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*Phil Smith Symposium*

NON-IDEAL IDEALS AND THE TRAGIC SENSE OF EDUCATION:  
RESPONSE TO NICHOLAS BURBULES

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It is a particular pleasure for me to be responding to this paper because I have a distinct memory of many of the publications to which Nicholas Burbules refers in this paper. I was a student at the University of Illinois, and had the privilege of having Nick as my dissertation advisor. At the time, my framing for each of the seemingly disparate ideas Burbules has explored had to do with a particular sensibility that ran through them, both pragmatic and tragic. The pragmatic has to do with bringing seemingly unattainable practices within reach in the world as we know it, not by denying the difficulties but by learning to live with them. This pragmatic sensibility is aligned with the tragic, understood “not as a universal orientation toward life, but as a corrective that comes upon us, if we are open to it, when we acknowledge the irreconcilable tensions among different aspects of who we are trying to be and what we are trying to accomplish as educators.”<sup>1</sup>

I talk here about the tragic as a philosophical disposition rather than a political or ideological position deliberately because I’m not sure how to position Nick’s argument in relation to Ideal theorizing as I understand it. It seems to me to be worth drawing attention to a slippage in this paper between Ideal theory as a political philosophy in the liberal vein of John Rawls, which has spawned one thread of non-Ideal philosophizing, and Platonic Idealism. While its true that both strains put forward an ideal of Justice from which all else follows, liberal theorizing contains this essential difference: because it dwells in the tension between liberty and equality and takes its bearings from existing political and economic frameworks, it is always already less than ideal. Rawls recognizes certain facts of human existence that need to be taken into consideration when developing standards of justice, for example, that resources are limited, and access to equal resources in a free society may well be unattainable. Justice as Fairness focuses on securing resources for the least advantaged, which is the best we can do under the circumstances. The much maligned and misunderstood conceits of the “veil of ignorance” and the idea of the original position also reflect this tragic sensibility within Ideal theorizing. If things were truly ideal, we wouldn’t need to seek out imaginative ways to transcend these circumstances by encouraging citizens to think as though their

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas C. Burbules, “Teaching and the Tragic Sense of Education,” in *Teaching and Its Predicaments*, ed. Nicholas C. Burbules and David T. Hansen (Westview Press, 1997), 72.

particular social positioning might be other than it is. In short, a Rawlsian liberal sensibility is already imbued with the tragic. Ironically, Ideal theorists are less idealist than some of their critics.

While it is true that Ideal theorists in the Rawlsian vein put forward the view that the governing Ideal in question can be attained, it is important to note that the ideal in question has already undergone a substantial reevaluation. As I understand it, Justice as Fairness is put forward as the best we can do in less than Ideal circumstances. It seems to me that decency is not perfection. It is simply—and importantly—better than what we currently have. Recognizing the degree to which liberal theorizing in the Rawlsian vein is already permeated with the tragic sense of life, which is to say, deeply attuned to the trade-offs that must be made within existing philosophical and political frameworks, makes it hard to draw a sharp distinction between non-Ideal and Ideal theorizing. Political theorist Laura Valentini similarly suggests that the “debate” between the two stances is often overblown. She attributes this partly to a fundamental misunderstanding of what Ideal theorizing attempts to do, and partly to the unrealistic expectations of critics, many of whom seem to think that Ideal theorizing ought to preempt every feasibility constraint and overcome the full range of obstacles to full compliance. At its best—and Valentini makes an important point that Ideal theory has better and worse manifestations<sup>2</sup>—Ideal theory in the liberal tradition attends carefully to limit conditions. In other words, the non-Ideal is essential to the theoretical framework being put forward. Valentini’s conceptual mapping of the debate attempts to dissolve some of its less helpful manifestations by delineating the key facets of good Ideal theory. Good Ideal theory must have the basic tools to respond to the two sorts of complaints that are most frequently lodged against it: it must be sufficiently attentive to basic “facts” of human psychology (to the extent that these can be deduced from existing structures of a given society) and it must seek to account for and redress the most egregious obstacles to attaining the Ideal, even if it doesn’t adumbrate them.<sup>3</sup>

How then to situate Nicholas Burbules in this “debate”? In what sense is he, as he claims, a theorist of the non-Ideal? I would say that he is a thinker who dwells conscientiously at the hyphen—attached to the idea of an Ideal, but vigilantly attentive to the conditions that make both its pursuit and parameters less than Ideal in the world we inhabit. In each of the papers Nick references in this Phil Smith address, he is putting forward a conception of a non-Ideal Ideal to which educators can reasonably aspire, as opposed to what Dworkin’s calls the “‘ideal Ideal’ of fantasy.”<sup>4</sup> It seems to me that not unlike Rawls, Burbules has been developing a tragic theory of the normative, albeit one that looks to

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<sup>2</sup> Valentini puts Rawls’s *Justice and Fairness* and *Political Liberalism* in the “good” category, but not *The Law of Peoples*.

<sup>3</sup> Laura Valentini, “Ideal vs. Non-ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map,” *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 9 (2012): 654–664.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

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education to help us attain a more desirable state than what we currently have and knowing full well that education is itself an uncertain undertaking.

Pretending to listen is an excellent example of this. In our ideal image of good teaching/parenting/relating to others, we would be able genuinely listen to our students/children/significant others much if not most of the time. In the real world, however, we often find ourselves half listening. As Burbules and Suzanne Rice show, this less than ideal stance of pretending to listen is not always a bad thing.<sup>5</sup> In some circumstances, it might be a perfectly viable ideal to which to aspire. But there is more to the reevaluation of listening than a ratcheting down of the unattainable ideal of genuine listening. Instead of allowing any kind of “half listening” to suffice, Burbules and Rice insist that we learn to become better “pretend listeners” in the midst of our less-than-ideal distracted condition.

Burbules offers binocular vision as one way for us to learn to live in the gap between our social ideals and the less than ideal conditions with which we are confronted. Binocular vision focuses one lens on the world as it is and one on the world as it could be. Working in tandem, the two lenses, with their different vantage points, present the viewer with an image somewhere in the middle distance—almost but not quite within reach, but more importantly, sufficiently magnified so as to afford the viewer a closer look at what we are actually dealing with. When we see pretending to listen in the middle distance, we see it close up not only for what it allows us to let go of (continuously dedicated attention), but also for what it demands of us. We have to pretend to listen in the right way, on the right occasion, for the right reasons. In other words, looking into the middle-distance doesn’t *relinquish* effort, it *requires* it. Herein lies the educational significance of non-Ideal theorizing as Burbules conceives of it. Ratcheting down the ideal to make it more feasible doesn’t reduce the educational (or societal) challenge: there is still work to be done.

A similar shift in focus from the ideal Ideal to the non-Ideal Ideal happens in Burbules’s conception of the educational value of dialogue. In a superb overview of the debate over dialogue (which has many parallels with the debate over Ideal versus non-Ideal theorizing), Burbules revisits his own stance on topic, forged over the years in a book and a number of subsequent papers. Burbules wonders whether the educational faith in dialogue can continue in light of the criticisms leveled against it. He concludes that it must, albeit a tempered faith that attends not simply to the aims of dialogue under ideal conditions but to situated, material practices that occur in messier circumstances that are both politically and pedagogically fraught.<sup>6</sup> Burbules

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<sup>5</sup> Nicholas C. Burbules and Suzanne Rice, “On Pretending to Listen,” *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 11 (2010): 2874–288.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas C. Burbules, “The Limits of Dialogue as a Critical Theory,” in *Revolutionary Pedagogies*, ed. Peter Trifonas (New York: Routledge, 2000), <http://faculty.education.illinois.edu/burbules/papers/limits.html>

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concedes that his earlier approaches to the topic were perhaps too prescriptivist despite his pluralist conception of the range of possible outcomes of dialogic engagements. He argues that it is the practice of dialogue rather than any preconceived set of outcomes that is significant.

Bringing binocular vision to bear on the practice of dialogue, he calls on critical theorists to attend both to the shortcomings of too prescriptivist an account of what makes for genuine dialogue and to the problems of too myopic a focus on the conditions that mitigate against the possibility that something good—which is to say, something *educational*—might happen through the dialogic encounter. He calls for a “modulated account” of dialogue that recognizes the range of sound educational reasons for pursuing dialogue while remaining rightly suspicious of the mechanisms that might unwittingly prevent these encounters from being both authentically dialogic and educational. Importantly, is not only the dialogic ideal that has educational significance; our failure to reach it is also instructive. He explains: “This failure can have crucial educational import in alerting us to the horizons of our own assumptions, to our own culpability in why the dialogue ‘failed,’ and to the possibility of considering a radically different way of approaching the world.” He goes on to make a point that is reiterated in his Phil Smith address: “If one believed truly that such encounters always failed, it is unclear what meaning ‘education’ could ever have.”<sup>7</sup>

This plaintive and astute point takes me back to the nub of my sense of Burbules as a tragically normative thinker. Education neither puts us on a direct path toward a given ideal nor is it so mired in structural and other constraints that it cannot move us toward an idea of something better. And even when educational undertakings fall short, we stand to learn from them. Or perhaps it is precisely when they fall short that we benefit the most.<sup>8</sup> Yet, as Burbules says, we tend not to go into this hoping to fail. This tragic sensibility, about which Burbules has written so perceptively, is what aligns his normative perspective with that of Rawls. The tragic sits in the middle-distance between utopian Ideals and debilitating pessimism. It reflects the underside of the educational process—the fact that “every gain is a loss” and that the process is “perpetually incomplete and potentially unfulfilled.”<sup>9</sup> And yet, we put our faith in it, knowing that education will not perfect either ourselves or the world we share, but hoping nonetheless that it will at least make things a bit better. Burbules’s tragic sense of education cuts across the “debate” over value of Ideal and non-Ideal theorizing for education and better situates his multi-

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> I’m reminded here of Deborah Kerdeman, “Pulled Up Short: Challenging Self-Understanding as a Focus of Teaching and Learning,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 2 (2003): 294–308

<sup>9</sup> Nicholas C. Burbules, “The Tragic Sense of Education,” *Teachers College Record* 91, no. 4 (1990): 459.

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faceted and yet deeply intertwined contributions to the field of educational philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Many thanks to my colleague, Quentin Wheeler-Bell, for pinpointing the most egregious shortcomings of my reading of Rawls, and for supporting my sense of Rawls as a tragically normative thinker.

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