

Editorial

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[See table of contents](#)

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Editorial

HEESOOON BAI

Editor

Autonomy, Agency, and the Pedagogical Art

The recent news of the campus shootings in the US that left more than thirty people dead—students and faculty—outraged some and stunned others. Schools, along with churches, temples, and mosques, have traditionally been sanctuaries that protected lives and nurtured souls: *sanctum sanctorum* for a human society subject to violence and torment. And now? I can hardly bring myself to say this, but the bloody images of the cruelty in Virginia insistently flash a word across my mental screen: slaughterhouse. Surely this is a world gone mad when the schoolhouse turns into a slaughterhouse! Are there problems with modern education—its aims and methods—that have contributed to this horrific event?

We, as educators, need to ask ourselves this question. I believe, as do cultural theorists, that schooling contributes enormously to shaping individuals—their worldviews, identities, expectations, desires, hopes, and fears—and hence shapes our society as a whole. While I would not be justified in making a direct causal connection between the aims and methods of current schooling and the university student who murdered those people, nevertheless I see him as an extreme manifestation of the results of sadly common afflictions suffered by students—*anomie*, alienation, and a lack of meaningful community in the academy. I thus take the phenomenon of campus killings as a symptom of a culture that has lost its vision of the true purpose of education.

We face the increasing technicization of education and an accompanying commodification of students as a result of the current narrow—nearly blind—focus on standardized testing and measurable outcomes in terms of acquired units of knowledge and skills. During this process of technicization and commodification, we invariably lose sight of the person—her soul (*Psyche*), his heart (*Bodhichitta*), her animal energetic presence (*qi*) and so on—because the primary focus is on achievement as measured by grades, wealth, power, and status. This misplacement of priorities propels students to the edge of an abyss of existential angst, misery, and fury—those who fall in explode and harm others, or implode and harm themselves, or both. We have witnessed this in the recent mass killings and suicide at Virginia Technical University. In light of this (or rather, in light of its darkness), we clearly need to restore the primary aim of education: cultivating the human and humane qualities of love, courage, care, compassion, respect, joyfulness, and peace.

Synchronistically, this Spring Issue of *Paideusis* features writings that address such aims and methods of education for the present “dark ages” (as Alasdair McIntyre sees it). The prophet of the present dark ages was Nietzsche, who foresaw Western civilization’s engulfment in nihilism and the resulting fall of humanity into an equal measure of banality and brutality. The need to overcome this state became Nietzsche’s passion and personal struggle, forming the context and foundation of his philosophizing. In this issue of *Paideusis*, Peter Fitzsimons offers us an in-depth study of Nietzsche’s

ideal of the educated person, the *Übermensch*, in a work that will stimulate, provoke, and challenge our thinking about the aims and methods of education.

Nietzsche's *Übermensch* champions autonomy, and Nietzschean autonomy flows from an individual's agentic capacity and disposition that is strong enough and courageous enough to rise above the nihilistic conditions surrounding them—synchronistically again, two other articles in this issue are similarly concerned with autonomy: Carlo Ricci's polemical essay against mainstream schooling and standardized testing; Jodi Nickel's fine-grained study of five different conceptions of autonomy. Ricci reflects a growing trend toward alternative education, seeing mainstream schooling's obsession with standardized testing as a serious threat to students' exercise of autonomy with respect to their own learning and their ability to become independently thinking and acting individuals capable of realizing their dreams. Ricci's essay challenges us to think outside the box—literally outside the classrooms—by liberating education from autonomy-curtailing schooling. I am sympathetic. For many years, I home-schooled my own two children, now grown and thriving, to support the development of their autonomy. Jodi Nickel's analysis of different conceptions of autonomy and their complementary roles brings up important issues at the level of in-class practice, which most directly guides students' often complicated development of autonomy. Indeed, the kind of philosophical analysis of autonomy exemplified by Nickel's work is critical to pedagogy because, as the saying goes, the devil is in the details, and thus the complexity of educational practice requires the kind of clarity of understanding that philosophical analysis can confer.

This importance of philosophy to pedagogy is further testified to in Leena Kakkori and Rauno Huttunen's article, which uses the framework of Aristotle's virtue ethics to examine, and elaborate upon, those moral attributes that make an individual a good teacher. What I find particularly fascinating in their article is the notion that happiness or well-being (*eudaimonia*) is a central question in ethics—and hence is, by extension, an essential attribute of a good teacher. Moreover, Kakkori and Huttunen point out that since friendship is essential to happiness, friendship is an important pedagogical art. The authors contend that in the context of the unequal relationship that exists between teacher and student, friendship has to assume the form of “pedagogical love.” I am not at all surprised by this suggestion, for my own experience as a teacher confirms it.

If happiness and love are singularly critical in teaching and learning well (and to well-being), then what a stark contrast we have between the horrific story of the Virginia Tech campus massacre and the current issue of *Paideusis*! Paul O'Leary's delightful essay, “Ethical Habituation and Pleasure,” makes a case, also based on Aristotle's ethics, that pleasure is essential in learning to be moral, or morally virtuous. This learning goes through stages in which pleasure is transformed from a reason to act virtuously into a “symptom” of virtue. In this process, “pleasure” undergoes a transformation from (sensuous) enjoyment to a “wholehearted attachment to the sort of life which exemplifies the virtues,” to quote O'Leary. To me, the key word here is “wholehearted,” with all its connotations of sincerity and of determination and, most of all, of heart. When society's learning and teaching becomes heartless—when it no longer touches and nurtures the heart—then the lives of all students sink toward despair, and the lives of the worst unfortunates become a worthless pit that constrains the soul, enrages the persona, and unleashes the most horrific and destructive of impulses. In the face of such despair and rage, reason is helpless. This, I feel, lies behind the late campus killings tragedy.

But is this pronouncement that I make “just your opinion”? Let us now turn to our last essay, “That's Just Your Opinion!” which is featured in our Philosophical Fragments section. I am sure that Claudia Ruitenberg is not alone in being troubled by the “That's just your opinion!” retort we often receive from students (and children) when we offer a justified belief, and request in return a justification of the belief statements that they make. Ruitenberg rightly sees that philosophical discourse cannot take place when interlocutors are unable or unwilling to seek out justifications from each other and to offer such justifications in return. How do we persuade our students to practice such a giving and seeking of justification? Well, dear Readers, read on! And please do not forget to send in to our Dialogue section your justified opinions in response. As your Editor, however, I hasten to add that the

first principle of dialogue is an accurate understanding of the other's viewpoint, which requires an exercise of empathy that I believe to be a quintessential pedagogical art. The authors of the two Dialogue response pieces in the present issue would agree.

This issue also features four book reviews, all very immensely informative and engaging. I thank the book reviewers for jobs well done. I would also like to thank all the reviewers for taking time out of their ultra-busy academic lives to serve the journal. Their exacting reviews are the reason for *Paideusis's* consistently high quality. Lastly, I thank all the "Pai-Tech" folks (whom I have dubbed the "Pai Bakers") for their long labour of love and dedication to the fine art of copyediting and copy-formatting. Thank you, Thomas, Johanne, Charles, Peter, Don Nelson, and Buddy. I also thank my partner, Avraham, for his constant support and help, and for soothing my editorially inflamed nerves. Don Cochrane, Associate Editor, also merits a mention of gratitude for sharing his wisdom, garnered from over a decade of editorship. May you all be happy, well, and at peace!

Yours editorially,

Heesoon

P.S. I wish to draw your attention to a Call for Papers by the Graduate Student Society of Philosophy of Education. (I have been informed that the submission deadline is being extended.) The conference this year will be held in Vancouver (to be exact, in Surrey and Burnaby). Please visit the website: <http://www.gscope.net>