THE HUMAN CONDITION IN AN AGE OF DISCIPLINARY DECADENCE: THOUGHTS ON KNOWING AND LEARNING

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I would like to thank the organizers of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society for inviting me to be the 2002 Phil Smith Lecturer.[1] I am honored by this opportunity for many reasons connected both to our shared past and present. I will begin with the past.

Like many of you, I, too, have taught in the American public elementary and secondary school system. I was a high school social studies teacher in the Bronx, New York, for the latter half of the 1980s. That experience has left an indelible mark on me, as I am sure it has on many of you who took a similar path. I had entered the New York public school system with lots of the misguided presumptions of many young people at the time. If many of you recall, that was during the Reagan Administration, and one of the tactics of that administration was to take advantage of the media edge afforded the president on pressing social issues. The President and his strategists knew that they could simply present any controversial claim before the American public—true or false, though often false—and then leave it up to their opposition to prove otherwise. The problem was that their opposition didn't have a competitive level of resources, and besides, something sociologically new had emerged on the scene, to which I will later turn. What the President and his cohorts knew was that once something was presented in a public forum, especially a national or international one, it took on the veneer of "truth." Thus, as long as he and his associates never recanted their position, it stood, continuing its life as though true. The Black Welfare Queen was one of those falsehoods, false because it was advanced as exemplification of a norm instead of an exception but accepted in American society because of the bad faith presumption of black normativity as abnormality. But more germane to this talk is the infamous manifesto of that administration's position on public education—*A Nation at Risk*.[2] That work was pushed with the fervor of few misrepresentations of American reality in year's past. The reverberations of its pronouncements are still felt by many of us: The American worker is supposedly noncompetitive because badly educated through left-wing pedagogical innovations of the 1970s. Instead of pedagogy aimed at developing a politically-informed citizenry, the nation should supposedly focus on skills-based education and a small set of texts and concepts geared at the most centrist understanding of American civic life—that is, the hijacking of the American Revolution by its right wing, namely, the founding fathers, and the body of literature that forged an Anglo-Saxon American identity.[3] The result, as is also well known, is that much federal, state, and private funding shifted during the 1980s from schools and classrooms to teacher education programs.[4] The effect was catastrophic on the morale of teachers: In effect, the American teacher

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became the proverbial scapegoat, and the task became to "fix" this derelict creature.

One could imagine the attitude young college students had toward public school teachers at that time. Hearing mostly of their faults, the presumption was that we—the young, newly graduated, and restless—could do better. With such low morale among the teachers, especially with regard to their abysmal salaries, there was a sudden shortage of teachers in the nation, especially in large urban areas. So New York City implemented a *per diem* program that would enable recent college graduates to teach. I entered the public school system through that program.

What I found in the New York public school system astonished me. I was at first a day-to-day substitute teacher, so I got to see some of the "best" and "worst" schools. I won't here rehearse the racial, ethnic, and class packing of the former, and the pathologies of the latter. Those are familiar to all of you in this forum. Eventually, I began to develop techniques to make it through the worst situations, and I discovered something rather unusual: Adolescents *loved* engagements with philosophical and artistic material. I took advantage of my undergraduate training in philosophy, political theory, and ancient classics, and a childhood talent for drawing portraits. Success with this kind of interaction led to my being called several days in a row to Lehman High School, which occasioned the investigation of its principal, who, after observing one of my classes, decided to hire me for the rest of the academic year.

I ended up spending three years at that high school. What I saw as a regular New York City high school teacher destroyed many of my presumptions about the teachers. Instead of lazy, ideology-pounding didacticians, I found committed individuals who came to work much too early and left much too late. I saw professionals who took every opportunity to improve themselves and their profession. And I saw people who genuinely loved their students. This is not to say that there weren't those who fell short of such excellence. What was clear was that the pathological cases were just that—pathological ones. They were the exceptions instead of the rule. What I also saw, however, was that resources were constantly being taken away from public school systems and a mad dash for what remained left the more vulnerable systems at the mercy of the privileged ones. Again, all that should be familiar: Predominantly white and upper-class school systems—in the Bronx' case, the Riverdale districts—received first divs on every resource, and those with darker and poorer majority populations struggled for the leftovers. I say "poorer" because the district I ended up teaching in was at a meeting line of poor white and poor black and Puerto Rican populations. In an unexpected twist, the students who were most in academic peril, mostly due to truancy, in that school were white.

I was in an unusual situation there. I had not taken any education classes before, but I had earned my way through college tutoring in my alma mater and giving private lessons in music. I didn't know anything about age-appropriate material and many of the developments in pedagogy. So I taught my courses at a very high level, and even lectured (which was a big *no* in that system), and the result was lively, enthusiastic classes. A year later, impressed by my attendance rate, the principal invited me to develop a special program for in-school truants. After some thought, I decided to take it on. By then I had taken graduate courses in education (to secure my teaching license) and had developed some ideas that I wanted to put into effect.

The program that some gifted colleagues and I eventually put together was the Second Chance Program. For the sake of time, I won't here recount our many adventures in that program. I'll only mention one story. I had insisted that the 75 students meet in a bare room. There were no chairs, no tables—nothing but the walls and the floor. When we met, I wrote on the board a single question: "What is a school?"

We spent three days discussing that question, during which the students discovered such things as the etymology of the word "school" being from the ancient Greek word *skole*, which meant, to their surprise, leisure time. We talked about how special it was to be able to have the time to devote to things uniquely human and that the schools the students have come to know didn't have to be structured as they were. The students then began to point out that our empty room could use some furniture, and they each began to contribute to its decoration—comfortable chairs, a mural, plants; and eventually to the content of instruction, what they felt they should be learning. It was an odd experience watching students advance their wants with their needs; there was, in other words, an isomorphic relationship between what the students wanted to learn and what they ought to learn. One pro with this approach was that my students tended to do extraordinarily well on essay sections of the state standardized exams, but not as well on the multiple choice sections. We focused on *thinking*, and multiple-choice questions aren't really designed for thinkers. Thinkers could see many possibilities in many questions, whereas conventional, unimaginative types, those who tend to share a singular view of the world, would, say, pencil in "c" because it would be the *only* answer they could imagine. The range of what the students decided they wanted to study looked, ironically, much like what students study in the French *lycee*.

After some years of teaching, I began to think about the effects of philosophical engagements with my students, but there wasn't a context in which to explore such questions at a level that satisfied me. So I decided to go to graduate school.

My academic philosophical training up to that point was entirely on ancient Greek and Modern European philosophy, with some mid-twentieth–century analytical metaphysics, formal logic, and the American pragmatists peppered in. I entered graduate school with the hope of looking into Aristotle's conceptions of potential and developing a humanistic theory of student achievement.

I mention all this to bring to the fore the importance of the work of members of societies such as the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society. It was philosophy of *education* that brought me to the study of professional philosophy. I thought about philosophy well before becoming a high school teacher and a graduate student, but one needn't get a doctorate in philosophy to do philosophy (although it helps if one wants to teach it in a university). I was, for example, introduced, by way of my Rastafarian uncles, to the thought of black liberation thinkers, most of whom did not have formal degrees in philosophy but whose thought was philosophically rich. So I had no structural pressure to go on for the degree. Moreover, I hadn't expected to have a career as a college teacher and researcher. Thus, once in graduate school, there seemed to be few incentives to carry me through. The irony of my situation was, however, that the likelihood of not having a professional future in the academy freed me to pursue my course of study in a way that was different from my graduate school colleagues—that is, without pressure and anxiety of receiving its material rewards. Beyond the job market and other material dynamics were the simple realities I faced as a young black man achieving thought in a world that often denied that black people can think. Yet, satisfying as that may have been, it wasn't the entire story. What had happened was that I had fallen in love with the world of ideas and teaching and was brought in touch with the humanistic and transcendental commitments that brought me to philosophy to begin with. That love was nurtured by my mentor Maurice Alexander Natanson. During my first semester of graduate school, the Director of Graduate services suggested that I take a course with Natanson—to familiarize myself with "that sort of thing." I did. And the rest, as the expression goes, is history.

The Topics at Hand

The topics I would like to touch upon for the rest of this lecture pertain much to my short autobiographical narrative. The first will be a discussion of the importance of working through contemporary problems of philosophy of education through taking seriously questions of the human condition and their relevance to our understanding of recent political reality. Second, we will see that the first leads to problems of evidence. This problem of evidence is linked to problems of truth and the psychoanalytical reality of its indecency in the present age. The indecency of truth reflects a form of bad faith at the level of knowledge production that I call "disciplinary decadence." I will talk about

that and then conclude with my ongoing defense of thinking in an age antipathetic to its possibility.

The Human Condition

Those of you who are familiar with my work know that I am an out-of-the-closet existentialist.[5] For that, I have at times been accused of exploring a movement that has become *passé*. It has always struck me that research based on what is "in" versus what is "out" is a denigration of the value of knowledge. Beyond the faddish nature of such approaches should be questions that generate what we would like to know, and if those questions lead to paths that are "out," then so be it. The last half of the twentieth-century exemplified much hostility to the human being, especially in academic philosophical circles. The two main sites of this hostility are well known. There is the postmodern wing, wherein the human being represented a kind of centrism and arrogance better left to the past. And then there is the neopositivist wing, where the human being represented the pollution of subjectivity. The quest for pure objectivity on a par with the exact sciences supposedly requires a social science devoid of humanistic features. It struck me that both of these were forms of human beings denying their own humanity, and I ended up writing on such dynamics as manifestations of self-denying phenomena, as forms of bad faith.[6] Through a theory of coextensivity—where a phenomenon can have many exemplifications—I showed that bad faith manifests itself as more than a lie to the self in an attempt to evade freedom. It is also a form of denial of social reality. The performative contradiction in denying social reality is that "denial" is communicative, is outward directed, even where the reference is to the self, which makes it social. It is, in other words, a social rejection of the social. Another form of denial are the conditions through which denial can be advanced in the first place. One of these is the notion of a human nature. The advancement of a nature leads to the notion of law-like structures on human action before such actions are made. The problem is that it places our relation to structures as the cart before the horse. Structures set the conditions for us, but they do not determine what we *will* do and the meaning of our various projects in life. This is so by virtue of many of us doing different things and creating new forms of meaning in structurally similar, if not same, circumstances. The human world is, in other words, *lived*, and it is creatively so. Appeals to individual natures won't help in such cases since the observer would need prior cases to establish *this* instance as part of a series that constitutes a nature. It is a contradiction of terms. An individual nature by definition pertains only to this individual, which means its status as a law of action or identity cannot be advanced beyond itself, and even to itself it becomes limited since it would have to create such a separation of self from self.

It is for reasons such as those just advanced that existentialists prefer the term human *condition* instead of human nature. I should like to add here,

however, that this does not mean that an existential position stands as a form of individual libertarianism. The peculiarity of the social world's relation to individuals is this: An individual makes no sense outside of a community, and the same for the notion of a community without individuals. They are in a symbiotic relation to each other, and I have argued elsewhere that this relationship is a transcendental one—that is, both necessary and universal.[7] A biological mass with no means of understanding itself beyond itself may be of human chromosomes, but it is very doubtful that it would be of human reality. It is such an understanding that led to my advancing the importance of another, unfashionable approach to philosophical problems: transcendental phenomenology. There are many definitions of phenomenology, but the upshot of such an approach is that it takes seriously the role of consciousness in the constitution of knowledge. Following Immanuel Kant, phenomenology takes seriously the *active* role of consciousness in the constitution of meaning. Beyond Kant, however, there is the dynamism of consciousness of meanings and essences that are not fixed in the sense of being ontologically closed. For in phenomenology, one begins by suspending the natural attitude or the question of one's ontological commitments, which means that phenomenological essences do not function like, say, Aristotelian essences (that is, substances).[8]

The turn to condition brings us now into more concrete terrain. Consider Hannah Arendt's schemata on this question in her classic *The Human Condition*.[9] Arendt argued that human life is a function of at least three fundamental activities: labor, work, and action. Labor refers to activities without which we will not be physically alive. It pertains to our survival, and it is what we share with all other, in a word, animals. It is cyclical activity. And the "we" here means both the self and ultimately the species. Work is creative activity. It is world-constituting. The paradigm example of this is art. Action, however, is peculiarly social.[10] It is not that there aren't social dimensions to the first two. A social world is required, for instance, to make them meaningful to us. But action *depends* on the social. It is activity whose continuation is fragile. A sign of its fragility is its dependence on speech, which makes it in its structure peculiarly public.

Each of these activities is vital for human beings. The prevalence of one over the other, however, sets the stage for the type of societies in which people live, and that relationship constitutes the condition of being human in its time. A society dominated by work, for instance, tends to put a low premium on labor and action. Think of what the world would be like if we structured it according to the credo of art for art's sake. My guess is that it would be like modern through contemporary France, where many of its ideals are embodied in a single city: Paris. That city, unlike London and New York, is dedicated to art and the senses more than to commerce. In spite of its cathedrals, it is not a city of God but a city of aesthetic wonder. As they used to say in the French speaking

world, at least according to Frantz Fanon, "Know Paris and then die."[11] The exemplification of a society devoted to action, at least in Arendt's imagination, is ancient Athens. There, labor and work were subordinated for the sake of a public sphere in which citizens acted. That sphere was protected by the walls and institutions of the city-state or *polis*, which led to its correlative activity—*politics*. The fact of slavery and the subordination of most women in ancient Athens was rationalized as part of a greater purpose through which both excellence and honor were achieved. And then there is the society dominated by labor. If such a society requires lots of time for the cultivation of survival, then the small bits of leisure time left for work and action are precious. But if labor is the dominating value and there is much leisure time not devoted to work and action, the result is energy aimed back at labor-centered activity or activity heavily linked to the fruits of labor: consumption.

Now, none of these are perfect societies. The purpose of Arendt's schema is simply to examine what condition their various relationships manifest. Our world, for instance, stands by patently egalitarian values, although we often fall short of realizing them. Because of this, the Graeco model of a society organized for the sake of politics wouldn't bode well with our (for the most part) antislavery and anti-inequality sentiments. Rationalizations for the building capacity of capitalism makes some of us defend the work- or art-centered view. But for the most part, it should be pretty clear that contemporary North American society is consumer-centered and thus labor-centered. (We should note that this is not Marx's sense of labor, which encompasses both Arendt's categories of labor and work, and is also ambiguous in that it also refers to the laborer. Agreement would be on the "enslaving" dimensions of labor for groups who only have their bodies to mix with the means of production or capital. Where Marx and Arendt connect is on this consequence: The working classes are those whose social identity collapses into labor, although the individual laborer may prefer to work instead of to labor.) In a labor-consumer society, few people get to work and even fewer instances of action emerge. The result is a decline of genuinely public spaces, spaces conditioned by the activities of speech and honorable deed.

The autobiographical section of this talk thus returns here. The project of public education in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s was, at least as popularly rationalized by progressive educators, to prepare American youth for the responsibilities of living in a democratic society. That, however, requires a society devoted to action and work, but both depended on a value system where the economy would provide what is *sufficient* instead of *excessive*. It was the aim of the Reagan administration to eliminate such efforts from the 1960s and 1970s and extol the virtues of excess. The subsequent dependence on consumption in the 1980s took its toll by creating a hierarchy of labor/consumption first, work second, and action last. Thus, although there have

been much talk *of* the political in American society, in truth, political spaces, genuinely public *spheres*, were in jeopardy. "Public" gatherings and forums became primarily spaces for entertainment (entertainment workers whose products were being consumed by a laboring mass with a leisure time marked by nihilism). "Art," after all, involves taking the risk of *not* being entertaining. We have seen the effects of consumer-centered values in nearly every aspect of American life. The North American academy, and in consequence the many academies worldwide given its impact on attracting many of the best intellectuals from elsewhere, is increasingly guided more by the demands of the "job market" than intellectual work. And it is no accident that celebrity, versus public, intellectuals have ascended with greater frequency and intensity during this period.[12] Serious and imaginative work is rarely ever entertaining; it for the most part lacks mass appeal.

The situation is ironic in democratic terms. For on the one hand, democracy carries with it an egalitarian ethic. But that ethic becomes problematic when it collapses into "massism." Massism violates a basic premise of knowledge and politics. At the epistemological level, it is antipathetic to one of the two Cartesian criteria of knowledge: distinction. The first, clarity, is amenable to mass sentiments because of its obvious accessibility. But distinction is another matter. Distinction by definition goes against the grain of "all." This does not mean that "all" cannot understand or see the distinction, but that the ethic of all is carried on to the phenomena themselves, wherein the distinction necessary for the articulation of something being what it is versus something else is rejected. This epistemological position is an extension of a political position, which renders no space out of reach. Ortega Y Gasset, the liberal Spanish philosopher, puts it this way:

> . . . the present-day writer, when he takes his pen in hand to treat a subject which he has studied deeply, has to bear in mind that the average reader, who has never concerned himself with this subject, if he reads does so with the view, not of learning something from the writer, but rather, of pronouncing judgment on him when he is not in agreement with the commonplaces that the said reader carries in his head. If the individuals who make up the mass believed themselves specially qualified, it would be a case merely of personal error, not a sociological subversion. *The characteristic of the hour is that the commonplace mind, knowing itself to be commonplace, has the assurance to proclaim the rights of the commonplace and to impose them wherever it will.* As they say in the United States: "to be different is to be indecent." The mass crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified and select. Anybody who is not like everybody, who does not think like everybody, runs the risk of being eliminated.

> And it is clear, of course, that this "everybody" is not "everybody." "Everybody" was normally the complex unity of the mass and the divergent, specialized minorities. Nowadays, "everybody" is the mass alone.[13]

Gasset's point is not to reject the democratic spirit and extol elitism. What he is focusing on here is the mentality that militates against growth, intellectual challenge, and the form of excellence that is a function of the contingent and the unique. What is problematic about American elitism, for instance, is not that there are elites but that their status is more a function of economic wealth and social privilege than performance. If we consider the correlate of American racism, the argument goes thus: Could many whites last a day under the hardships unleashed on many of their black colleagues? An effect of massism is antipathy to minorities or small groups in high places based on excellence. Thus, although there are elites in American society, those elites are not excellent minorities but formula elites, people who do not raise the standards of their society. They give the veneer of commonness, which has at its heart the rejection of any where to go beyond the convenience facilitated by technological maintenance.

If emergence in the social world is decent only where entertaining, the political becomes jeopardized because deed and honor are its fruits, honors based on distinction instead of mass appeal. Returning to Arendt's schema, the centering of labor and consumption stimulates an antipolitical attitude in public spaces the consequence of which is the elimination of a properly public sphere. Since public spheres rely on speech, understood as a dialogical exchange wrought with risk, a transformed public emerges in which there are words without speech. The words become increasingly violent, and the public domain becomes an increasingly dangerous place.

A feature of the three fundamental activities—labor, work, and action—is that they are reflections of human vitality. In other words, we *need* them. That being so, the elimination of any one of these would jeopardize our humanity. Consequently, if suppressed in one place, we would seek them in others.

It is no accident that the university has become an increasingly politicized space in the past three decades but most intensively so in the past two. By this, I do not mean to say that the protests on campuses in the 1960s and various student forums and societies that date back to the American Revolution were not political. What is different about the past two decades is that whereas past decades had universities with public spaces in which students met and dealt with political reality, these past two decades have made those spaces increasingly dangerous, and the targets of anti-politics have become not only the students but also their teachers. As the streets have become increasingly policed against the political, leaving controlled spaces for consumption, young people find themselves politically hungry, and they thus exercise this aspect of their condition

in the few places conducive, in their structure, to speech.[14] That is why classrooms have become increasingly "political." It increasingly doesn't matter what the subjects may be, exchanges between teacher and student, and students with each other, have become more and more political.

Anti-political forces are aware of this development. That is why the charges of "political correctness" were drummed up in the 1980s and have continued into the present; faculty and students often find themselves in the midst of political battles increasingly met by interventions from increasingly violent forces both on and especially off campuses.

What is the political threat posed by contemporary educational institutions? Philosophy, at a time when it wasn't ashamed of itself, had a word for it. It is called *thinking*.

The attack on thinking rests in an effort to wipe out the political. We see it in contemporary market fundamentalism, where the market is advanced as the telos and determining mechanism of all things good for us. What is lost in the decline of the political beyond its link to one of our vital activities? The clear answer is that where there is no thinking there is no distinction, and where there is no distinction, we collapse under the force of sameness or mandatory sameness (where thinking is indecent). All this amounts to a new form of what in days past would simply be called totalitarianism. Ours is a world of *market totalitarianism*, a world in which there is literally no room for any alternative.

The diagnosis I advanced through Hannah Arendt and Ortega Y Gasset, shared also by C.L.R. James, amounts to this.[15] The creative upsurges that marked the development of our species are unpredictable, and part of politics is the facilitation of spaces through which the unpredictable can leap forth and the creative can shine. What is good about democracy is that it is supposed to facilitate all of this through an underlying respect for human value—not a perfunctory respect but a treasured one that encourages growth. Recent social developments have been such, however, that it has not only been elementary through secondary education that have been pummeled by the assaults of the 1980s. Think, for instance, of the sorry state of contemporary American philosophy. The two mainstream philosophies in its academy militate against the emergence of genius. The most hegemonic is its Anglo-Analytical wing, which is exemplified by scholars content with reducing philosophical work to puzzle-solving and a political monologue on which form of inconsequential politics to hold. Its main rival, the European "continental" wing, focuses on textual analyses of European thinkers as though the only mystery left in the universe is figuring out what those philosophers both said and meant. Analytical philosophers extol its supposed health often in terms of its gobbling up philosophy departments in the U.S. and abroad, whereas continental ones seek some hospitable universities while joining forces with other disciplines, particularly

literature and sometimes history.[16] On the matter of the health of these two approaches, I am on the side of Anna Julia Cooper who advanced an efficiency theory of value wherein a social group is expected to produce more than is invested in it.[17] The output of mainstream American philosophies does not match the economic and social investments made in them. There was a time, that is, when these areas of philosophy produced groundbreaking thinkers, but they now produce professionals who collapse into an endless stream of repeatable practices guided by the same forces as entertainment at one extreme and radical nonemergence at the other (if, in other words, one produces without appearing, one can, if lucky, reach retirement without a glitch).[18] The ultimate death knell to the current state of that discipline, however, is the general knowledge that, with few exceptions, the best contemporary philosophers can be found *outside* of philosophy departments.[19] The reasons for this I will return to in the next section on disciplinary decadence. For now, it should be clear that if this is the situation of philosophy, then philosophy of education is in deep institutional peril. There was a time when leading professional philosophers also devoted their energy to the question of education and no self-respecting philosophy department would be without a philosopher of education, and in those times, they were able to produce students who, if not surpassing them in their contributions to the reflective life of humanity, at least equaled their contribution. John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead come to mind as exemplars of this view in the United States, and so was the case with George Edward Moore and Bertrand Russell in England, and Edmund Husserl in Germany. Think of the social forces at work that made Simone Weil, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Raymond Aaron, Paul Nizan, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty all students within a few years of each other at the École Normale Supérior and the Sorbonne, and a similar phenomenon in the Africana world whose alumni include Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and through the latter, Frantz Fanon.

Mainstream philosophy has turned its back on education for a few decades now because, frankly, it's a field now afraid of looking at itself. Excellence in the field is judged not by the quality of work that is being produced but by the prestige of the jobs secured. Perhaps the best indication of this is an anecdote I heard from a rather gifted, influential philosopher who, during his graduate studies at Harvard, had told his Director of Graduate Studies that he wanted his dissertation advisor to be then University Professor Paul Tillich. The DGS's response was resolute: "You don't want to work with Tillich; he is a thinker, not a philosopher."

It is no wonder that philosophy of education began to seek sustenance over the past few decades, for the most part, elsewhere.

Evidence

A striking feature (among many) of the contemporary intellectual climate is the death of evidence. There are many instances of this, but perhaps most memorable are the many "charts" and so-called evidential claims made by Ronald Reagan during his presidency. The so-called "evidence" he advanced was rarely ever evident. We needn't blame Ronald Reagan for this. It was happening everywhere. If we think of the scores of pseudo-intellectuals who have mastered the performance of "academese" and the rhetorical advance of evidence-like claims. Lying beneath all this is, of course, nihilistic forces, and lying beneath such forces are, as Friedrich Nietzsche diagnosed a century ago, decadent ones.[20] Where truth has collapsed into commonness, then critical thinking isn't necessary, which makes the work of assessing evidence superfluous. The effect is the kind of nonthinking activities against which Ortega y Gasset argued. There are two extremes of this. On the one hand, there is over-simplicity which demands no reflection. Then there is the dense, abstruse appearance of expertise that conceals an absence of new thought. Both don't require thinking because their ultimate appeal is appearance.

Evidence is paradoxically that which has been hidden but revealed as a conduit for the appearance of another hidden reality. In effect, then, it is an appearance that enables appearance, but it is an appearance that requires thinking in order to appear. In short, it is not an appearance that stimulates thought but a form of thought that stimulates appearance. This means that evidence is always symbolic; it always refers beyond itself. Because whether affirmed or rejected, it always extends publicly for assessment, evidence is peculiarly social. And since it is social, evidence is subject to the complex exchange of intersubjectivity. Evidence must, in other words, be subject to "norms" and "criteria." By norms, I don't here mean normativity nor societal prejudices but instead an understanding of where an exceptional instance versus a typical instance of a case holds. This requires further understanding of relevance, which, too, requires the value of distinction. All this together provides a clue to the contemporary problem: When simply the *performance* of presenting evidence substitutes for *evidence*, then *anything* can count as evidence. We see this in scholarly texts where the authors announce the importance of looking at a subject and then later argue as though that announcement itself constituted its examination. We also see it in cases where pronouncements of past failures of certain social remedies take the form of perennial truths. Think of the current rhetoric of the failed social programs of the 1970s. How could programs that were implemented in the mid-1970s and began being torn down by the end of the 1970s be assessed as a success or failure? But at other levels, the problem of evidence becomes particularly striking. The 1980s were marked by rhetoric against big government. Yet, the bureaucracy increased by at least four times its previous level under those conservative administrations, while it was reduced under the Clinton

Administration. Even before the war began, the current president, George W. Bush, made policy blunders that destroyed the surplus left by Clinton and began a process of increasing the size of the government which has been exacerbated by the "war on terror." How is it, then, that we don't have a national formulation of the Republican Party equaling increased government bureaucracy and government spending?

The evidence question is not only limited to conservative politics. Think, for example, of some "left-wing" organizations struggling to formulate a position on the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in which enemies of the United States government become automatic friends of the left.[21] The problem is that the evidence manifested by the attacks, and the record in local politics of countries in the Middle East, suggest, rather compellingly, that Al Qaeda was also an enemy of the left—including, even, the far left. But more, there is a deeper humanistic question of whether any group who would commit such acts, whether as this recent one has or as, e.g., those who used germ warfare in Japan, stand consistent with the *humanistic* side of a politics whose legitimation rests, ultimately, on the welfare of people.

At less grandiose a level, we see also the problem of evidence in cases of presumed symmetry. For example, a standard trope by black feminists in African American Studies and Women's Studies is that the former is sexist whereas the latter is racist, but where is the evidence for this claim? I remember asking an author of a text in which such a claim was made, and she simply lay claim to its "obviousness." But when I asked her who were at that time the heads of such African American studies programs as Yale's, Princeton's, University of Massachusetts at Amherst, University of Wisconsin at Madison, Stanford's, Purdue's, Wesleyan's, just to name a few, it struck her not only that they were all women, but that she *knew* that. When I asked her about black women chairs of women's studies programs, she couldn't name a single one—although I could name, e.g., Sonia Sanchez at Temple and Charlotte Morgan-Cato at Lehman College, both predominantly black-based institutions. It is true that the dominant public image of African American studies is male, and it is also true that there are sexist black studies and racist women's studies programs by virtue of, e.g., environments in which black women's intellectual work don't receive *intellectual* respect, but we should remember that at least the popular mostly-male programs consist of famous men who have hired publicists to produce media hype on their importance in the field.[22] Presumed symmetry leads to a variety of bad reasoning. For example, what affects blacks is expected to be the same for whites, and Asian-American and Latin-American realities are expected to be similar to blacks, and the same applies to matters of sexual orientation and class.[23] What is missing is a profound understanding that these may not be matters that can be settled at an *a priori* level because they are not problems of *understanding*, but *knowing*.

Evidence is a form of understanding. It is not simply the case that something advanced as evidence *is* evidence. It must be understood as such, which means that it must be put through a process of critical inquiry, a process that requires thinking.

Disciplinary Decadence

We come now to the problem of disciplinary decadence. I have hinted at this problem throughout this lecture by raising the question of the scope of disciplinary knowledge. Disciplinary decadence is the process of critical decay within a field or discipline. In such instances, the proponent ontologizes his or her discipline far beyond its scope. Thus, a decadent scientist criticizes the humanities for not being scientific; a decadent literary scholar criticizes scientists and social scientists for not being literary or textual; a decadent social scientist sins in two directions—either by criticizing the humanities for not being social scientific, or social science for not being scientific in accord with, say, physics or biology. And of course, the decadent historian criticizes all for not being historical; and the decadent philosopher criticizes all for not being philosophical. The public dimension of evidence is here subordinated through the discipline or field functioning, literally, as *the world*. Thus, although another discipline or field may offer evidence to the contrary, it could, literally, be ignored simply on the basis of not being the point of view of one's discipline or field. Where is philosophy of education in all this?

The first obvious difference is that philosophy of education does not stand as a discipline with its own ontological precepts. In many ways, it is patently *interdisciplinary*, and as many of us already know, work in the field is not done primarily by intellectuals who center philosophy of education as their primary activity. Scholars and public intellectuals come to it, in other words, from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. In many ways, this is in the spirit of what philosophical thinking is about. This brings us to the other point. The *philosophical* side of philosophy of education brings to the study of education its own set of problematics and limitations. Where philosophy is treated as a closed affair that is simply "applied" to the study of education, it collapses into decadence. But where it is seen as an inexact activity, as the effort to think about the grandest implications of educational practice, it transcends disciplinary decadence. That transcendence I call *teleological suspension*. It is when a discipline suspends its own centering because of a commitment to questions greater than the discipline itself. Ironically, when philosophers do this—attempt to think beyond philosophy to greater commitments—they ironically breathe life into philosophy's gasping lungs. Think of the "great" philosophers of past ages. Few of them came to philosophy with philosophical credentials in hand. In the middle ages, there were priests, the most significant of whom were St. Augustine and subsequently St. Thomas Aquinas. In the modern period, there

is a gentleman mathematician and physicist (René Descartes), a physician (John Locke), a librarian and engineer (Godfried Leibniz), a lawyer (David Hume), a Bishop (George Berkeley), to name a few. From the Romantic period onward one finds a theologian (G.W.F. Hegel), a philologist of Greek classics (Nietzsche), two physicians (William James and Karl Jaspers), three mathematicians (Alfred North Whitehead, Bertrand Russel, and Edmund Husserl), an engineer (Ludwig Wittgenstein), a tradition that continues to this day. If race prejudice were suspended, to this pantheon we could easily add, for example, a historian and sociologist (W.E.B. Du Bois), a literary scholar (Anna Julia Cooper), and a psychiatrist (Frantz Fanon).

The shift from philosophy of education to theories of education is in such a spirit. At the heart of this shift is the pursuit of questions whose consequences may be philosophical, but they don't have to be. Our age is, however, saturated with disciplinary decadence, wherein fields and disciplines dig their trenches and hope that their opponents' bullets continue to miss their targets. There are, however, pressing problems that need to be addressed while such battles continue. Whether we like it or not, educators today find themselves in a situation as custodians of both academic and political nutrition. The intensification of the assault on public life means continued attack on the institutions whose purpose it is to cultivate that life. That means those institutions face responsibilities as they have not before. In the past, there was room for words and deeds to stand apart, but in our world, the world of the educator, words and deeds are one. It should be clear by now that overcoming disciplinary decadence and its correlate ignoring of field-transcending evidence is linked to a vital commitment by knowledge producers and counselors, which, in effect, many of us are, and that commitment is to freedom and truth conjoined in the project of constructing our species' self-understanding and collective aspirations.

To Conclude

I return to my high school students. There is something that I always remember in them that I have seen in every subsequent student. Students look at teachers in a funny way. Their eyes carry both hesitation and faith, two conflicting positions in a single act. This look challenges all teachers because the faithful side asks *us* to present reality to them, while the suspicious side remembers that we, too, are human beings. In many ways, they embody the existential phenomenological insights to which I earlier turned. They come to us out of a sense of necessity, but it is up to us to stimulate the dimensions of themselves that would enable them not only to create the world of the future, but also act in ways that would make such worlds liveable. To that task, we should all turn, but that achievement would be another story.

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Notes

1. This article is a slightly revised version of the talk presented on 27 September 2002 as the Keynote Address.

2. David P. Gardner, chair, The National Commission on Excellence in Education, *A Nation at Risk : The Imperative for Educational Reform: A Report to the Nation and the Secretary of Education, United States Department of Education* (Washington, D.C.: The Commission, 1983). See also *A Nation at Risk: The Full Account*, 2nd edition, ed. by USA Research Incorporated (Cambridge, MA: USA Research Incorporated, 1994).

3. The American Revolution was more inclusive and popular until a small faction of its elite propertied supporters seized control in its immediate aftermath and set up a system of government that structurally excluded many groups who fought for the founding of a new nation. Women of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, Native American supporters, and African American revolutionaries, for example, had expected to be full citizens in the new Republic. For discussion, see Joe R. Feagin, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, and Future Reparations* (New York : Routledge, 2000), chapter 1. The founding father exempt from this criticism by virtue of his having made it against the Federalists is, of course, Thomas Paine.

4. For more detailed discussion, see, e.g., Ira Shor, *Culture Wars: School and Society in the Conservative Restoration 1969–1984* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). For the most prescient critique of these developments and their impact on young people and the schools they attend, see, of course, Henry Giroux's many important interventions over the past two decades, particularly *Theory and Resistance in Education: A Pedagogy for the Opposition* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1983), *Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning*, introduction by Paulo Freire; foreword by Peter McLaren Granby, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1988), *Stealing Innocence: How the Media Uses Our Children* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).

5. For those of you who aren't familiar with my work, representative cases are *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1995),

Existentia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought (New York: Routledge, 2000), and my edited volume *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

6. See particularly *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism* and *Fanon and the Crisis of European Man: An Essay on Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1995), as well as *Existentia Africana*.

7. Lewis R. Gordon, "Sociality and Community in Black: A Phenomenological Essay," in *Of the Quest for Community and Identity: An Africana Philosophical Anthology*, edited by Robert Birt (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), pp.105-123.

8. Some philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre have criticized transcendental phenomenology for turning to the notion of a transcendental ego. Sartre has, however, missed the point. Look at it this way. Try to imagine your own death. There is an egological correlate even at this moment of imagining that makes it contradictory since one must have *an egological standpoint of the end of one's egological standpoint*. That egological accompaniment is a transcendental condition of positing meaning. Even Sartre's pure pre-reflective consciousness that posits an egological object is, from the transcendental phenomenological perspective, a hidden ego-accompaniment. For Sartre's point of view, see *Transcendence of the Ego: An Existential Theory of Consciousness*, trans. by Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988). For some elaboration of what I have just articulated, see *Existentia Africana*, pp. 72-80.

9. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

10. This is my amendment to Arendt's argument. She uses the term "social" to refer to the "societal." My use is more radical as seen in my discussion of the relationship between sociality and communicability.

11. From Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 19. This expression is by the way a variation of a proverb found all over Africa: "This would be the ideal moment for me to die."

12. For an excellent discussion of the race, gender, and class dynamics of intellectual celebrity, see Hazel V. Carby's essay, "The New Auction Block: Blackness and the Marketplace," in *A Companion to African American Studies*, ed. by Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, forthcoming).

13. José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1932), p. 18, emphasis in the original.

14. Although I say "young people" here, it should be borne in mind that students in the 1960s through early 1990s, especially at inner city and commuter colleges, tended to be of a broader age range than today. It wasn't unusual for many college professors to find themselves before an audience of students whose ages ranged from 16 to 30, and there was the occasional middle-aged student. In short, students were also comprised of different age groups, different generations, in a dialogue on social change. I suspect this contributed greatly to the success of many early student movements.

15. For C.L.R. James, see his *American Civilization*, ed. and introduced by Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart with an afterword by Robert A. Hill (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993).

16. See, e.g., Editorial Pronouncement: "In Defense of Analytical Philosophy," *Sorites* 1, no. 1 (April 1995): 1-12. This is an electronic journal, and the piece can be found at the following website: http://sowi.iwp.uni-linz.ac.at/Sorites/Defense.html. For my remark on continental philosophy, see, e.g., the website "Philosophy Graduate Schools Friendly to Continental Philosophy," Philosophy Department, Earlham College: http://www.earlham.edu/~phil/gradsch.htm.

17. Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*, introduction by Mary Hellen Washington and foreword by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford, 1988), see especially her famous essay in that volume, "What Are We Worth?"

18. There is, as might be imagined, an endless stream of arguments relativizing the meaning of "groundbreaking." Thus, one could find formulations of work as groundbreaking by scholars whose world is so small that very small movements forward appear as extraordinary ones. (See the discussion of grand projects in the *Sorites* editorial board's defense of analytical philosophy.)

19. There are several recent discussions of this phenomenon, but see especially John McCumber, *Time in the Ditch: American Philosophy and the McCarthy Era* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000) for a political argument on why this is so.

20. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967).

21. This was specifically the case with student and faculty movements in such universities as Sussex in England and many of the South African universities. To some extent, the behavior of the U.S. government since then has been counterproductive in this regard since the response clearly doesn't match the gravity of the deeds of September 11th. The numbers of people killed by the U.S. government in response has far outweighed any notion of *international*

security since the message has now been made clear that Americans simply have a greater right to live than other people.

22. The reality of African American studies is incongruent with its media misrepresentation. The connection here with dynamics that collapse intellectual work into entertainment should by now be clear to the reader. For an examination of African American studies, in its contradictions and struggles, from more than thirty scholars in the field, see *A Companion to African American Studies*, edited with an introduction by Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, forthcoming 2004).

23. Another ironic form of sexism and racism is the tendency of some black feminist scholars to accept no criticism except from other black feminists. This view has emerged out of standpoint epistemological approaches, wherein only people who share one's standpoint can know what one knows and therefore can lay claim to informed criticism. Yet, how could such a position be conducive to an environment of respect when criticism is a necessary condition of taking another scholar's work seriously? Would this not lead to a structural, analytical impasse between black women and everyone who is not black and female? In my book *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, I argued that such views lead to an "exoticized" relationship between, say, whites and blacks who hold such a view. But that exoticized view is a form of racism. I contend here that the addition of gender holds the same conclusion: It is a form of sexism as well.