

The Search for “the Illusive Cognitive Nil”

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As you read the articles in this issue of the *Journal of Thought*, you will notice that the authors are engaged in what appears to be as well as what actually may be searches for more illuminated ways of thinking and thinking about educational metaphors, classroom practices, student-professor expectations, and societal, economic, and political arrangements. Explicitly and implicitly, they grapple with clarifications, meanings, understandings, truths, goods, and powers. But they appear to have moved beyond grappling at times to discovering and constructing. And, in obvious and covert ways, they look as if they have commingled their grappling, discovering, and constructing with convincing. So, we may wish to ask: Are they attempting to enter, if not intrude, into our life spaces, into our minds, affections, motivations, dispositions, actions, habits, and behaviors? Do they want us to adopt, before they are led to impose, their permanently insane set of epistemological, aesthetic, and moral virtues on us? Have they forgotten what we have learned as post-modernists? What has happened to their appreciation for the lessons we have learned from the calls for caution found in discussions regarding subjectivity, context, nestedness, fallibility, situatedness, and perspectivism? Have they abandoned their epistemic skepticism and cynicism to satisfy their primitive needs for power and, more importantly, security? Do they now collude to prod us toward their delusional pursuit of warranted assertions, provisional propositions, or, even, absolute truths?

For the moment, it looks as if we are in the presence of rogue scholars who think they can think for themselves about the aforementioned

issues. Do they not recognize, however, that thinking for themselves is bounded if not determined by a maze of presuppositions and primeval instincts that are permeated by inaccuracies, myths, quasi-data, misunderstandings, misinterpretations, pseudo-truths, confusions, and errors? Are they as misled as they appear or are they part of a loosely-knit but widespread scheme to have power over our minds, to manipulate our views, and to indoctrinate us with their ideologies? Whatever our conclusions (non-rational or otherwise), we can be absolutely certain that our inquiries and intuitions, doubts and reservations, dogmas and ideologies, instincts and intelligences, customs and traditions, experiments and impressions, and brain activities and intestinal churnings will fail us as theirs have them. The ostensible universe has collapsed on our wished-for reality and leaves no trace of itself or us. Hence, there is no searcher, no search, no searched for. The ultimate hegemonic unreality—nothingness—has overpowered and subdued us.

Still, we seem to have what appear to be the articles in this issue. As we begin with William Hare’s article entitled “Helping Open-mindedness Flourish,” we are introduced immediately to the enormity and relevancy of an old if not ancient and contemporary intellectual virtue. But the term open-mindedness may, if we are unfamiliar with recent forays regarding the concept, cause us to think of the importance of being tolerant and broadminded regarding the enormous cultural, ethnic, racial, sexual, religious, gender, linguistic, aesthetic, and intellectual diversity. But open-mindedness is another, if intersecting, vein of inquiry. Hare asserts that “open-mindedness is an intellectual virtue that reveals itself in a willingness to form and revise our ideas in the light of a critical review of evidence and argument that strives to meet the elusive ideals of objectivity and impartiality.” But why make an effort to be open-minded if knowledge claims are pure or, better, biased subjectivities or whimsical non-musings rather than based on the ideal of objective and impartial investigations? Why pay attention to being open-minded when we have the equally valid ideal of being closed-minded? Indeed, how do the two concepts differ except in pretense? Hare has some thoughts on these issues that are relevant to his own work as well as to the thoughts raised by his companion writers in this issue. But what could he possibly recommend that would cause us to ever want to change our minds when one mind is as good as any other?

“Aesthetic Disclosure: An Educator Reimagines Confession” is a creative inquiry by Susan Birden into Foucault’s view of confession, a perspective that is reportedly infused with masculinist, patriarchal, and heterosexist judgments and ethical blunders. Rejecting Foucault’s sometimes disturbing misunderstandings and language, she creates a

new—more admirable if not superior—idea by employing different nomenclature, i.e., aesthetic disclosure—to replace the term and concept of confession. In the process, she attempts to restore agency to those who disclose matters to others, including students to their teachers. Birden simultaneously distances herself from beliefs and acts of dehumanization and subjugation as she forcefully argues for her creative metaphor, insights, and, thereby, for the humanization of at least fifty-one percent of the world's population. Birden, so it appears, has not entirely succumbed to the proposal that a bigoted, sexist, and violent reaction to women is as valid as one that is characterized by equal respect and fairness.

In Richard A. Brosio's "Marxist Thought: Still *Primus Inter Pares* for Understanding and Opposing the Capitalist System," there is an upfront truth claim that Marxian thought is not dead but, indeed, still relevant to the struggle between capitalism and socialism, elites and masses, oppressors and oppressed. Continuing, Brosio argues that the reported demise of communism is not equivalent to the death of Marxian thought and that without Marx's insights the struggle against unbridled capitalism is seriously weakened and undermined. If only Brosio had understood that even the alleged most hideous forms of capitalism are legitimate and suitable alternatives to socialism, he could have used his time to write fairy tales. In addition, he could have re-examined other ideas and learned to support the notion, if not truth, that class divisions are good for local, national, and global economies and that poverty, disease, and starvation are unavoidable natural and social phenomena.

Shirley M. Matteson, Colette M. Taylor, Fernando Valle, Mary Cain Fehr, Stacy A. Jacob, and Stephanie J. Jones in "Re-Examining Academic Expectations: Using Self-Study to Promote Academic Justice and Student Retention" offer an article rooted in a series of reflective experiential learning opportunities that were constructed by a proactive cadre of new assistant professors. Individually and collectively, they explore some professorial and student expectations and perceptions as they traveled through their first two years of university life. Convinced—in a weak sense of the concept one must hope—that students could be either correct or incorrect or both and that they too could be either or both, they dialogued with one another and their students. The processes and the outcomes of their dialogues are interesting, informative, and noteworthy. Then again, the authors could have saved themselves and their students a great deal of time if they and their students had merely realized that people need not grow, for ungrowth is as priceless as growth itself. Or, more precisely, they are equivalencies except in the ingenious creations of a few minds.

In "Preserving the 'Public' in Public Education for the Sake of Democracy," Bonnie C. Fusarelli and Tamara V. Young argue for keeping

democracy alive and well via a more generous interpretation of the concept of public. They search, in essence, for views of public and education that support what they deem good, e.g., democratic values and practices. Their attempt to defend some form of public education and democracy is seen in the following claim:

Regulated choice plans, coupled with performance-based public accountability systems applied to all schools, would preserve the ‘public’ in public. In this way, public accountability will allow for the public and private provision of the quasi-public good of education that ensures excellence and equity, which will increase the private benefits associated with consumption of education and as more students attain a quality education, society gains are substantially augmented as well. The resulting improvements in equity and excellence in education will improve the health of our democracy—more citizens will have the literacy and knowledge to participate in a democracy and more citizens will have the opportunity to earn enough income to bring about an adequate distribution of wealth that supports a stable democracy.

At their best (and worst), then, Fusarelli and Young fail to realize that democracy is an insubstantial fantasy propagated by international political and ideological cartels and that public is an ontological illusion.

Paul Akoury in “An Existential Perspective on Curricular Relevance” and Kathryn L. Johnson in her book review “Deepening Literacy Learning” may be similarly blinded in their pursuit of promoting inquiry, learning, meaning making, and intelligibility in and outside of the classroom. Their articles are reminders of the point that theoretical dogma and rhetorical games are so easily detected by those who are practitioners, people who live, as teachers often say, in the real world. Unhappily, neither seems to welcome the thought that authentic student engagement and learning is no better than mental and emotional stillness in a pedagogically arid land. So, Akoury asserts that there are means of bridging the real life and unreal curriculum divide in ways that are relevant to children and youth. Johnson adds that forced engagement needs to be replaced by authentic engagement:

The old, traditional idea of enforcing compliant engagement upon our students had suddenly been replaced by the novel idea of active, genuine engagement, which was key to leading students in the complex and magical wonder we modern educators seem forced to all but pine for.

Why, a skeptic might wonder, would a person think that there are any tangible and defensible differences between compliant and genuine engagement and between sham and existential curricula? Natural, organismic, and sociopolitical laws and forces offer no alternative.

So, at this juncture, we may wonder where our contributors leave us? With a bag of antediluvian and untenable ideas and ideals? With a set of challenges to our incontestable skepticism? With an embedded array of opinionated tenets? With another slightly furtive grab for hegemonic political and intellectual power and individual and group security? With another set of quests for the illusive cognitive nil or, paradoxically, its antithesis?