

## OVERCOMING AMBIVALENCE ABOUT FOUCAULT'S RELEVANCE FOR EDUCATION

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John Covaleskie, like many others, is of two minds about the value of Foucault's thought for helping us to understand and improve educational practice.<sup>1</sup> First, he argues quite persuasively that Foucault helps us to understand the subtle, complex and harmful effects of power relations that shape and control educational institutions. Second, he suggests in the last paragraph of the paper that the Foucauldian imperative to "reduce everything to power" is "seriously deficient" because it obscures our understanding of the conditions for human, ethical action. This ambivalence about Foucault is commonly expressed in educational discourse, but is it justified?

I think it is at least premature, because we must first ask: "Does Foucault's reduction of everything to power enable (rather than deny and obscure) our understanding of the various conditions of human agency?" In the short time I have available, I'd like to point to some ways of asking this question in educational contexts, as well as to offer some tentative reasons why educators should answer "yes." I shall suggest that we should take seriously the possibility that Foucault's conception of education helps us to understand both the systemic oppression of disciplinary institutions and the ways individuals can actively resist such oppression. I shall also suggest that Foucault's "reduction to power" provides interesting insights into the task of education.

Covaleskie enlists Foucault as an ally in order to understand the ways that power relations harm the educational process. This use of Foucault yields important insights. For example, Covaleskie shows us that power works to track working class kids into working class jobs in ways even more subtle than Foucault perceived, even as it operates in uniquely Foucauldian ways. By resisting teachers' "sovereign" authority, kids only help to ensure their predetermined "niche" in society. This insight serves as an important counter to certain tendencies in educational theory, such as in Paul Willis's recent work, which tend to celebrate the ways in which the cultural activities of youth — from the fashions they wear to the music they listen to — work to undermine the normalizing influence of adult society.<sup>2</sup> But listening to heavy metal music seems hardly to constitute a form of resistance that is likely to undermine the larger social forces that reproduce class inequalities. And Covaleskie's analysis reminds us that resistance may serve to reinscribe rather than undermine the identities that individuals use to maintain such inequalities.

But if, as Foucault suggests, "everything reduces to power," does *all* human action simply reinscribe existing power relations? Does Foucault offer us a way out of power relations? I think the answer is "No" on both counts. However, as Covaleskie's paper does not recognize, Foucault does not regard power relations merely as harmful: "My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism."<sup>3</sup> So, for Foucault, human action must consist of power relations. Covaleskie lists three conditions of human agency which he thinks Foucault's "power reductionism" must deny or obscure. I shall consider each of these in turn.

First, Covalleskie alleges that Foucault obscures the “ordinary and valuable” distinction between power and authority. But it’s worth asking whether Covalleskie is right to assume that this represents a “serious deficiency” in an educational theory. Foucault’s point is precisely that what we take as “ordinary and valuable” is also often dangerous, and therefore always needs to be “critically questioned.” For Foucault, critical individuals must employ Nietzschean genealogical inquiry about received values. Such inquiry requires us to ask how we have come to accept certain things as authoritative: how we have come to consent to them, to regard them as legitimate, and therefore to value them. And by seeking answers to such questions, we may come to see “in what is given to us as universal, necessary, [and] obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints.”<sup>4</sup> In this sense, Foucault’s insistent reduction of everything to power exemplifies what he calls his position’s “hyper- and pessimistic activism.”<sup>5</sup> Another way of putting this, perhaps, is to say that Foucault points to an important role for education — viz. to find questions precisely where we normally are least likely to look for them. But if Foucault’s reduction of everything to power incites individuals to critically question received values, then educators need to seriously consider the possibility that this is a virtue, rather than a deficiency, of Foucault’s theory.

Second, Covalleskie says that Foucault’s view that “discipline is imposed on us as an effect of power makes us blind to Dewey’s sense of discipline as a relationship between us and the world as we pursue our aims”. Certainly, if Foucault says that discipline is merely an effect of power, then there seems to be no room for Dewey’s sense of discipline understood as “power at command” of intelligent individuals.<sup>6</sup> In other words, for Foucault, discipline would “use” individuals; whereas for Dewey individuals may use discipline to achieve their aims. However, Foucault’s view must be more complex than this since, as Covalleskie himself recognizes, disciplined individuals may resist the forces of discipline.

The idea that discipline is imposed on us simply as an effect of power depends upon an absolute distinction between the “individual” and discipline that Foucault (and Dewey too, I think) would not accept. Foucault denies that “individuals,” or what he would call “subjects,” exist prior to the exercise of power. In fact, Foucault regards the individual itself as one of the major effects of disciplinary power relations. For Foucault, this point is illustrated by the fascinating and subtle way the Panoptic prison constitutes the obedient “consciousness” of the inmates.<sup>7</sup> And like the inmates in the Panopticon, individuals in a disciplinary society are constantly aware that their behavior is subject to surveillance and observation. However, they are also unaware of when and how this surveillance occurs. For this reason, disciplined individuals internalize the “gaze” of power and make the aims of power their own, for better or for worse.

The “for better or for worse” is important here since discipline for Foucault, by producing individuals, does not merely hinder resistance, but also enables it (“once one knows where to look for it,” as Covalleskie says). Similarly, educators should consider the possibility that Foucault’s insight might enable, rather than hinder, a deeper understanding of what Dewey meant by discipline as intelligent inquiry. For Foucault, once one recognizes that one’s aims are the product of power relations, they become “contingent and arbitrary.” What once seemed inevitable and natural, now seems open to inquiry and investigation. Thus, the teacher may come to realize that she has unconsciously been shaping her classroom behavior to conform to the imperatives of an assessment driven educational system. Even after recognizing this, she may continue to regard her behavior as in many respects beyond her control. For example, she may find herself unable simply to refuse to prepare her students for the test, because they’ll fail and she might lose her job. But the fact that she now recognizes her behavior as an effect of power, and thus no longer legitimate, may also open up for her a new “field of action” for resistance.

The fact that individuals (and their aims) are necessarily embedded in power relations also structures the educational task in an interesting way. The Foucauldian educational task becomes not the common sense one of making the uncertain certain, the unfamiliar familiar.<sup>8</sup> That is the logic of the examination, which assumes prior fixed knowledge which individuals must acquire. Rather,

Foucault would regard education as primarily a matter of making the certain uncertain, the familiar unfamiliar, the given contingent. If nothing else, this educational ideal embodies more than a little of the spirit of Deweyan inquiry.

Third and finally, Covalleskie suggests that Foucault's power reductionism leaves no room for considering an ethical ideal of care. But I would argue that there is ample room. Since all relations are power relations for Foucault, it follows for him that relations of care must also be relations of power, and must thus be regarded suspiciously. In fact, this "principle of suspicion" about care might be interpreted as one of the guiding principles of Foucault's conception of pastoral power. Pastoral power, like care, "cannot be exercised without knowing the inside of people's minds, without exploring their souls, without making them reveal their innermost secrets. It implies a knowledge of conscience and an ability to direct it."<sup>9</sup> And on a Foucauldian interpretation, the incitement to care has the panoptic effect of creating individuals who are increasingly willing, even eager, to make themselves visible, open to scrutiny, and controllable. One might even argue that Foucault's conception of disciplinary power, far from excluding the possibility of pursuing ethical ideals of caring, actually instantiates such an ideal. After all, as Foucault tells us, disciplinary institutions arose out of the enlightenment impulse to find gentler, more humane ways of meting out justice (even though they have the effect of being as or more oppressive than traditional forms). But the point of a Foucauldian "ethic of care," if it can indeed be called that, is not that care is bad (although Foucault might have found such a paradoxical formulation alluring). Rather it is that precisely where we are least inclined to look for it, power works its subtle magic in our most intimate relationships. These relationships, too, are fraught with danger.

Understood in this light, the value of a Foucauldian "ethic of care" is perhaps best appreciated from an educational perspective. Caring relations for Foucault (as for Noddings, I assume), must constantly be open to critical scrutiny and genealogical deconstruction. This does not mean that we cannot pursue and act on commitments within caring relations. In fact, Foucauldian genealogy and criticism seem to presuppose such caring commitments, since in order to criticize something effectively, we must care deeply about something else. For example, Richard Rorty has said that Americans may feel a special obligation to resist and fight the oppression of blacks in the U.S., when the victims of oppression are identified as "fellow Americans."<sup>10</sup> Foucault need not deny this. However, in other contexts, such as during war-time, that same nationalist commitment might itself lead to injustice and oppression. I take it that the spirit of Foucault's critique of discipline consists not in denying that we can exist — even flourish — in such caring relations, but in suggesting that such relations are not immune from, indeed are paradigmatic of, power relations. As such, they provide excellent sites for individuals to reflect upon, and learn about, the ways in which their seemingly most benevolent actions also have power effects.

Indeed, perhaps educators are in a uniquely privileged position to overcome ambivalence about Foucault. That is because a perspective that "reduces everything to power" may be best appreciated for its ability to provoke educational action, rather than to prevent it.

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<sup>1</sup> The main lines of argument in this response emerged out of a conversation I had with David Blacker. The final product owes much to his insights, although responsibility for the conclusions of this paper is, of course, my own. Thanks also to Nick Burbules, who provided helpful comments on a draft.

<sup>2</sup> See Paul Willis, with Simon Jones, Joyce Canaan, and Geoff Hurd, *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert L Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 231-32.

<sup>4</sup> Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, trans. Catherine Porter, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," in Rabinow and Dreyfus, 232.

<sup>6</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916), 129.

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 201.

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to David Blacker for this insight.

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in Rabinow and Dreyfus, 214.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Rorty, "Solidarity," in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 191.

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