

Adornian Critiques of Reason

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Lectio praecursoria kasvatusfilosofian väitöskirjaan *Adornian Critiques of Reason: Autonomy, Morality, and Education*, Itä-Suomen yliopistossa 11.5.2018.

Introduction

My doctoral dissertation *Adornian Critiques of Reason: Autonomy, Morality, and Education* is a philosophical study on education. The purpose of the dissertation is to examine the philosophy of Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969) from the perspective of the philosophy of education. At the heart of the dissertation is the concept of reason, one of the most central and well-worn topics in Western philosophy and, specifically, the history of education. I examine certain interpretations of reason and the way in which these interpretations interplay with morality, subjectivity, and autonomy. Drawing on Adorno’s philosophical thinking, my aim is to scrutinize and reconceptualize these basic concepts and their relations in the philosophy of education.

As the doctoral dissertation is somewhat abstract, in this *lectio praecursoria*, I will address its themes in a manner that is as accessible as possible. First, I will give a short introduction to the philosophy of education in general. Second, I will give an overview on critical theory. Finally, I will discuss how these topics come together in my doctoral dissertation.

What is philosophy of education?

Certainly, there are many different ways of defining *philosophy of education*. To begin with, it can refer to one’s personal views on education and upbringing. All of us have some kind of personal philosophy of education, regardless of how conscious we are about these views or whether we have children of our own. Secondly, a philosophy of education can also refer to specific institutions’ collective views on education. An educational institution’s philosophy can, for example, highlight artistic, intellectual, and practical education, with a special emphasis on the role of imagination in learning. This is the case with Waldorf education, which is also known as Steiner education.

However, the philosophy of education is also an academic discipline, and as such, it commits to the criteria and standards of scientific research. In my dissertation, I define it as follows: the philosophy of education is located at the intersection of the two disciplines of education and philosophy. “Philosophy offers the methodology and meta-theoretical standpoint, which is a requisite for constructing the theoretical understanding regarding education, where the main interest of research lies” (Huhtala 2018, 13). Thus, “philosophy of education is a philosophical study of education and its problems” (Noddings 1995, 1).

Since the classical Greek philosophers, education has been considered a route to a more democratic and just society. Among other things, education has been responsible for producing autonomous individuals who are able to think for themselves and also consider others; collectively, these autonomous individuals make the establishment of the ideal

society realizable. This is to say that the philosophy of education is interested in the aims and ideals of education. Regarding these aims, the subject raises questions about their justification: “to what end ought children be taught ... to reason?” (Siegel 2009, 4). On what basis should individual autonomy be considered the central aim of education? What are the characteristics associated with autonomy, and on what grounds are they considered to be as such?

Looking at the history of the philosophy of education, it becomes apparent that these issues and kinds of questions have been around for some time now. Why ask questions that do not find their final answers? Because—and this comes down to the fundamental nature of education—education has to do with the cultivation of the human being. It has to do with the hope of a better future. And this task is unceasing. We cannot define a better future by using the criteria and ideals of past societies; instead, we must keep these philosophical debates ongoing.

What is critical theory?

Now, we have arrived at the second part of the *lectio praecursoria*, where I will discuss critical theory. The critical theory used here is a school of thought also known as the Frankfurt School. It was founded in 1923 in Frankfurt, Germany. The Frankfurt School consisted of scholars from different disciplines whose common denominator was Judaism and a strong interest in both Freudian and Marxist theory. The core members of the School included Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Erich Fromm, and a few others. In my doctoral research, I engage with Adorno’s philosophy.

Instead of sketching the ideals of humanity, of which the philosophy of education has sometimes been accused, the main motivation of critical theory is to identify human oppression and thus liberate human beings from their unjust circumstances and the social structures of realized, not-so-ideal societies (see Horkheimer 2002, 245–246). The Frankfurt School highlights the close connection between the structure of individuals’ psyches and the structure of the surrounding society. According to critical theorists, one of the main hindrances to an emancipated society is ideology, referring in particular to the repression that is not only external but also internalized by its individuals. Critical theory’s main feature is negativity. Negativity refers to the idea that the possibility to transform reality is reached through radical immanent criticism. Hence, the change requires understanding the inner logics and concepts through which the past has worked its way into today.

Critical theory in education takes off from the tenet that pedagogical practices are connected to social practices and that injustices and domination need to be identified and addressed (Popkewitz and Fendler 1999, xiii). When we think of injustices and domination, there might be obvious examples that come to mind. One can think of forms of gender or racial discrimination. While it is crucially important to address these kinds of injustices, there are also injustices and domination that operate on a much subtler level. Domination is also manifested in and through concepts that shape our thinking processes. My doctoral research provides a way of thinking about the concepts of reason, autonomy, morality, and the assumptions imbedded in each of these. In the final part of this *lectio praecursoria*, I will discuss these three educationally relevant concepts and the overall relevance of the doctoral dissertation.

Reason, morality, autonomy

I start with the concept of *reason*. Reason is reflected in the way we understand ourselves as human beings, which is to say in relation to ourselves, others, and our surroundings. My overall aim has been to develop critiques of reason that can be utilized in the service of educational theories. Deriving from the philosophy of Adorno, my critique pertains to two different notions of reason. First, it concerns a philosophical notion of reason as rational self-regulation. In the history of the philosophy of education, reason has often been understood as generic and ahistorical (see e.g., Kant 1997). In this conception of reason, it is seen as capable of formulating guiding principles that could be accepted at any given time.

Second, my critique concerns the notion of reason that Adorno calls *instrumental* and to which I also refer as *neoliberal* reason. Instrumental reason, with its calculative logic, has become the prevalent mode of reason in late modern societies, extending to most areas of human life. The consumer culture and contemporary neoliberal education exemplify this form of reason, where much of the culture is geared towards consumption, and education is increasingly occupied with unification and standardization policies that aim for economic growth. These dimensions mold our conceptions of morality and autonomy. Due to the significance of the subject, it is important to examine the underlying assumptions of the concept of reason as well as its relation to other educationally important concepts.

Next, I will discuss the concept of *morality*, particularly the rational idea of morality. The moral theories that are committed to this insight often construct rational, abstract principles according to which one must lead one's moral life. The problems with such moral theories are that they fail to heed the complicated real-life circumstances and the uniqueness of the individual. Also, it can be argued that commitment to external, abstract moral principles lessens moral agency.

In my research, I argue that the rational idea of morality offers a narrow interpretation. I examine this idea of morality as insufficient and contend that this insufficiency of reason as the main force for morality has not been examined enough. Reason is a necessary part of morality, but it is by all means not all that there is to it. In my view, morality is an active exercise of embodied thought and action, and moral engagements cannot be abstracted from alleged universally and timelessly valid moral principles. As the history of Western civilization has demonstrated, the moral good cannot be sustained only in the established community. Hence, moral good and bad are to a large extent defined in the sphere of given society and internalized by its members. It is important to acknowledge the historical and erring nature of reason and to critically reflect on the given goals. As such, the understanding of reason impacts the realization of reason and echoes the dimensions of morality and culture. Too much emphasis on standardization and effectiveness can be harmful.

In my doctoral dissertation, I argue that resistance and critique offer central benchmarks for morality in the contemporary context of neoliberal education. Education should be conceived foremost as a means to enrich the individual and not as a driving force of the economy. The enrichment that begins with fostering the preconditions for the basis of autonomy in early childhood rejects the homogenization and standardization of neoliberal education and instead furthers the ideals of continuous critical self-reflection and a resistance to prevailing norms when necessary.

Next, I will examine the concept of *autonomy*, which, as already mentioned, is a central educational goal (see Cuypers 2004; Dearden 1972; Drerup 2015; Piper 2011; Scheffler

1973; Siegel 1988, 1997; White 2010). The etymology of the word comes from the Greek term *autonomous*, which can be translated as “having its own laws” (Wermke & Salokangas 2015, 1). Individual autonomy as an educational ideal basically means that children are educated to be independent individuals who can think for themselves without submitting to external or internal influences or pressures. These kinds of autonomous individuals are seen as a valuable asset to a society, as they collectively foster the progress of the given society.

In today’s educational theories, autonomy is largely understood in terms of rational self-regulation, which means individuals are able to govern themselves through their own rational considerations. The conception stems from the history of the philosophy of education, where autonomy and human freedom are often based on overcoming nature (Kant 1997, 98, 134). Hence, reasoning is understood foremost as a human phenomenon that heightens and ultimately defines humanity. As rational creatures, human beings are something different and superior to nature.

Even if there might be attempts to discredit these philosophical concepts as having little to do with our everyday practice, these concepts still have an effect on the practices of education (see also Standish 2011). One manifestation of this dominating relationship towards nature is the demarcation of mind and body as separate entities, which translates into an undermining of the role of emotions with respect to our reasoning processes. In educational practices, this has resulted in students being taught how to rationalize skillfully and critically, without letting their emotions get in the way.

However, emotions necessarily attend to reasoning and thinking processes. Not only Adorno’s philosophy but also contemporary empirical research findings attest to this insight (see e.g., Haidt 2012; Greene 2013). From this viewpoint, the dichotomy of *reason* and *nature* – which underlies the interpretation of autonomy – is a fallacious one. Thus, it is crucial to examine these concepts and their underlying assumptions, as they have far reaching consequences.

In my dissertation, I interpret autonomy from the critical theory perspective, in which *autonomy* refers to emancipation from instrumental reason that is directed towards ourselves. I assert that certain modes of reason actually work against the formation of autonomy. However, the point is not to deny the role of reason, for it necessarily contributes to the subject’s autonomy. Instead, autonomy should be understood in broader terms. It is important to acknowledge the interdependence between people. This means that the autonomy of individuals also includes individuals’ relations to others and nature; thus, these aspects become an irreducible part of one’s autonomy.

Discussion

The combined findings of the doctoral dissertation suggest that the conception of reason as rational self-regulation is embedded in today’s theories of the philosophy of education. I argue that autonomy and morality are constructed and understood through conceptions of reason. I also argue that the Adornian understanding of reason offers a more nuanced relationship with the subject’s self, others, and the surroundings and that this conception of reason would be fruitful for the concepts of autonomy and morality. To conclude, my doctoral research provides a way of thinking about these educationally relevant concepts and the assumptions imbedded within them. It also provides tools for reshaping educational theorizations.

Dissertation

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FT, KM Hanna-Maija Huhtala toimii tutkijatohtorina Oulun yliopiston kasvatustieteiden tiedekunnassa.