

## A Teacher's Gift of Sacrifice: How Can We Give It?

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### INTRODUCTION

In "The Teacher's Gift of Sacrifice as the Art of the Self," Darryl De Marzio asks compelling questions about how the life and work of Socrates, viewed through the lens of Michel Foucault, can inform teaching practice today. These questions are relevant to philosophers of education who are concerned with that elusive point in practice where the rubber meets the road. It is evident that De Marzio is such a philosopher, and I am honored to have this opportunity to respond to his work.

According to De Marzio, Foucault considered Socrates the master of the "care of the self." In the first passage that De Marzio quotes from the *Apology*, the Platonized Socrates declares, in Nietzschean terms, his devotion to the ascetic ideal. This ideal presupposes a soul/body dualism, which renders education a process of preparing the soul to leave the body and achieve direct communion with the Good. According to the passage, the process proceeds by the teacher's attempting to persuade students to engage in such preparation. As is clear from Plato's *Republic* (among other works), dialectics is the teacher's chief method of persuasion, and its end is to help the student's rational soul to remember its former communion with the Good — the Truth of all ethical matters — and thus to leave the body. This is what the Platonized Socrates' pedagogy amounts to. Hence, it is inappropriate to posit that we should consider characterizing Socrates as an "instinctive deifier," that is, as an artist who makes students into beautiful objects, for that misrepresents the purpose of his teaching, if we are to believe Plato's telling of it.

Indeed, Plato's Socrates sought to bless his fellow citizens by escorting them back to the Valley of Lethe, before they drank from its oblivion-inducing waters. In *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche tossed Book X of the *Republic* — the end-in-view of the Platonized Socrates' ethics — the Christianity it spawned, and, indeed, *all* ethical metanarratives — into the fire with his declaration: God is Dead! By extension, the aforementioned pedagogy — at least as a method of arriving at the Good — is dead, too.

In light of Nietzsche's epitaph, how is the teacher to teach ethics or, rather, the "aesthetics of the self," to a student? At the end of his introduction, De Marzio asks a final question concerning the practice of teaching, but leaves us without an answer. He claims that Socrates' attempt to justify his own teaching activity in the *Apology* is the moral inheritance of teachers today, but makes no effort to address how teachers teach (or should teach) in a manner that makes them worthy of it. At one point, he leans in the direction of discussing Socrates' claim that Athens should provide "free maintenance of his teaching activity" — a direction that would have at least explored a funding infrastructure amenable to its support, but he never walks down that path. Nevertheless, I commend him for at least leaning in this direction.

While thus far I have been at odds with much of what De Marzio has said, I agree with his support of Nietzsche's claim that art can (and, in my view, *should*) destroy the ascetic ideal. However, to stop here is to stop short of our goal, which is to teach students a "personal aesthetics of existence." To articulate this goal is to ask a fundamental question about teaching practice: how (that is, by what method) can teachers help students to transform their lives into works of art? To put it in De Marzio's terms, how can teachers help students to form, cultivate, work upon, assay, write, and rewrite their existence as a work of art? If we cannot begin to answer this question, then we resign ourselves to remaining irrelevant for an audience I want to make a career out of reaching: K–12 classroom teachers, that is, the pillars of our republic.

#### GIVING THE GIFT

Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* can help us to give the gift.<sup>1</sup> His treatise is an analysis of the nature of human existence, which, according to Heidegger, lies along a continuum. On one end, we find inauthenticity, and, on the other, authenticity. These poles represent the extremes of human existential possibility. All human beings live somewhere in between these extremes, and most just happen to be closer to the inauthentic pole. The reason for this is that Tradition is a common obstacle that confounds the will in attempting to move from the inauthentic to the authentic. I consider the ascetic ideal to be a species of Tradition. When a student exists inauthentically, s/he exists without understanding the basis of Tradition, and thus has not chosen it. When a student exists authentically, on the other hand, s/he understands the basis of Tradition, and can thus choose whether or not to make it his or her own. We learn from Nietzsche that the basis of Tradition is self-preservation — that is, Tradition came to exist because it secured and perpetuated the conditions that preserved a particular kind of life.<sup>2</sup> Hence, a person exists authentically to the extent that s/he chooses a Tradition that preserves his or her sense of self. By engaging in the calculus of choosing, the student engages in reevaluating the values s/he has inherited, that is, the student engages in the work Nietzsche and Heidegger left us to do, as those who have witnessed God's death (let us observe a moment of silence). Importantly, teachers have a role to play in a student's choosing to live authentically.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger discusses the concept of solicitude, which he places in the category of care. Solicitude is the type of care shown to other human beings. At its best, education occurs in a relation of care between teachers and students. Thus, we may think of education as a form of solicitude. It is demonstrated in two ways: by "leaping in" for students, or by "leaping ahead" of them.<sup>3</sup> Due to time and space constraints, I will discuss only the latter.

When teachers leap ahead of their students, they acknowledge and respect the "ground," that is, the ethical understandings, that each student brings into the classroom. By virtue of being professionals, of being older, and thus of having more experiences, teachers can anticipate the ground that their students must travel in order to reach authenticity. In practice, teachers can present students with species of

Tradition, determine their understanding of it, guide them to interpret and interrogate it (if students so choose), and finally *get out of their way* so that the students themselves may judge whether or not Tradition helps them to secure and perpetuate the conditions for self-preservation. In leaping ahead of students, teachers intervene in the process of interpretation, but they do not guarantee its results.

Interpretation goes something like this: When teachers show students an ethical dilemma, or when students share their ethical dilemmas with their teachers, students have to determine whether or not an ethical principle applies to the given situation. This is easy if the situation is sufficiently similar to other situations that the students have encountered, but it is difficult if it is sufficiently different from those situations, for students must then determine whether or not the ethical principle applies to the given situation and, if it does, the extent to which it applies. Unfortunately, students cannot interpret the principle without first knowing its basis: the principle exists because it once secured and perpetuated a particular kind of life. This basis is exactly what teachers have not taught when they require students to merely memorize and regurgitate the principle. Only if students have come to understand this basis can they apply the principle correctly. Teachers who hide the basis of ethical rules encourage students to live inauthentically. This is the kind of education I propose we reject.

#### CONCLUSION

I support De Marzio's wish to teach students how to approach their own lives as always-evolving works of art. With him, I celebrate students' will to power and, because of him, I have tried to articulate a method by which we teachers can help them to achieve it. With him, I stand in claiming that Socrates' pedagogical example is one we can still aspire to — difficult though it may be for us comparatively mediocre philosophers. Persuasion still has a role to play in education, but it should be applied toward the end of convincing a student, for example, that a given interpretation of an ethical rule is more conducive to self-preservation than another. Dialectics also has a role to play: for instance, a teacher can rely on it to help a student define two competing terms so precisely that the objects of his or her ethical choice are clear. In sum, untied from its metaphysical moorings, Socrates' pedagogy remains a useful model. Combined with the educational project that Nietzsche and Heidegger outlined for us, we can begin to imagine how we may teach our students an "aesthetics of the self."

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1. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1989).

3. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 158–159.