannot satisfy the political need for a standard of judgement by virtue of which the “ought” can be determined. (p. 247)

While I don’t disagree with this, the “irreducible violence” Gaon refers to is only one type of violence. Deconstructive vigilance, then, cannot stand alone but must always be coupled with vigilance for other forms of violence. A “lucid” vigil must go hand in hand with a “compassionate” vigil. We should ring the alarm bells when someone shuts down critique, as long as we also raise the alarm bells when someone is harmed by the performative force of a (deconstructively legitimate) critique. Barbara Applebaum (2018) gives a powerful example of a situation in which the statement “Black lives matter” is met with the response “All lives matter.” Applebaum writes:

Now, of course it is true that “All lives matter.” But the truth of the utterance made unintelligible the rage of many people who were furious with this well-intended gesture to universal humanity. They believed it diminished the point they were trying to make about the fact that Black people have not yet been included in the idea of “all lives.” Put differently, the truth of the statement diverts attention away from the experiences of those “who have to insist that they matter in order to matter.” (p. 1)

A lucid vigil must include in its scope the desire for lucidity itself, and how it can and should be balanced, in educational and other social contexts that are always particular, with attentiveness to the social bond and other forms of violence that threaten it.

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