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## **PEDAGOGY OF DISCERNMENT, NEW WINE IN OLD SKINS? A RESPONSE TO POTGIETER**

### **Abstract**

In his 2014 paper Potgieter presented a number of pertinent questions on education in a post-modern world. In this article I not only challenge some of the views informing these questions but also raise additional questions for debate and critical analysis. Two pertinent issues, both with religious undertones, are addressed, viz.: a) whether the construct, “evil”, as employed by Potgieter in his argument, could be used as basis for the development of a theory on education; and b) whether a pedagogy of discernment could be used as a *primus inter pares*. Using hermeneutic analysis, I argue that the religious embeddedness of these concepts as well as the relativity of claims made could be problematic in terms of a general theory on pedagogy meant to serve as a *primus inter pares*. In contesting Potgieter’s argument I therefore pose a number of counter claims for analysis and scrutiny.

### **Introduction**

Science and knowledge development is best served through critical dialogue and debate. Oftentimes conferences serve as a platform for the presentation of new ideas which are seldom interrogated or further explored. One such new idea was presented at the 2014 BCES Conference when Potgieter challenged ‘...the illusory prestige and power of normative orders’ which present themselves ‘to every successive generation as the best possible likenesses of and most believable blueprint(s) for eudaimonia (the good life)’ (Potgieter, 2014: 1). He argued that it is not the absence, or even the lack of ethics and morals, but rather an oversupply, or “barrage” of ethics, morals and values that lead to the failure of worldwide “educational efforts ... to restrain, control and/or overturn the ever-increasing incidence of evil in society”. He argues, moreover, for the need to conceptualise the term “education” in ways that would highlight the “...phantasmatic claims and essential fallibility of humanity’s treatment and application of ethics, morals and normative systems”, asserting that, if the venerable aims of education were, at the very least, “...credible or believable, the incidence of evil in our society should have dropped significantly”. Informed by this assertion, Potgieter (2014) presents a ‘*pedagogy of discernment*’ as the *primus inter pares* (first among equals) of all other pedagogies, his central premise seemingly being that, *if education was successful / effective, then the incidence of evil would diminish*.

In this paper I want to respond to Potgieter’s argument by using the same hermeneutic methodological process that he used to contest the claims that he made in two contested<sup>1</sup> areas with particular religious undertones, namely:

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<sup>1</sup> There are other aspects that are also open for debate (such as the question whether a theory on education should be based on the deficiency rather than normality; the phantasmatic power of the normative system; and whether discernment could be based on anything other than as set of normative praecipos), but these will not be entertained at this stage.

- a) The concept “evil” as a philosophical construct;
- b) The pedagogy of discernment proposed as the *primus inter pares*.

In engaging in this debate I start by postulating my understanding of hermeneutics, focusing specifically on the work of Gadamer regarding hermeneutics as research methodological point of departure. I then interrogate the two issues flagged and conclude by offering a possible way forward for academic discourse.

### **Hermeneutics as research method**

Informed by the assumption that pure description is limited in its ability to reveal meaning, Heidegger introduced hermeneutics as a means of studying phenomena. Hermeneutics could be defined as “the theory and practice of interpretation and understanding (*verstehen*) in different kinds of human contexts” (Odman, 1988: 63). From a hermeneutical perspective it is argued that many of the elements that shape our being-in-the-world are hidden and, if existence is to be understood, these elements require interpretation. Heidegger emphasized the importance of our preconceptions. He posited that we experience and understand the world by means of projection and that “an interpretation is never a pre-supposititious free apprehending of something presented to us” (Odman, 1988: 191). Interpretation depends on structures of pre-understanding, that is, on a “framework of already interpreted relations” (Odman, 1988: 66) which anticipates the future and encompasses the person’s past and current situation. Understanding and experience are thus inextricably linked. I stance in this regard is that I can only enter a discursive practice based on my own limited knowledge and understanding. We observe what we know (cf. van den Berg, 1979) and, because human knowledge and experience differ so vastly, what we see and understand differ tremendously. This view is in line with the qualitative research principle that the researcher is the research instrument (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), and an instrument can only measure what it is designed to measure.

Emphasizing the importance of language in shaping both our experience and our interpretations, Gadamer (1997) argued that, while this might be problematic, words (concepts, terms, symbols) are the only tools we have to communicate meaning. “*Each word is laden with its own complex set of meanings that are often particular to a specific setting, making it difficult to extract the exact meaning of words. In addition, the meaning that authors try to convey is clouded by their own sets of assumptions, beliefs and values, which render the definitions they may offer always tentative and partial*” (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). In developing my argument I have therefore incorporated the importance of language, paying attention to words used in the process of constructing text, and examining their origins and permutations in order to explore underlying meanings that might illuminate understanding. In addition to stressing the importance of language, Gadamer conceptualized the hermeneutic experience of understanding as being characterized by three metaphors: the fusion of horizons, the act of dialogue and the hermeneutic circle (Thompson, 1990). These three metaphors also inform my own analysis. The dialogue that this paper would like to open is aimed at breaking open the meaning of Potgieter’s (2014) previous dialogue with us, so as to broaden our mutual horizons that would lead us to new understandings which would push the boundaries of our knowledge forward.

### Analysing the two areas of contestation

Evil as a concept appears to play an important role in Potgieter's (2014) thinking. To a large extent he takes his cue on the meaning of "evil" from the work of Hannah Arendt (1963), who said that she had "been thinking for many years... about the nature of evil". It is fair to say that what she called the "overpowering reality" of totalitarian concentration camps lay behind her preoccupation with the problem of evil, a concern that lasted until the end of her life. But can a philosophy of education be built on notions of evil, a construct intimately associated with religion?

Firstly, it is almost impossible to separate the term, "evil", from religion. If we accept that most religions accept the existence of an omniscient, almighty, ever present and perfect God, then the notion of evil becomes a serious logical problem. Here the classical *hypothetico-deductive* reasoning could be brought to bear (Ratzsch, 1996), namely that:

1. If **A** then **B**.
2. **B**.
3. Therefore, **A**.

Logically then, *if* God is omniscient, *then* God will know of all of the horrible things that happen in our world. Therefore, *if* God is almighty, *then* God should be able to do something about all the evil and suffering, and *if* God were morally perfect, *then* surely God would want to do something to end the evil and suffering. Yet we find that our world is filled with countless instances of evil and suffering. If we were to follow this *hypothetico-deductive logic*, the continued existence of evil and suffering would contradict the theist claim that there is a perfectly good and almighty God. By implication, and through logical deduction, one would then have to conclude either that God created evil or that God does not exist. The challenge posed by this apparent conflict has come to be known as the philosophical *problem of evil*.

My argument is that pedagogy, as a science, should not get itself entrapped in these types of discourse: they are best left to philosophers and theologians. It follows that, to ground pedagogy in a conception of evil, would therefore be fundamentally wrong. If God can't stop evil, how can man/woman (as educator) stop it? Moreover, even *if* we accept that evil could exist as a *secular* concept, *then* the obvious question is, "Who determines that something is evil?" Can it be left to the individual, or is it something that society determines or socially constructs?

The basis of my argument is therefore that "evil" cannot be a relative term. To be useful as a philosophical construct its meaning must be singular and not subject to change. If the killing of innocent women and children, as it occurred during the holocaust (on which Hannah Arendt's notion of evil is based), is evil then the killing of any innocent woman or child is "evil". Innocent women and children died in the bombing of Hiroshima and were still suffering the consequences many years later. Could we look at the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and claim some higher ground that would make it a noble deed? Was the child massacre in Bethlehem in the times of Christ more or less "evil" than what happened at Columbine High School or during the mass killings in Norway in 2011? How do you measure evil? If a society condones evil for whatever reason (such as child sacrifices in ancient civilizations or the beheading of journalists by the Islamic State) does it make evil less evil?

Whatever answer is proposed to questions like these will most probably be closely related to Arendt's conclusion in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. The now famous sub-title of this work, "the banality of evil", refers to Eichmann's deportment at the trial, displaying neither guilt nor hatred, claiming he bore no responsibility because he simply "...did his duty...; he not only obeyed orders, he also obeyed the law" (Arendt, 1963: 135). And herein lays the futility of the concept "evil".

Potgieter's (2014: 2&6) claim that there is an ever-increasing incidence of *evil* in society is not supported by any empirical evidence, thus begging the question whether the claimed increase has been statistically verified or whether it is simply a commonly held perception fuelled by sensation making media giving it prominence in news programmes. Internationally statistics shows a decrease in violent crimes. This seems to suggest that evil is on the decrease.

I would therefore like to propose an alternative to the notion of evil by reverting to the well-established notions of *right or wrong*. These notions are ethically, morally or legally established codes that create a mutually agreed upon basis from which to explore pedagogical implications. The problem is that Potgieter rejects this basis, claiming that people need to "...liberate themselves from the phantasmatic power of the agents of an oppressive normative system". I reject this stance. I can deal with something that is legally wrong; I can deal with something that is ethically wrong; and I can deal with something that is morally wrong, because my judgments would be based on standards of eudaimonia (the good life). Using these standards as basis does not imply a passive acceptance of the standards, but an acknowledgement of their usefulness as basis for interrogation, analysis, critique and debate. It is because of the continued human debate and interrogation of these standards that one generation can successfully rid itself of the wrongness of many centuries, such as the end of slavery in Europe and its colonies during the nineteenth century. This generation firmly believed that what generations before them did was wrong and therefore decided to create a different value system. This in itself calls into question the so called "*phantasmatic power of existing normative systems*". Similar examples may be quoted from the recent past such as the recent South African history and the rejection of apartheid and a peaceful transition to black majority rule.

Contrary to Potgieter (2014) I would like to stress the importance of the communal in the socially constructed reality. It is because of this socially constructed knowledge that communities can break free of the values or norms passed on from one generation to the next as the context within which each generation must live changes and with the change comes the need to reinvent and redefine the values and principles by which they need to live (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). It is only if the generations can successfully mediate the process of rediscovery, redefinition and reinvention of values that the young ones would be able to integrate the redefined values into their own unique way of life. Some of these redefinitions may be so radically different that their adoption might change the course of human history, changing that which was accepted as right (e.g. slavery or apartheid) into that which is now wrong. Any pedagogy that makes life possible will therefore need to find its anthropological basis within a socially constructed philosophical theory.

## Pedagogy of discernment

Potgieter (2014) proposes the pedagogy of discernment as the *primus inter pares* – the first among equals, and I quote:

*Discernment points to the ability of a mature, responsible, whole person... to perceive, recognise, distinguish and apprehend a particular phenomenon or event by separating it from the background radiation of, amongst others, ethics and morals and the addictive nature of the normative systems.*

The notion of discernment is neither a new concept nor a concept unique to education. As early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century Ignatius of Loyola reflected and separated discernment from a theological perspective. Consequently many Catholic scholars today accept that the process of human discernment and decision-making lies at the very heart of Catholicism (Whitney, 2012). Because of the centrality of discernment within the Catholic Church it is important to briefly touch on what it entails and what the principles are that serve as the basis of Jesuit education. Ignatius of Loyola knew that true obedience was rooted not in passivity or ignorance, but in choice founded upon understanding and the will and ability to discern. This is where the five step process known as the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm comes into play.

In terms of the Ignatian Pedagogical Paradigm, pedagogy is an educational process that seeks the development of the whole person in service to others, forming “men and women of competence, conscience and compassionate commitment” (Defeo, 2009: 45). Ignatian pedagogy, which is the very core of Jesuit education, combines an Ignatian vision of human beings and the world with a dynamic five-step methodology - context, experience, reflection, action, and evaluation that are meant to “accompany the learners in their growth and development” (Defeo, 2009: 47) and, in the end, to develop the kind of discernment required to know the will of God and choose and do what is right.

Potgieter’s (2014) Pedagogy of Discernment shares certain elements with of Jesuit pedagogy, raising the question of whether the former is a case of new wine in old skins. I doubt that Potgieter had Jesuit education at heart when he developed his ideas, but as it happens his notions of both evil and discernment intersect with specific religious notions and I would therefore advice a different route.

Firstly, the notion, to discern, immediately raises the question, “*To discern in terms of what?*” That is, what standards or criteria should form the basis of an action of discernment and who will determine those standards or criteria. Secondly, it raises questions as to the purpose of discernment. Given the centrality of Potgieter’s emphasis on “evil” it could be assumed that the purpose of discernment is to reduce evil in the world, but that would imply an ability to discern between “good” and “evil”. The question would then be, “How would a person know evil from good in the absence of socially determined norms and standards?” Can it be left to the non-mature person (child) to establish these standards? Given the power of peer pressure, the rise of popular youth culture and the diverse nature of post-modern communities, who will set the standards for discernment?

## Conclusion

Potgieter raised important questions in his paper, opening the debate on a topic that has for the past decade, at least in the South African context, given politicians

and administrators the right to prescribe. This, in itself, is an important realization, and the pointers raised by Potgieter are worth pursuing. In my reflection on his work, I have raised some questions that beg further exploration. In answering these questions I suggest that we first establish an anthropological understanding of humanness that could serve as point of departure for our argumentation. In this regard there are three aspects to human nature that no serious education discourse can overlook: our noesis, our technology and our ability to choose. As humans, we have the ability to construct meaning and comprehend the world around us. We also have the ability to create (technics). It is through technology that society is bound together: being both a cultural and an economic force it penetrates into the soul of every person affected by the power of a digital age. As educators we see patterns and extract from them theories of how things fit together. But comprehension is just the beginning of our ability. What makes us truly exceptional among living creatures is our ability to choose our actions and, through those choices, to change our environment with the tools we created. We comprehend nuclear power, but we choose whether to use it for the benefit or annihilation of society.

As mature adults we know these things, and we choose either how we want to educate our young about these things, or abdicate our responsibility to teach them at all. However, irrespective of our choices, every new generation will in the end choose how they live. As adults we can provide beacons or leave it to them to find their own, but let us never forget:

*I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element. ...In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis is escalated or de-escalated, and a person is humanized or de-humanized. If we treat people as they are, we make them worse. If we treat people as they ought to be, we help them become what they are capable of becoming (Ginott, 2003).*

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