

Intelligence and Passion in Teaching: Ignacio Götz on Spirituality

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There has been a growing interest over the last number of years in the relations between concepts associated with religion such as spirituality and those associated with education such as teaching. The interest in spirituality is due in large measure to the often discussed failure of the “Enlightenment Project” to provide a satisfying vision of the good life for moderns on the one hand, and the success on the other, of what might be called the “Emancipation Project,” that is the socioeconomic program of free market capitalism, especially in North America, at providing every growing middle and upper classes the resources and time to ponder their spiritual plight. Hence, popular books devoted to spirituality such as Harold Kushner’s *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* and *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough* become best sellers, because, at least among the classes that have benefited from the successes of the “Emancipation Project,” there is extraordinary concern today about finding a meaningful life path.¹

Some have found this meaningful life in a return to premodern forms of religiosity or in naive reconstructions of those religious experiences such as fundamentalisms of one kind or another. Among those who remain committed to a more liberal agenda—that is, who have yet to fully give up on Enlightenment ideals—the term spirituality is a popular way to describe this burgeoning interest, as opposed, for example, to religious or moral life. The former connotes institutional religion both of the fundamentalist variety, which the circle rejects, and of the modernist, mainline church variety that is associated with the failures of the “Enlightenment Project” for which an alternative is being sought. The latter is too secular and philosophical and so smacks too of failed enlightenment. Spirituality, on the other hand, represents a find of informal, noninstitutionalized religion that allows this circle to return to religious sources without committing themselves to the dogmas and limitations of specific religious traditions.

The educational consequences of this new interest in spirituality are of great import. Since the end of the last century, public — and in large measure also independent — education in the United States has undergone a process of secularization that has expressed itself in an ever increasing independence from mainline Protestantism, and more recently also Catholicism, and a continuous strengthening of constitutional prohibitions against the state establishment of religion through schooling.² The result has been a near total lack of interest in issues pertaining to religion and education in the American educational research community. Over the past half century, these tendencies were reinforced by the rise of analytic philosophy of education, which banished not only religious but all values from the realm of legitimate philosophical discourse on education. This new interest in spiritual education, therefore, marks an important turn in educational thought away from viewing education primarily as an agent of economic instrumentalism and epistemology—as it was seen by the educational secularists of the first half of the century

and by the analytic philosopher of the second half—and toward understanding education as celebrating a vision of the good life.

We owe Ignacio Götz a debt of gratitude, therefore, for enhancing this conversation by placing the role of spirituality in teaching squarely on the agenda of educational thought in his provocative and challenging essay, “On Spirituality and Teaching.” My task here is to summarize Götz’s most salient points and to assess their adequacy according to appropriate philosophical and educational criteria.

GÖTZ’S ACCOUNT OF SPIRITUALITY IN TEACHING

Götz divides his account into three parts, “The Nature of Spirituality,” “Sins Against Spirituality,” and, “Toward a Spirituality of Teaching.” The first part deals with his concept of spirituality, the second with impediments to incorporating spirituality so conceived into educational systems, and the third with positive steps that can be taken to enhance this sort of spirituality in teaching and the preparation of teachers.

In contrast to what he calls “the Platonic-Judaic-Christian model” of spirituality, which distinguishes between the interior qualities such as spirit and soul, on the one hand, and the exterior body, on the other, Götz conceives of spirituality as “a quality of lived experience, rather than a mode of knowing.” The experience involves “self-transcendence...not necessarily toward a god or higher power, but...beyond the narrow, selfish confines of the ego: and is rooted in...a radical openness...that is the ground of hope, humility, and growth, but also of...evil.” It also entails “pursuit of the highest values commensurate with one’s...calling, personality, culture, and religious orientation.”

Götz enumerates five impediments to achieving this sort of spiritual attitude: (1) abbreviating infinity by embracing orthodoxy or fanaticism, (2) capitulation to mediocrity, to the average or mass point of view, (3) pride of reason or self-assurance in one’s knowledge to the point of dogmatism, (4) the Instrumentalist fallacy in which technology eschews mystery, and (5) the demise of questioning brought about by the subordination of mind to power, teacher to administrator, truth to political correctness, invention of repetition.

He takes teaching to mean, “a set of...behaviors...intended to let learning take place.” He elucidates three qualities of character that are conducive to cultivating spirituality in teachers: (1) openness to new and diverse ways of learning, (2) transparency, or letting others learn through a reflective quality of self, and (3) Modeling the desire life by a master teacher. He also articulates three stages that may be passed through on the way to a spiritual life: (a) purification, or stilling the minds surface, (b) acquisition of knowledge through identification and eventual unification with the subject matter, and (c) molding the self or understanding one’s true nature.

SPIRITUALITY AND INTELLIGENCE

I am in general sympathy with Götz’s project, although I sometimes worry whether in adopting such an inspirational, poetic style, this paper doesn’t throw out some of the analytic baby with the bath water. Even when we transcend the analytic avoidance of feelings and values, which we must, we would be well advised not to

abandon what we have learned from philosophical analysis about clarity and rigorous argument.

This having been said, I especially appreciate the emphasis in his concept of spirituality on lived experience, highest values, openness, and self-transcendence. If the quest for spirituality is in fact motivated by the failure or the “enlightenment Project” to provide adequate visions of the good life, then any concept of spirituality that wants to fill this need must relate to life lived at its best. To understand the spiritual life as the lived experience of one’s highest values clearly meets this criterion.

This helps us to understand how openness is an essential part of spirituality, and how it is connected to hope, humility, growth, and the possibility of evil. Goodness is a moral concept in that it offers standards by which to evaluate ways of living. The quest for spirituality, therefore, involves engagement with moral discourse. But for moral discourse to make any sense, we must assume that people are moral agents. This means that they have the freedom of will to behave as they choose and the intelligence to understand their choices. Without these assumptions, discussing moral standards would be futile, since no one would be able to enact or understand them. But these two freedoms imply that the spiritual life cannot be completely predetermined, but must be open to exploration and mistakes. The *recognition* that I could be mistaken in my belief that this path is the best one for me is a source of humility. The *fact* that I often am mistaken is a source of evil. But the *realization* that I can correct my errors and return to the good path is a source of considerable hope, and the *lessons I learn* from my mistakes are important enablers of growth.

Moreover, the very idea of a concept of goodness requires transcendence of the self. For the concept of value entails the idea that some things are more valuable than others, or in other words, the application of a standard of significance. Literature or art or religious ritual is of value not because I happen to feel that it is at the moment, but because it conforms to some standard of excellence that lies outside of me and that I have learned or acquired. So, to seek a spiritual life, on this account, is to search for a life that conforms to standards of highest value that transcend my self, that are found to quote Charles Taylor, in “the bonds of solidarity,” or “history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God.”³ And if the search for spirituality involves the quest after a set of standards by which to distinguish between better and worse ways to lead my life, then it always involves an element of critical intelligence by means of which I understand and apply these standards.

This critical dimension is evident in Götz’s depiction of the sings against spirituality. Eschewing orthodoxy, caring for standards of excellence rather than mediocrity, avoiding dogmatism, and prizing questions are all closely associated with critical intelligence. Indeed, it is by means of applying standards of excellent thinking called good reasons that we critique orthodoxies, avoid dogmatisms, and seek new questions.

The relation between intelligence and spirituality is seen in what Götz has called the “instrumentalist fallacy” as well. I would add, moreover, that a spiritual

conception of education, one that views education as celebrating a vision of the good, suggests not only that technology and pedagogical technique should not replace mystery and wonder in teaching, but also that education itself should not be seen primarily as technique, as a means to some extrinsic end such as a better job or reformed society as is so often assumed. Rather, if education is viewed as the study, practice, and celebration of goodness, it is the end-in-view. Education gives expression to the highest good, and becoming educated involved acquiring the highest values of a particular tradition or community.

SPIRITUALITY, IDENTIFICATION, AND UNIFICATION

Because of this intimate connection between the concepts of spirituality and intelligence, there is a deep relation between spirituality and educational concepts such as teaching, at least they have some to be understood in analytic philosophy of education under the influence of R.S. Peters, Thomas Green, and Israel Scheffler.⁴ Some might argue that the difficulty with Götz's account of spirituality lies at this juncture; for, while the notion of critical intelligence suggests a distance between the learner and that which is learned, and knower and the know, the inquiring subject and the object of inquiry, the theory of teaching and learning advanced by Götz's entails a commingling and unification of these two poles. The teacher, on Götz's account, is to reflect internally and model externally the vision of the highest good that he or she espouses, and the learner is to first identify with this vision and then become one with it, have it encompass his or her entire being.

The question is, are these two sense of teaching and learning, one entailing critical distance and the other requiring passionate engagement, incompatible with one another? The standard model of academic teaching and learning with which we are all familiar in the university would say that they are. But this model is rooted in the very failed "Enlightenment" ideology that prefers epistemology to moral theory, and assumes rationality to be the highest value rather than a means to reinforce the moral agency of persons.⁵ According to this view, the paradigmatic instance of learning involves a radical separation between subject and object such as the one we experience in relation to physical objects that lie outside of us.

If, on the other hand, we assume that the paradigmatic instance of learning is not the study of the external environment, but rather the acquisition of a vision of the good, then it makes perfect sense for the learner to come to identify with that vision and eventually incorporate it into the core of his or her being. On this model, it is indeed a unification with the subject matter that is required. In fact, one of the oddities of the enlightenment model of learning viz. a viz. moral discourse was that we would say to students in ethics courses that we are not going to offer normative answers to their ethical questions, but only tools of analysis. This is precisely the sort of instance that would leave students with the sense of emptiness of which Enlightenment critics have spoken, longing for someone to help them understand how to live a good life.

But this does not mean that anything goes, that all visions of goodness are of equal value. To say this would be to undermine the very notion of goodness altogether; for without a standard of significance according to which some views are

better than others, there can be no moral discourse. Here is where Götz and I may part company. I would say that the criterion for distinguishing more or less preferable visions of the good life involved the extent to which they reinforce the assumptions of moral agency mentioned above, freedom of will and intelligence. It is my impression that this sense of openness is much more “radical” and hence relativistic than mine. I will be interested to hear from Professor Götz if this is so.

CONCLUSION

In sum, Ignacio Götz is to be congratulated for advancing the discussion of spirituality’s role in education. Although his account lacks some of the clarity and rigor that philosophical analysis has come to expect, it offers a compelling depiction of the tension between virtues of intelligence such as eschewing dogmas and pursuing questions, on the one hand; and those of passion on the other, such as identification and unification with subject matter in order better understand one’s self. It is precisely this mix of intelligence and passion that is missing in today’s educational reforms, which prefer the former, and in today’s religious revivals, which tend toward the latter. Both educational and religious institutions would be well served by heeding Götz’s balanced perspective on spirituality.

1. Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983) and Harold S. Kushner, *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough* (New York: Summit Books, 1986).

2. Warren A. Nord, *Religion and American Education* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

3. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

4. R.S. Peters, *The Concept of Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967); Thomas Green, *The Activities of Teaching* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971); and Israel Scheffler *Reason and Teaching* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

5. H.A. Alexander, “Rationality and Redemption: Ideology, Indoctrination, and Learning Communities,” in *Philosophy of Education 1996*, ed. Michael Katz (Urbana, Ill: The Philosophy of Education Society, 1997).