Contemporary Philosophies and Theories in Education 3

Duck-Joo Kwak

Education for Self-transformation

Essay Form as an Educational Practice

Education for Self-transformation

CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHIES AND THEORIES IN EDUCATION

Volume 3

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Preface

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor describes something of the massive religious and social change that swept through Europe from the thirteenth century, encompassing the Reformation. The motor for this change was in part a response to the stagnation of the medieval church and in part a hemorrhaging of the social settlement it had established, but one of its major effects was a new emphasis on individuation and self-judgment. Not surprisingly, this change met with some resistance from the established orders, and there was suspicion of what were seen as new forms of inwardness. But they laid the way, nevertheless, for so much that characterizes the modern era, especially for the massive inward turn that, in his earlier *Sources of the Self*, Taylor had described as arising in the eighteenth century, with Rousseau and with Kant's Copernican revolution. Inwardness today, it might be thought, has become a growth industry, with the rise of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century, with the burgeoning of therapy in its multiple forms, and with new genres of confession. It is in this context that individuation has been prey to various forms of commercialization, and too often the privacy of inward self-examination has turned into the public consumption exemplified by confessional TV. By the same lights, therapy has not uncommonly become formulaic and superficial, based on false conceptions of the inner and the outer, and in a range of human practices, meaningful content has been displaced by the imperatives of performativity.

Suspicions of inwardness arise today in newly insidious ways, with an erosion of trust across the range of our culture that is peculiarly prominent in education itself. Take, for example, the now obsessive concern with exhaustive procedures of assessment. No learning is taking place, it is assumed, unless it is manifested in a behavioral outcome; and nothing is to count as teaching unless it is dedicated to this end. Ideas of intelligence and educational development are then cashed in quick-fire critical thinking, such that anything approaching rumination, any meditative relation to things in the world, is dismissed as sentimental self-indulgence. It is in these circumstances, moreover, that the development of creativity, the fostering of the imagination, and the gaining of autonomy have degenerated into parodies of themselves – cosmetically conditioned sets of skills whose purchase on the inner self, or on the personal engagement these terms might otherwise connote, is little more than vestigial.

Token references to "spiritual education" sit unsteadily alongside or within conceptions of religious education, hamstrung, on the one hand, by sensitivities to cultural difference and, on the other, by confusion about what, in any case, religious belief actually amounts to. Such degeneration has reverberated through educational research itself. Shored up in a new empiricism, it pretends to embody a hard-headed response to the imperatives of "what works," obstructing in the process any more thoughtful, more responsible, pondering of the complex challenges that education truly provides. With its new earnestness about winning the funding necessary to sustain itself, it too often combines its behaviorist confusion with an intellectual philistinism that erects new barriers to responsible thought.

To draw attention to these limitations in educational practice and research is, in a sense, nothing new. What makes this book by Duck-Joo Kwak remarkable is the freshness of its manner of taking up these problems – not by addressing them globally, in broad-brushed and perhaps excusably scathing terms, but through the precise, more modest concentration on a specific form of writing and expression, named somewhat undramatically "essay-form." This approach may seem oblique, and in a sense it is. But this does nothing to diminish – indeed, I would say, it illustrates – what is at stake here.

One of the most striking and most creative realizations of inwardness in human expressiveness was the development in writing of essay-form, most notably in the work of Montaigne. Montaigne took a topic and used this as a jetty for embarking on an exploration in thought, an exploration whose course could never be fully charted in advance and for which there could be no blue-print. Moving from philosophy conceived as theoretical science to philosophy conceived as the practice of free judgment, his thinking was to be an assay, an attempt, a trying-out of ideas, testing the words as he worked with them and surprising himself sometimes with what those words gave back, to him no less than to his readers. And his topics were indeed various, often surprising and sometimes strange. On sadness. On idleness. On liars. On sleep. On names. On the cannibals. On books. On experience. On educating children. On thumbs. It seems that almost any topic might strike the author and become the occasion for thought – if, that is, thought was given rein and not subjugated to some preconceived purpose. The essay, celebrated in the work of many great writers, from Johnson to Hazlitt to Emerson, from Virginia Woolf to George Orwell, came to be the form in which the author would speak in his or her own words, would speak to others in an appeal to them to see the world as he or she saw it – saying, in effect: "This is how it is, isn't it? See it like this." And, more prosaically perhaps, but still sustaining something of this characteristic flexibility, scope, and challenge, the essay became part of the familiar experience of schooling and university, where a topic or choice of topics was prescribed but where there were no strict rules as to how to proceed. That this undoubtedly caused some students to feel a degree of insecurity there is no doubt, but it was one means by which they were required to call upon their own resources, in the process discovering something of themselves.

Contrast this, for a moment, with modes of writing in contemporary schooling, from elementary school to university. For, while the essay-form is far from extinct,

its open-endedness and invitation to unfettered thought are viewed increasingly with a degree of suspicion. First, there will be outcomes to be hit, there will be criteria to meet. Hence, teachers will teach to the test, and learners will quickly learn that they must learn to the test too. Now, there is no doubt that learning will have outcomes, and no doubt that these should be desirable ones, and a practice in which criteria are *not* operative is no less than a contradiction in terms. But what has happened is that these terms – "outcomes" and "criteria" – have acquired a technical sense, which, for teacher and student alike, imposes a bogus behaviorism, restricting the very understanding of what education can be. This usage blocks the development of a more sensitive, nuanced, and accurate conception of the way that criteria run through anything we might aspire to do well, in short through most of what we do. And second, the pressures of this assessment regime will generate new approaches to writing and expression, the better to hold off the risk of failure and to help students to make the grade. Thus, there is now no end of advice as to how to construct and develop a piece of work, even what constructions and phrases to use. Model writing-frames can be readily found on the Internet, and they have become part of the stock-in-trade of teachers of study skills and of learning-how-to-learn. Moreover, in fields of study that have aspirations to some kind of scientific status – most obviously in social science – there will be a preference, at least as far as the research methods textbooks are concerned, for the adoption of an impersonal style ("The researcher found that. . .," etc., etc.). The drabness of the prose that is then generated will be a further barrier to the excitement of thought that the study of the social world might properly engender, and it will be a frustration of precisely those forms of creative thinking and imagination, that engagement of humanity, that the essay rightly opens up.

Kwak's exploration in the pages that follow is an attempt to retrieve the essay from its degenerate forms in academic writing, and her own text, in contradistinction to so much writing in educational research, exemplifies what she preaches. In the process, she aims to save a pedagogical possibility in which the first-person voice of the inner struggle of "lived experience" can be articulated and expressed. Hence, this is not just a book about writing methods but one with a sharp existentialist edge. Addressed to the condition of the modern self in its (post-)secular condition, she seeks a philosophical practice that can reduce the experiential rift between knowledge and wisdom. What is at stake here is no less than the expression of self-formation and transformation.

Her journey takes her through writers whose pertinence to her cause cannot be doubted, but whose work is less familiar in this regard than it should be. Hence, we find fascinating discussions of Hans Blumenberg, Søren Kiekegaard, and Georg Lukács, with a major part of the later development of the book influenced by the writings of Stanley Cavell. Cavell's sense of the importance of voice in philosophy chimes well with Kwak's characterization and celebration of essay-form, but let it be clear, once again, that what is at issue here is easily misunderstood. To speak of the importance of voice in this sense has little to do with the somewhat fashionable cause of "student voice" or with the now regrettably well-worn politics of recognition; nor is it to be understood in terms of some kind of narcissism, as gratuitous introspection. It is altogether much closer to the bone of that human expressiveness that

is a condition for our life with others, our culture and our politics; and in this, it will connect with the very idea of democracy, with the possibilities of formation and transformation that this rightly occasions for our lives as individuals in relation to the communities we find or found.

There can be no doubt then that *Education for Self-transformation: Essay-Form as an Educational Practice* is a bold endeavor, and it is, in the best Nietzschean sense, an untimely one. This is not the register one encounters most commonly in the philosophy of education, let alone in educational research more generally. And the sentiments and commitments expressed here are, in a sense, more personal and more engaged than scholarly writing usually allows. But there is nothing self-indulgent here, for Kwak's text resolutely follows the argument where it leads. And for the reader ready to be challenged, it will lead in surprising, refreshing ways – living up to the promise and relevance that she claims for the inwardness, judgment and expression that are richly realized in the form of the essay.

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Chapter 1
Introduction: Education as Self-transformation and the Essay Form of Writing: Education for a Post-secular Age

We are living in a nihilistic age. The culture that shapes us and the criteria which we live by are *simultaneously* pre-modern, modern, and post-modern in their nature. We often feel *lost*, or *alienated* from ourselves, finding our lives not connected to any meaningful order larger than life, such as Nature or God. However, we are programmed to feel proud of ourselves as empowered agents with a disengaged rational power over "who I am." Yet, we begin to be highly suspicious of whether this pride can live up to the supposed Enlightenment humanism, longing for something larger than life which can again define "who I am." The degree to which each of these experiences dominates us may vary depending upon which region of the world or which fate of life we happen to be thrown into. But we cannot deny that we are all more or less subject to this nihilistic and conflicting experience of life, whether aware or not, in today's ever-globalizing and modernized world.

The nihilistic age brings with it a crisis of fragmentation, and it is not uncommon for people to talk about "the end of education" (Sloterdijk 1987). According to Sloterdijk, schooling in a post-modern era can no longer involve the activity of "education" as traditionally conceived, i.e., induction to knowledge and formation of character, since the terms of these conceptions are now bankrupt. The main characteristic of the post-modern age in which we live can be described in its broadest sense as *self-consciously* modern, meaning suspicious of the past and abandoning the metaphysical, religious, and political certainties of the preceding age. Yet the political revitalization of religion in the most advanced modern societies of the West against this background signals our entry into a so-called *post-secular* age in Habermas' words, where religion is again high on the public agenda (Habermas 2008). Until recently dominant, the secular humanist culture of public education is for many unsatisfying, leaving them with a need that is now being fulfilled by a turn back to religion. This seems to point to a crisis with the role of (scientific) knowledge as well as that of (secular humanistic) values, in education in general and in schooling in particular.

This book is my intellectual journey as a Western-educated Asian to make sense of the fragmentation of our contemporary life, which has enabled me to develop an

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educationally alternative way of responding to the crisis. I would call it a "post-secular" approach to education, in the sense that it stays within the secular humanist model, while bringing students into contact with something akin to the religious, but without religious inflection. There are two key concepts that characterize the post-secular approach: "self-transformation" and "the essay form of writing." As may be true of most of the educated in the non-Western modernized region of the world, the non-Western part of my identity has always been under the threat of being transformed through the system of modern education. One of the most important *educational* events in this process of transformation is the creation of modern subjectivity; subjectivity as a reflexive power from within, which is usually considered to be the source of modern agency over one's own actions and character. The moral status of this reflexive power seems to be *ambivalent*. Donald R. Hall says that subjectivity always implies "a degree of thought and self-consciousness about one's own identity" unique to the modern self, on the one hand, and "at the same time allows a myriad of limitations and often unknowable, unavoidable constraints on our ability to fully comprehend identity," on the other (2004, p. 3). However, in Asian or non-Western culture, modern subjectivity is often perceived as a sheer evil, representing a *manipulative*, *artful*, and *dehumanizing* Machiavellian tendency of the colonial West in the fashioning of human identity. What is considered to be violated by it is our (non-Western) innocence in relation to the world and ourselves.

I think this politically rooted dismissal of modern subjectivity, just like the sweeping post-modern critique of the Enlightenment selfhood as sovereign and self-determining, is educationally unfortunate and even harmful, especially to politically disadvantaged members of society, since in the long run it tends to weaken or misdirect the formation of their political voice. Educators under the modern school system should take seriously the fact that schools are, whether we like it or not, political arenas in the sense that different social forces, whether economical, political, religious, or cultural in its nature, compete with each other to affect the minds of future members of society, yet in such a way that no one force is in a position to take responsibility in shaping their identity and destiny. And the cultivation of modern subjectivity is an integral part of this whole political process in the schooling, since we are living in an era in which we are commonly asked to rethink, express and explain our identities; old norms and traditions, which trapped the individual in a cage of ascription, seem to be breaking down. Thus, the pondering of "I" or "who I am" still *should* be perceived as having a role in, or responsibility for, *creating one's own selfhood*, despite its denaturalizing violation of our supposedly innocent relation to the world and ourselves, in order to bring us back in touch with the world and ourselves.

Raising a doubt about one's full control over one's own identity like a post-modern critic, I am interested in the dangers and limitations of subjectivity as well as in its power and virtue for educational self-(trans)formation. This means that I am concerned with the *extent* to which "subjectivity" as the source of one's agency can bring about change in the way the individual subject conducts herself and orients her life. By addressing this question, i.e., how we should, and to what

extent we even have an ability to, change society *through* our individual actions and the ways that cultural representation can and cannot abet those changes, I will attempt in this book to reformulate a notion of subjectivity which allows us to make an educationally proper response to the crisis of fragmentation in a post-secular age. And "the essay form of writing" will be proposed and explored as a form of pedagogical practice through which this particular notion of subjectivity is to be cultivated and practiced. Now let me bring out in detail some theoretical backgrounds behind this thesis. This will make clear such key terms as "post-secular age," "self-transformation," and "the essay form of writing" in the way I will employ them in this book.

When Richard Rorty makes a critique of epistemology-oriented modern philosophy and announces "the end of Philosophy" in his ground-breaking work *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), both the notion of knowledge as the representation of reality and the notion of Truth as corresponding to reality are called into question. But this crisis with "representational knowledge" also means a crisis with "modern subjectivity" defined by "the disengaged rational self," which originates in the Cartesian conception of selfhood and culminates in the Kantian conception of selfhood. For the idea of modern subjectivity as an agency that organizes knowledge as its systematic representations is presupposed by the notion of knowledge as the "representation" of the world. Thus, we may say that "the end of Philosophy" timely declared by Rorty anticipates "the end of subjectivity," both of which tend to lead into the phenomenon of "the end of Education." The traditional sense of education as knowledge transmission is now bankrupt, since there is no absolute knowledge for the future generation to be inducted into as well as no substance-based character for them to be formed into. With the explosion of the modern myth of knowledge, young people can no longer seek emancipation in schools and universities, as these institutions are increasingly constrained by a new criterion of knowledge as "performativity" in Lyotard's terms. This is why today we often witness schools and universities losing ground as official *educational* institutes, ground that comes from the integrity of their own practice and purpose as social institutions. In fact, they tend to be engaged more and more in *qualifying*, rather than *educating*, future generations, exclusively with exams and degrees as measures for their performativity. This tendency has seriously undermined the educational authority of today's schools and universities.

However, just as "the end of Philosophy" does not mean, nor needs to bring about, the end of philosophy per se, "the end of Education" does not mean the end of education as a social practice per se, nor need it bring about the death of our belief in schooling as an educational institution. The term "the end of Education" may demand us to conceive a new paradigm of education or a new culture of schooling that can properly respond to the situation consequent on "the end of Philosophy," i.e., education and schooling that can be defined by what is more than, or other than, "knowledge transmission."

This book proposes the idea of "self-transformation" in the place of "knowledge transmission" in pursuit of a new paradigm of education. This proposal can be aligned with what David Cooper (2003, p. 211) calls "a moderate" post-modernist

position. He describes the moderate postmodernist position as that which does not reject the possibility of objective agreement on truth, knowledge and moral norms, but shares the post-modernists' hostility toward "depth" of the true nature of the world and their rejection of the foundationalist account of the truth. Cooper also claims that such a moderate position would be plausible *only when* there is "a comfortable place to occupy between an absolute or foundationalist conception of truth" or value and a whole-hearted "embrace of a playful, anarchic and nihilistic attitude to our beliefs and commitments" (Copper 2003, p. 215). Similarly, I think an alternative concept of education for self-transformation would be plausible *only when* there is a place for the radical reformulation of modern subjectivity between its deconstructionist critique and its modernist defense, which can avoid polar and polemical contemporary discourses on the questions of knowledge and truth. Thus, my overarching concern throughout this book can be described as an attempt to reformulate modern subjectivity in this middle path.

While the post-modern critique of knowledge as representational tends to put into question the textuality of the self as a system of representations, "subjectivity as a critical concept invites us to consider the question of how and from where one's identity arises, to what extent it is understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control" (Hall 2004, pp. 3–4). This philosophical inquiry about subjectivity, which has been one of the central questions that for the last two centuries continental philosophers from Nietzsche and Heidegger to Foucault are interested in, is usually considered to be an intersection of two lines of philosophical inquiry: epistemology as the study of how we know what we know and ontology as the study of the nature of being or existence (Hall 2004, p. 4). This means that the inquiry into subjectivity is associated with a bigger and more general question, such as how our understanding of knowledge relates to and constrains our understanding of our existence, and whether our social and individual existences are determined by the ways that we collectively organize knowledge. The concern that underlies this inquiry is akin to that with which ancient philosophers were concerned when they attempted to integrate "knowledge" and "wisdom," with the expectation that the knowledge of "how things are the way they are" would inform us of the wisdom about "how to conduct one's life." The assumption that knowledge is supposed to be conceptually connected to the question of how we should live derives from the ancient idea that the cosmos as such expresses a human purpose and therefore that the knowledge of cosmos or nature would be part of what it means to be human. This is exactly what Hans Blumenberg, the contemporary German philosopher, means when he says that "since the ancient theory, what theory was supposed to do was not to make life possible but to make it *happy*" (1983, p. 232). In this sense, the inquiry about subjectivity can be described as an attempt to recover this ancient connection between "knowledge" and "wisdom" or "theory" and "happiness of life," the connection that has long been lost in the modern mind.

Then how has the connection been lost in the modern mind? This disconnection is created when, unlike the naïve ancient mind, the *self-conscious* scientific-minded moderns regard the cosmos as *indifferent to* humans; this experience is expressed as the "disenchantment of the nature" in Max Weber's terms. The knowledge of the