

The Cynical Educator (Ansgar Allen)

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Review of

The Cynical Educator

by Ansgar Allen. Leicester, England: Mayfly Books, 2017.

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If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that doesn't matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair. (Nagel, 1971, p. 716)

Ansgar Allen is, no doubt, writing in a different tradition than Thomas Nagel. But if we were to reformulate Nagel's concluding comment on the absurd in the more specific context of education—"If there is no reason to believe that, ultimately, anything we say or do in the name of education matters, then that doesn't matter either, and we can approach our absurd lives as educators with irony, thereby avoiding the Scylla of despair and the Charybdis of ersatz hope"—it could find a comfortable place in the conclusion of Allen's book *The Cynical Educator*. And this is, indeed, close to where Allen ends up.¹ The cynical educator or the educated nihilist (of the sort at whom the book is aimed, himself included) is left with only comedy and "the art of laughing" (p. 177)—and, I would add, Nagel's irony—as recourse for her plight. But before reaching that conclusion, Allen establishes the historical and contemporary context for educational nihilism and cynicism. He trenchantly disabuses us of the notion of "education as savior" as he excavates that faulty idea's roots in Platonism, Stoicism, monasticism, and pastoral care. As it turns out, it is a false inheritance. In our contemporary moment, "[e]ducation is under attack more than ever for failing to deliver on its promises" (p. 4). And yet,

[b]y habit we insist there be hope, that nihilism will not run its course. We will find value and meaning somewhere before all is said and done. Divined in ancient Greece; [sic] we have been educated to follow step. The first philosophical schools taught their members to ration existence to a higher ideal, to an ideal beyond achievement and beyond question. We remain haunted by this schematic. (p. 19)

The Cynical educator² has identified this schematic and understands its problems. With the insistence on hope in education and its concomitant Platonic legacy of deferral, certain iterations of, or practices in, education can be critiqued as failures, but never the entire enterprise itself. This is why it is so difficult

¹ I will offer one caveat here. Nagel clearly critiques the notion of the Sisyphean hero as a worthwhile model of response to the absurdity of human life. Ostensibly, this critique may seem to be in conflict with Allen's concluding chapter, in which he references multiple works by Camus and refers to the absurd hero acceptingly. However, a careful reading of the book, I think, reveals that Allen does not understand the nihilist educator or cynical educator to be heroic in any straightforward sense of that term.

² Allen differentiates between the Cynical educator (presumably one who has more fidelity to the legacy of Diogenes) and "everyday cynicism," which, "exists in a weakened state" (p. 2).

for most to admit that “[e]ducation sets down the intellectual and affective foundations for another century of rampant growth, exploitation, pollution, and barbarity” (p. 2). But the Cynical educator does admit as much. And, in so doing, concludes that “[i]t is better to live with the absurd and teach absurdly ... than to live with and perpetuate consolations of hope and education” (p. 187).

Allen says in the beginning that the book “was not written for applause” (p. 8) and I offer none here. Nonetheless, *The Cynical Educator* is an important work, if difficult to pin down (as I suspect the author intends). Its audience is named and addressed at points throughout and yet somehow by the end it seems less than clear for whom it is precisely intended. It scoffs at an imagined traditional (and less effective) alternative to itself that “would announce itself as an elucidation of Nietzsche or Foucault” (p. 5) and, in so doing, leaves the reader wondering if it has indeed just made such an announcement. Allen goes to some lengths to otherwise distinguish the work from traditional scholarship and yet it employs meticulous and manifold references. It moves rather abruptly between aphorisms and genealogy and sometimes even veers into something like standard writing in continental philosophy. For all that, it is a book to be reckoned with. It is unflinching and, I think, necessary. Ultimately, there is something a bit unsatisfying about a rather straightforward review of this work, but I present one here regardless.

The Cynical Educator proceeds in nine thematic chapters. The arguments are thick and plentiful, too much so to evaluate them all.³ The text begins with a set of jolting aphorisms about the state of education in our current historical moment and about the need for a new breed of Cynic. While there are common internal cries of education being under threat, Allen claims that they miss the point. While educators say that education is “dying all around us,” Allen says that “[i]t hardly lived” (p. 1). Educators continue to believe in the inherent good of education, never pausing to (re)consider this basic conceit. Instead they are spurred into a fury of action “as if they could save education from itself” (p. 5). It is in this context that a new Cynic arises. Allen is clearly fond of the legacy of Diogenes but also understands that a kind of emulation of figures from two millennia ago is out of the question. But a new Cynic can arise in our current moment: “A Cynicism of our own pays close attention to cynical attitudes otherwise lost in the day-to-day of work and living. It roots them out, transforms them and performs them to greater effect” (p. 3).

In the second chapter, Allen draws a direct line between our contemporary insistence on hope in education and Socrates. “His was an educational scheme where a quest to give meaning to one’s existence was yoked to an experience of doubt, and a promise too, that education would be its overcoming” (p. 19). While modern institutional structures have neutered Socrates’s original method of “dialogue and suggestion,” the pattern of instilling doubt and offering hope through education as a remedy remains. But what is it that is delivered to the student after having been numbed into doubt by the torpedo-fish? Or, as Allen asks, “[w]hat if on occasion Socrates did more damage than good, unsettling his pupils assuredly, yet generating little of value in return?” (p. 21). Still, we insist upon the inherent goodness of education. We bask in the “warmth” of the educational promise. Allen’s Cynical advice is, rather, to “become cold, educate and be educated without clothing yourself against the chill” (p. 23). Here we begin to get a sense of the activity of the Cynical educator.

³ In particular, I am leaving out a discussion of the chapter on the Marquis de Sade as educator. It is in many ways the most difficult chapter to read and digest, perhaps even for the (mostly) converted to Cynicism and nihilism. I am not quite sure how to address it and so will not do so in the body of this review. That said, its difficulty is good reason for the reader to wrestle with it.

The book next moves into full genealogy mode. The educational legacy of the Stoics, Allen claims, is the confrontation of the problem of justification. The educator offers advice, sometimes painful and unwanted, to the powerful, and therefore must convince them of his necessity. He does this through sincerity, “declaring in effect: ‘Look, I risk telling you the truth, so I must be on your side’” (p. 39). The Roman philosopher–educator eventually gives way to the Christian bishop whose justification comes from divinity. This legacy remains in the early forms of the Christian pastorate in which salvation is the primary educational theme. Although we may seem far removed from any of these traditions, Allen argues that “education as savior” has survived into modern times. “We do not question if education should adopt this framework at all. Rather, we ask, what kind of salvation should education offer?” (p. 71).

Falling back into more aphoristic writing, Allen moves into discussions of contemporary “Mass Cynicism” in education. Cynicism has been watered down, recuperated, and tamed (this can be traced to the Romans). This is why “contemporary cynicism cannot be attacked by conventional means” (p. 86). The contemporary cynical educator is complex and paradoxical. She is part Cynic, part romantic (p. 92); in effect, “a teacher [who] has long given up on the job, yet does it anyway” (p. 91). Thus, we see the first glimpse of the Cynical educator as a kind of Sisyphian figure.

In the chapter “Insults and Obscenities,” Allen provides a brief history of Cynicism and discusses its contemporary possibilities based in large part on Foucault’s lectures on the Cynics. Allen’s commentary on these lectures done through the lens of education is some of the most important that exists in print. It gives the lie to the notion that the Cynical educator is the one who gives up or leaves the profession altogether. “[T]he committed nihilist follows through with the suspicion that modern education lacks value” (p. 123). Eventually, such Cynical educators “*act upon* their conviction” and, in the end, they stay with education just “as Diogenes remained in Athens” (p. 123). This argument sets Allen up for his concluding chapter regarding Camus, the absurd, and the Cynical educator’s response.

In the final chapter, “The Absurd,” Allen reaches a conclusion that I am claiming is not unlike Nagel’s above when adapted for the context of education. Allen argues that in education, the absurd is not an ideal but a proximal and felt reality. It is also “particularly hard to confront” because “educators are protected from such encounters, somehow believing that despite it all, education can escape its grasp” (p. 182). And for those who do confront the absurd in education, there awaits a “painful ambivalence” (p. 183). More than this, the Cynical educator actually pursues such pain. Such painful experiences with the absurd become “repellent” to the empty “consolations of hope and education, promises of reason and order” (p. 187). In the end, “[t]he absurd is uniquely valuable, if not essential to the Cynical educator” (p. 187). But, for all this, the Cynical educator also follows Nietzsche’s arguments in *The Birth of Tragedy*. That is, the employment of comedy provides a release from the absurd. “Perhaps, then, today’s educator should first admit the absurdity of the whole endeavour, and learn to laugh while laden. The educator’s laugh would bring relief whilst expressing pain” (p. 177).

The Cynical Educator is a wonderfully disputatious book. Allen packs into less than 200 pages enough to roil both Cynic (and cynic) and non-Cynic alike. It may well be the case that our contemporary moment is one in which we most need a confrontation with the absurd in education, a time when a commitment to hope is becoming a bit wobbly even for those most committed to the saving power of education. Perhaps Allen’s book might provide the final push. But for the rest of us who already count ourselves among the converted, what of the comedy, the laughter, and the irony? Much more space in the book is dedicated to the pain of the Cynic than these. What is mostly absent in Allen’s acceptance of the absurd

in education is the part of Nagel's quote that claims, "then that doesn't matter either." This is what ultimately allows us the release of the comic and the consolation of the ironic.

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