
Presidential Response

UPSIDE DOWN THINKING

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Terry O'Connor, Dean of the School of Education at The College of New Jersey, former President of the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society (OVPES), and my very good friend, likes to say that I am an upside-down thinker. He says that if you want to figure out what position Quantz is going to have on something then figure out what everyone else is likely to think and then turn the thinking upside down and you'll have the position that Quantz is likely to take. If O'Connor is right, perhaps this is why, in the last several years, I have come to like Sasha Sidorkin's work so much. As an upside-down thinker, I recognize another upside-down thinker when I see one. In this wonderful argument, Sidorkin brings us through the history of all humankind to lead us to the conclusion that the best way to reform schools today would be to de-emphasize education. Now that is upside-down thinking at its best. And even better is the fact that he has it right! Nothing has been less educative for our young people than the hyped-up demands for so-called "accountability" which pretends to focus on learning outcomes, but really focuses on training. I know my own children would greatly benefit if their school would adopt Sidorkin's recommendations. I know they would once again enjoy school. And I remember what Charles Silberman recommended in his classic 1970 *Crises in the Classroom*. After 525 pages of discussing the problems of schools, Silberman comes to the conclusion that if children and adults are going to have to spend 6 hours a day for 180 days a year in school then schools should at least be pleasant places to be. He concludes his book saying, "We will not be able to create and maintain a humane society unless we create and maintain classrooms that are humane."¹ I think that Sidorkin is working in this same realm.

Let me take a moment to lay out Sidorkin's basic argument as I understand it.

THE ARGUMENT

- (1) The ability to teach is a uniquely human characteristic (or, at least, the ability to exploit the 3 gifts of childhood: immaturity, curiosity, & play).
- (2) Schooling is a form of labor, not a consumer service and being a form of labor, we must ask the economic question, why would one labor such?
- (3) Since schools are a form of extended childhood, it is a mistake to assume that they have anything to do with the adult economies. That is, as a form

of economic relation, schools are based less on market economies and more on relational economies, but like all economies are located in history.

In *mass schooling*, students exchange their labor for the opportunity to build social relations with peers and adults.

In communities where the school highly regulates social relations (such as small towns and rural communities), student cooperation leads to desired social relations; whereas, in communities where the school has little effect on community social relations (such as urban areas), student cooperation fails to bring desired social relations.

- (4) Therefore, school reform should increase the benefits of relations. In other words, focus on providing students non-educational rewards for educational labor.

Present school reform, perhaps liberal or traditionally conservative, is based on trying to make the technology of mass schooling mimic the technology of elite schooling, but since they are two different technologies, they also have different economic relations. Successful reform of a mass school along elitist school lines will only result in the construction of another elitist school.

Present reactionary school reform (masked as “conservative”) is based on the assumption that schools are market economies, but since student labor in school is not regulated by the market place but by reciprocal relations, such reforms can not work.

Furthermore, given the reality of a class-based society, curricular reform should not attempt to require the learning of elite culture by working-class kids, but of those technologies and cultures that might help develop working-class strengths and solidarity.

I would like to make three points about this argument.

Point 1:

Sidorkin argues that the ability to teach is a uniquely human characteristic. He draws this conclusion from anthropological evidence that suggests that unlike Neanderthals, *homo sapiens* had the capacity to replicate models so that, for example, a pot for water could be replicated and improved on. But it is not immediately clear to me that the ability to replicate tools equates with the ability to teach. While Sidorkin states that *homo sapiens* and the Neanderthals were equally intelligent, I’m not sure what this means. Let me explain: The capacity to replicate appears to follow from the ability to recognize essential characteristics or universals which, in turn, according to Dewey, requires the capacity to recognize what is *irrelevant to the particularity of the object*. Those characteristics

that do not make the object unique are the characteristics that we recognize as commonalities, or essentials, or universals. And recognizing things such as universals is what we refer to as the ability to use abstraction. We could, therefore, just as easily argue that the difference between the Neanderthals and *homo sapiens* is not that one taught better than the other, but that one had the capacity for abstraction and, therefore, the ability to recognize a model.

Point 2:

In an aside, Sidorkin points out that the ability to model made *homo sapiens* less “creative” than the Neanderthals. I really appreciated that comment. I believe I understand the inspiration for it as well. There seems to be a kind of worship of something called “creativity” in contemporary America. If we look at what passes for art today compared to the past, the key for success seems to be “originality” rather than other factors such as elegance or essence. But in my own mind, this worship of creativity is really a misunderstanding of creativity for creativeness must always both introduce something unique while, at the same time, it must connect to that which came before it. I would suggest that the tool-making of *homo sapiens* is actually more creative than that of the Neanderthals, for the tools of *homo sapiens* introduces something new into a well-known pattern; whereas, the Neanderthals merely continued blindly starting all over again every time. This is certainly not creativity; though, I’m afraid that Sidorkin is correct in his observation that it is what passes for creativity in the Western world today (even if what passes for creativity is little more than a very uncreative ritual performance honoring the liberal commitment to autonomy).

Point 3:

Sidorkin’s argument includes the following sub-claim : “Schooling is a form of labor, not a consumer service.” This is a claim that I completely agree with and also believe that it is a crucially important point in contemporary discussions of public education. The move to make schooling a consumer good is one of the most destructive moves in the history of public schooling.

But having said that, I find Sidorkin’s grounds for this claim to be only partially persuasive. He argues that the history of education in the West has passed through 3 phases. argues that the key moment occurs in the second phase when education for the ruling classes began to incorporate a kind of learning that was not intimately connected to production itself. In ancient Greece, we had the phenomenon of an education for free-born citizens consisting of the earliest versions of a “liberal education” while the learning of most slaves (and women) consisted of training in a vocation (which, of course, was learned primarily through apprenticeship). In this way, “education” came to be equated with the kind of learning that the children of the elites were to receive so that

they could take their place at the helm of the realm. According to Sidorkin this latter kind of learning takes us beyond the normal childhood motivations found in apprenticeships and requires a technology to extend childhood while such learning is accumulated. That technology is school. For Sidorkin, this extension of childhood turns a natural process of children participating in production into an artificial process of labor. As labor, schooling requires an economic motivation. In the classical phase (and in classical schooling that the children of the elites receive today) that economic motivation is class privilege.

But what can be the motivation for children of the non-elites who make up most of the students in the third phase of mass schooling? Certainly not the promise of elite privilege since many, perhaps most, of our urban and rural poor recognize that the promise of mobility is an empty one. Sidorkin concludes that the only possible economic motivation is the privilege of participating in social relations. This is actually a brilliant observation. If you ask most students why they are in school, they are likely to tell you that it is to be able to get a good job. But if you follow that up with what is it that they like about school, you'll find that they like very little beyond that which arises through their involvement in social activities.

So up to a point, I might be able to accept Sidorkin's argument. I might want to raise a few objections about his characterization of the 3 phases of education, but what really troubles me is the absence of connecting public schooling to any state interest. While it may be true that most children can not be motivated by the intrinsic nature of learning (as in apprenticeship) or the promise of elite privileges (as in classical schooling) and, therefore, today's students of mass schooling are most likely to be positively motivated by the pleasure of social relations; positive motivations are not the only ones that exist in schools.

I recognize that Sidorkin's argument centers on student motivation rather than state motivation and I am not suggesting that it should be otherwise. What I am suggesting is that students' motivations are very likely constructed in some relationship with the motivations of the state. And since the motivations of the state seem to be the legitimation of the status quo through the celebration of elite cultures over other cultures while, at the same time, reducing understanding to mere technological skills, many students of the non-elite do find great motivation in resisting such celebration and technocratization.² Sidorkin's solution for student motivation suggests that we increase the non-educational rewards of schools, but unless coupled with a curriculum and pedagogy that is pointedly anti-hegemonic, such increased motivation is not likely to do much to overcome the motivation to actively resist.

UNPOPULAR POINTS

Besides the upside-downness of his thinking, another reason that I have come to appreciate Sidorkin's work is because he is not afraid to present unpopular positions. Take Sidorkin's willingness to draw on anthropological constructions of evolutionary biology in this piece. There is a tendency among contemporary educational scholars (at least in organizations such as OVPES) to reject human biology as particularly relevant to explaining social action—and with good reason. The appeal to biology and evolution has typically been used for conservative reasons, to justify the status quo, to offer nature as the cause of hierarchy and inequality and to, therefore, justify it. Appeals to hereditary evolution have been devastating to those without power. Movements such as social Darwinism brought us eugenics movements such as those funded by Ohioan Clarence Gamble (heir to the Proctor and Gamble fortune) to sterilize poor women. In the hands of so-called scholars such as Arthur Jensen and his "g-factor" such appeals to biology and heredity have been used to explain away anti-Black racism. Recently the work of the so-called socio-biologists, such as Edward O. Wilson, and their concepts such as "sperm competition" have been used to justify the patriarchal codes that demand chastity for women while condoning promiscuity for men. There is good reason why scholars should be suspicious of those who turn to biology to explain human behavior. While it may be true that any particular human act is probably some combination of the physiological, the psychological, and the sociocultural; we know enough about the latter two to know that there are few physiologically based impulses that don't first have to be interpreted through our psychological and sociocultural frames and, therefore, any physiological impulse can be overcome through conscious or unconscious intent—even the physiological need for food—as anorexics throughout history have shown us.

The feeling of our hair rising on the back of our necks whenever we start to hear someone appeal to biology or evolution when trying to explain human behavior is completely understandable. However, since human action includes not only psychological and sociocultural influences, but also physiological ones, to deny that biology and evolution have some claim on our behaviors seems simply wrong. To deny this is to deny that humans are animals. Is this really what we wish to claim? Are we so arrogant a species as to completely separate ourselves from the rest of earth's living creatures? Not in my case, nor in Kurt Vonnegut's case. In his novel *Galápagos*, Vonnegut's narrator inhabiting the island of Galápagos sometime in the future asks, "Can it be doubted that three-kilogram brains were once nearly fatal defects in the evolution of the human race?"²³ Humans' brains are big enough to learn to control and manipulate the earth's resources to feed the human desire for pleasure, but, apparently, not big enough to control the human desire for pleasure itself. The human brain is big enough to

construct intricate and complex social relationships, but, apparently, not big enough to control the social relationships that they have constructed.

While we progressive scholars may bristle at arguments that involve human biology and evolution, understanding the fundamental human condition has been central to philosophy (Western and Eastern) and, despite our denial, is central still to philosophy today, even that of poststructuralism. Plato and Aristotle were not the only ones who built philosophy upon the assumption of what it meant to be human. Marx built his philosophy upon the assumption that what made humans unique among all animals was our ability to work on the world: our ability to take ideas and realize them in the world around us. Dewey too built his philosophy around a biological and evolutionary assumption of humanness. Dewey assumed that that which makes us human is our ability to learn, to resolve indeterminate situations through thought and experiment and, therefore, to grow. Dewey's good friend, G. H. Mead also built a social theory upon an assumption of humanness. Mead assumed that all social action begins with the attempt of human animals to coordinate social action through the use of symbols.

Of course, we have the anti-animal assumptions of the existentialists. How can we ever ignore Sartre's dictum "existence precedes essence"?⁴ Many would say that existentialism is the epitome of the opposite of building a philosophy on the biology and evolution of humans as animals and yet, does not existentialism assume that what makes humans unique among all animals, that which is the essence of humanness, is that only we among all the animals are condemned to have no essence, but to be forced to create our selves? Today, many educational scholars are attracted to post-structuralism as the contemporary Frenchified intellectual trend. (I'm reminded of Tony Green's comment to me when I was spending a wonderful sabbatical at the Institute of Education's Sociology of Education department with Tony and Basil Bernstein. Tony explained his attraction to Althusser by saying, with a characteristic twinkle in his eye, "When they sneeze in a Paris salon, we in England catch the cold." It seems reasonable to add, "And we in America turn that cold into a new, virulent strain of pneumonia.") Anyway, many contemporary scholars claim to be influenced by poststructuralism. What seems to capture much of these scholars' imaginations is that they believe all meaning is located in language (or discourse or signs or symbols) and, therefore, there is no meaning beyond that which is constructed through language. But, of course, in stating this we are making the assumption that the essence of being human is that we engage the world through semiotics. So whether acknowledged or not, all philosophers make some sort of assumption about the biological and evolutionary basis of being human.

And then there are the arguments of feminists such as Carol Adams, Lynda Birke, and Donna Haraway who argue that the construction of a binary consisting

of humans on one side and all other animals on the other is inherently patriarchal and that the interests of feminism must include the dissolution of the boundary that separates the two. For example, Adams points out that the cultural and legal inadequacies that lead to the failure to stop abuse of animals and of women are basically the same. Birke suggests that the dualistic construction of the human/animal divide leads to the abuse of animals in science. She writes, “For feminism, I suggest, what can be learned is to question not only boundaries of difference within humans (or between women), but also to question the boundaries of what constitutes humanness.” In her remarkable book on the study of other primates, Haraway argues that the logic of primatology is directly related to the advancement of racism. And by now, everyone knows the story of how Jane Goodall, untrained in the biases of patriarchal science, took the naïve and unprecedented step of giving the chimpanzees in her study names; therefore, “contaminating” her study with human emotions. And thank goodness that she did.⁵

Why all of this emphasis on how humans are unique among all animals? Is there no place for asking how it is that we are similar to other animals? I guarantee you that once you start to view human life as fundamentally like other mammals rather than different from them, you find not a moral warrant for an unjust hierarchical inequality, but rather you find a species engaged in the same behaviors as any other social mammal. Randall Collins points out that if you look at the content of communications among humans and compare it to the content of communications among other mammals such as chimpanzees, baboons, and wolves; you find that the content of those conversations covers essentially the same territory. All social mammals spend their time communicating around such topics as fear, nurturing, food, solidarity, sex, power in the form of domination/submissiveness. The real difference between human communication and the communication of chimps and wolves is not the topics of our conversations but that we make our communications more complex than chimps and wolves (and as I tell many of my graduate classes, it’s a good thing too, because without that complexity there would be no need for graduate education nor, I might add, for philosophy of education societies). When we start to view it this way, those topics of conversation that appear to be uniquely human turn out to be much less so.⁶

“What about abstract intellectual arguments of scholars?” you might ask. “While other humans may be relegated to arguments that fail to rise above the other animals, surely intellectuals base their arguments on factors that make them uniquely human?” Maybe. Maybe not. Several years ago when my children were young, I observed an argument of about 8 or 9 children who must have ranged from 6 to 10 years of age. By the time I arrived on the scene they had broken into two groups. I fail to remember the topic of their argument, but I know that whatever the argument was everyone in this room would have

recognized that neither side was anywhere near the truth of the matter. As I watched these children engage in their argument, I found each side advancing reasons for their particular position. One would come up with some form of evidence and the other would counter. Throughout the argument the children drew on all of the techniques that we would recognize as both legitimate and illegitimate forms of arguments. After a while, one side seemed to advance what appeared to be very persuasive evidence and a couple of the children switched sides. As the argument continued, one-by-one the kids on one side were presented with a piece of evidence, an argument, that they found persuasive until only one child was left on his side. And soon-there-after the *coup de grace* was administered, an argument so persuasive that even the last holdout was persuaded and the argument was settled. A consensus had arisen. They were of one mind in solidarity. That everyone in this room would have found both sides of the argument completely wrong and nearly every move in the argument completely specious was both a sense of dismay for me but also a sense of delight. Here were these young children showing every bit of social acumen as adults. Afterwards I went around telling people about this incident and then adding, “I now understand exactly what is going on amongst my colleagues.” Most missed my point, however. They seemed to think that I was “dissing” my colleagues in my department. But I was not. I was including myself and all of the academy. This is what we are. Yes, we make things more complex, but ultimately, what academic argument comes down to is the same ritual action that we find among chimps and wolves. Yes, we are unique animals, but we are animals—of this earth and, therefore, of nature. We are not God’s chosen animals. We are not special. We will, in fact, go the way of the dinosaur. Yes, the least amongst us shall be first: The insects. The microbes.

So unlike many, perhaps, I find Sidorkin’s appeal to biology and evolution not an inappropriate turn that is too slippery to trust not falling into the trap of justifying the status quo, but rather welcome it as a courageous attempt to rescue philosophy from the sacred air of a supernatural human and place it in the realm of a human animal who has never and will never be anything more than a smart animal—smart, perhaps, but not smart enough. Sometimes I imagine myself ending up like Vonnegut’s narrator in *Galápagos* who, at the end of the book, finds himself on the island of Galápagos relating the story of how humans began to evolve down the evolutionary ladder. He feels confident that the future of humans and of earth is safe because of the Law of Natural Selection: “It was the best fisherfolk who survived in the greatest numbers in the watery environment of the Galápagos Archipelago. Those with hands and feet most like flippers were the best swimmers. Prognathous jaws were better at catching and holding fish than hands could ever be. And any fisherperson, spending more and more time underwater, could surely catch more fish if he or she were more streamlined, more bulletlike—had a smaller skull” (Vonnegut, 1985, 291).⁷ So the issue is

not whether we will as humans interested in philosophy reject appeals to biology and evolution, but only whether the particular appeal presented in the argument works as a heuristic or pragmatic tale to help humans construct a story that may save us from our big brains. Perhaps Shasha Sidorkin has it right; perhaps de-emphasizing education is exactly what we need.

NOTES

1. Charles E. Silberman, *Crises in the Classroom: The Remaking of American Education*. Vintage Books Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 524.
 2. Randall Collins, *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).
 3. Kurt Vonnegut, *Galápagos* (New York: Dell, 1985), 8.
 4. Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Wisdom Library, 1957).
 5. Carol J. Adams, “Woman-Battering and Harm to Animals,” in *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations*, edited by Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan (Durham: Duke University, 1995): 55-84; Lynda Birke, “Exploring the Boundaries: Feminism, Animals, and Science,” in *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations*, edited by Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan (Durham: Duke University, 1995): 49; Donna J. Harraway, *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Jennifer Lindsey, *Jane Goodall: 40 Years at Gombe: A Tribute to Four Decades of Wildlife Research, Education, and Conservation* (New York: Stewart, Tabori, & Chang, 2000).
 6. Randall Collins, *Conflict Sociology: Toward an Explanatory Science* (New York: Academic Press, 1975).
 7. Kurt Vonnegut, *Galápagos* (New York: Dell, 1985), 291.
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