COSMOPOLITANISM IN RELATION TO THE SELF AND THE OTHER: FROM MICHEL FOUCAULT TO STANLEY CAVELL

Paul Smeyers
Faculty of Education
Ghent University and Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium

Yusef Waghid
Department of Education Policy Studies
University of Stellenbosch, South Africa

Abstract. Educators, not to mention philosophers of education, find themselves in a difficult position nowadays. They are confronted with problems such as which kind of values one would want citizens to embrace, or to what extent social practices of a particular group may differ from what is generally held. In this essay, Paul Smeyers and Yusef Waghid focus on postmodern critiques, in particular on the position of Michel Foucault as it is relevant for the debate on cosmopolitanism. The authors argue that Foucault’s analysis of the self in relation to the other is somewhat contentious, as it seems to invoke an independent ethical self other than a social self. Smeyers and Waghid claim that a more nuanced position regarding this relation can be found in the work of Stanley Cavell. They conclude that encounters with the other should not be seen as a new kind of universalism or Foucauldian subjectivism, but rather as an opening that creates opportunities both for attachment and detachments, that is, for acknowledgment and avoidance.

A program broadcast by Channel 4 in 2007, titled “Congo: Children of the Genocide,” drew our attention once again to the issue of doing justice to the other and the otherness of the other.¹ The program deals with the Interahamwe, Hutu militias from Rwanda (about 7,000 in number), who control 40 percent of East Congo, in particular the area around Bukavu. They, descendants of those responsible for the genocide of the Tutsi in 1994, are now living outside of Rwanda, where a Tutsi Government is in place. One will recall that more than four million people were killed or died as a consequence of the 1994 genocide. The Congolese population is now the victim of these Hutu militia groups, with Congolese women being routinely raped (the program speaks of more than 4,000, though officially only a few cases have been reported) and, as a consequence, rejected by their own group. Those women who give birth as a result of rape are believed either to kill the children or to disappear. The hate of the Interahamwe toward the Tutsi is kept alive through indoctrination. They call the Tutsi “inyenzi,” which means cockroaches — in other words insects that have to be destroyed. The militias, who also “regulate” about 25,000 Hutu citizens, cannot be controlled, in spite of the presence of a United Nations peace force of 17,000 soldiers.

There are many possible interpretations that may explain what is going on here. Yet, who would disagree with the fact that “real injustice” is being done

in the Congo? Clearly there is an absence of respect for the other (that is, the Tutsi, the Congolese women). Surely educators cannot turn a blind eye to this. People should be taught a different attitude toward others, and yet, are they, are we, not too hesitant to take a lead here and to substantiate what we think human beings ought to value? Being knowledgeable about the criticism of paternalism and the sustained postmodern critique, we tend to keep ourselves far away from specifying what counts as the good life. Is this position sustainable, or are the evident and undeniable consequences of the case we mentioned witness of the fact that we really need to proceed differently and thus look for a more justifiable theoretical stance? These are the issues we will explore in this essay. We will begin by identifying how we have reached this point; then in subsequent sections we will lay out our argument for a different balance between the self and the other.

Educators, not to mention philosophers of education, find themselves in a difficult position nowadays. With the disappearance of the so-called metanarratives, it seems that the secular society one lives in has made it difficult, not to say almost impossible, to justify a particular idea of the good life that can be shared by all or at least many. The pluralism of society, the different values and viewpoints, many of them highly respectable, create, so one argues, huge difficulties for the justification philosophy of education traditionally is supposed to deliver. That this cannot be done anymore is exactly the point of what has been labeled postfoundationalism. Without embracing relativism, it has led to the descriptive turn, in philosophy as well as concerning social practices. For educators, including both teachers and parents, radical pluralism has given rise to doubts regarding whether they are still entitled to initiate their children into the values they believe in — though it is also evident that these educators are baffled by the problem of precisely how they can avoid doing so. At the level of the curriculum or of education more generally, the problems are equally serious. Here one would want at least some mutually shared idea of the good life that could be the warrant for the decisions about content and method that are required in educational contexts. Surfacing are problems such as which kind of values we would want citizens to embrace, to what extent social practices of a particular group may differ from what is generally held, whether not fully endorsing the positions or practices of a particular subculture necessarily creates an injustice toward that group, and whether the values of a paradigmatic Western society (in which individualism and competitiveness are high on the agenda) are to be

PAUL SMEYERS is Professor of Philosophy of Education at Ghent University and part-time Professor at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, both in Belgium, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Dunantlaan 1, 9000 Gent, Belgium; e-mail: <paulus.smeyers@ugent.be>. His primary areas of scholarship are educational theory, Wittgenstein, postmodernism, and qualitative research methods.

YUSEF WAGHID is a Professor of Philosophy of Education in the Department of Education Policy Studies and Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, Faculty of Education, Private Bag X1, Stellenbosch University, Matieland, 7602, South Africa; e-mail: <yw@sun.ac.za>. His primary areas of scholarship are analytical and evaluative inquiry vis-à-vis democratic citizenship education focusing on teaching and learning, educational policy and higher education transformation, and democratic citizenship education and cosmopolitanism.
preferred to those of a non-Western society where caring for the other is often a less abstract notion. It seems to us that the discourse of educators as well as of philosophers of education about these matters turns on what exactly is [or should be] involved in “initiation” and, at the same time, on what should be understood by “justification.” We would submit that it is exactly a particular use of these concepts that is responsible for the binary and polarized thinking of “us” and “them” as well as for the paternalism, the colonialism, and the so-called Western supremacy that is rightly criticized.

In order to substantiate this claim we will develop to some extent the postmodern critiques that have given occasion to many debates in educational circles and that all, in one way or another, have focused on initiation. Indeed, initiation has been criticized from many stances, and numerous empirical studies have illustrated that schooling and education more generally fail to address existing social inequalities. The focus of our interest in this area is Michel Foucault, who has in one way or another developed a radical position that deliberately avoids indicating how one should proceed. More precisely, although it is evident that becoming aware of the presuppositions that are embraced by an initiation into a particular way of life may give occasion to different activities, it has been argued that the direction one takes or should take can neither be indicated and certainly not justified in a strong sense. We will argue that this cannot be the end of the story, that there remain problems that need to be addressed in order to make these positions substantially attractive for an educational context. Thus we are pressed to the issue of whether an alternative can be developed. It is here that one is confronted with the difficult issue of justification, for which we will turn to the work of Stanley Cavell later in the essay. But before addressing that issue, we will first consider exactly what it is that has been criticized.

**The Reification of the Postmodern Critique**

To think of education as an initiation into practices has been part of many “traditional” views of education. In the Enlightenment tradition, for instance, the learner is initiated into forms of thought and understanding that are part of a critical cultural heritage. These forms are public but beyond a child’s understanding; therefore, children must be gradually and skillfully initiated into the knowledge, sentiments, and valued activities and practices of civilized life. But this formulation has long been under pressure for its so-called conservative tendency because of the broadly unquestioning stance it encourages toward the particular content into which the learner or novice is initiated. Though such a modernist conception of education may also seek to promote practices that cultivate the critical potential of youth and their capacity to question traditional practices or explore new ones, initiation is still regarded as too prone to serve as a stabilizing factor for the predominant ways of living together. For example, the unexamined assumptions behind practices may reinforce existing disparities, such as the unequal distribution of wealth and power.

An interesting example of the so-called postmodernist criticism to start from is the position of Foucault, whose analysis of power focuses on how it works and how
it produces the subject — conceived as simultaneously an instrument and an effect. The result is particular technologies of the self and particular discourses. Foucault observed a change from sovereign power — of which seizure and possession are characteristic and that is visible — into disciplinary power, a kind of pastoral power that expresses itself through a particular way in which space and time are controlled and a specific form of surveillance that goes with it. Disciplinary power is to a large extent invisible. Knowledge of the individual marks the power through normalization across the population. For Foucault, the blueprint of the panopticon is the crystallized incarnation of the underlying set of power relations that define modern Western civilization. The panopticon metaphor identifies a ring of inwardly facing cellblocks surrounding a tower; from the tower guards can monitor the activities in each cell. As a consequence of the constant threat of surveillance, the prisoners ultimately become self-regulating and internalize the norms. On this view, with the expansion of disciplinary mechanisms throughout society, including schools, clinics, and the like, Western civilization has become a generally punitive society concerned with regulating a homogenized public through training the body on a micro level, through examinations, and through hierarchical surveillance. Thus power has come to be exercised subtly and functions quietly in a permanent economy. Though Foucault certainly did not argue that “power” can or should be avoided — indeed, his conception emphasizes that we will always be in a power constellation — the [hidden] message nevertheless is an appeal to subjects to resist a particular configuration of power in order to move on to one that is more satisfactory; otherwise, what would be the point of investing so much energy and time in investigating the power constellations one finds oneself in? It goes without saying that Foucault offered neither a particular directive concerning the path one should take, nor a justification thereof. It could therefore be argued that the analysis remains radically historical and materialistic and thus descriptive (in the sense of avoiding normative implications). However, insofar as looking for more satisfactory power constellations is built into this stance, the matter of justification cannot simply be avoided, despite whatever Foucault and the Foucauldian literature suggests. If Foucault’s stance is unable to identify the characteristics that are held to be more satisfactory, yet holds on to such a direction, it either begs the question of justification or leaves us without a means to give direction to our activities. Of course, the Foucauldian position has been applied successfully to many areas of social research, such as in gay and lesbian studies, multicultural and feminist research, and, last but not least, through identifying in governmentality studies the changes that have taken place in schooling. One is left, however, with a prevailing feeling of disappointment: if one takes the result of these analyses as a starting point for change, the framework implies that one should back off. Many authors have transgressed this self-imposed boundary and have come up with interesting alternatives, but they have remained reluctant to offer justificatory reasons. This highlights, we will argue subsequently, a particular concept of “justification” that haunts the debate over what is satisfactory in terms of power constellations as well as, more fundamentally, what it is that a theoretical stance can offer in making such a determination.
Through this discussion, we have arrived at something reminiscent of Seyla Benhabib’s criticism that it is not at all clear that Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard have a normative discourse available for condemning violence. Interestingly, Benhabib was implying neither that theorists of difference are responsible for degenerate forms of politics, nor that philosophical positions can be criticized for their imputed (real or imaginary) political consequences in the hands of others, nor that one should judge, evaluate, or question the commitment of theorists of difference to democratic ideals and aspirations. “What I will be arguing instead,” she says, “is that Jean-François Lyotard and, to some extent, Jacques Derrida, privilege in their writings on the political *a certain perspective, a certain angle, a certain heuristic framework*, which itself has deep and ultimately, I think, misleading consequences for understanding the rational foundations of the democratic form of government.”

Thus the thesis of the radical incommensurability of genres of discourse is, according to Benhabib, no more meaningful than the thesis of the radical incommensurability of conceptual frameworks. If frameworks, whether linguistic, conceptual, or otherwise, are so radically incommensurable with each other, then we could not actually know this. Benhabib reproaches Lyotard and Derrida for disregarding the institutional mechanisms whereby constitutional traditions enable democracies to correct, to limit, and to ameliorate moments of unbridled majority rule, exclusionary attributions of identity, and the arbitrary formation of norms. Derrida cannot have it both ways, she argues: “on the one hand he criticizes and condemns nationalism, racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism, and on the other hand, he undermines the conceptual bases for holding on to those universalistic moral and political principles in the name of which alone such critique can be carried out.”

Thus, according to Benhabib, what we need is an articulation of the normative bases of cosmopolitan republicanism in an increasingly decentered, fragmented world, depicted in an antimetaphysical philosophy: a new international law that can transcend the self-centered narcissism of nations and force them to recognize the rights of others like them.

Similar criticisms have been made by Peter McLaren. Because Lyotard largely disregarded what the individual has in common with other human beings, the difference between people is depicted in a discourse of power. In Lyotard’s formulation, McLaren argued, the otherness of the other has to be radicalized in order to safeguard a place for the other. There is therefore a danger that Lyotard’s uncritical celebration of multiplicity and heterogeneity could be used in the politics of multiculturalism as an excuse to exoticize otherness: to support a regressive nativism that locates difference in a primeval past of cultural

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3. Ibid., 21.

authenticity. It is also troubling that Lyotard’s view of the subaltern subject repudiates all attempts to name such a subject, even provisionally, on the grounds that any form of naming is an act of appropriation and ultimately an act of violence, a position that can lead to both political and pedagogical paralysis. To name otherness, according to Lyotard, suggests a tolerance of difference rather than an engagement with it. Lyotard’s project thus lacks the substantive elements necessary for guiding our choices toward these ends, McLaren concludes.

**Practices, Moral Constraints, and the Other as the Mirror**

It therefore seems to us that for both epistemological and ethical reasons we cannot do without the concept of initiation into practices. But there is a different way to think about “practice” that consists in emphasizing (1) how practices are learned — for instance, through imitation, initiation, instruction, and so forth; and (2) how they are enacted. In both cases one’s relation to the practices in which one is engaged becomes crucial — that is, how one is brought into a practice, and how one contributes to it. Here practice is viewed in relation to human actors and not simply seen in intrinsic terms. Central to this understanding is the interrelation between the nature of the activity and how people think about and act within the practice. Of special importance is the relation that a practice encourages or discourages (through different ways of learning or enacting it) — that is, how it is intertwined with our self and sense of identity, on the one hand, and our relations and ways of interacting with other people, on the other hand. In this sense the way we identify with particular practices, and to what extent, is at stake. Practices transform the self, but at the same time there may be subversions of a practice that give opportunities to the self. Practices have reasons behind them, even if these are not always made explicit, but these reasons also can be reexamined and questioned; this process may also bring forward unintended dimensions.

This view of practice is very much along the lines of the characterization of practical judgment offered by Richard Smith. He starts from the Aristotelian position where the importance of experience in practical judgment is connected with a rejection of the idea that ethics is based in theory. “Experience on its own is,” Smith argues, “however, no panacea because unless we are helped, and sometimes even directly shown, how to interpret what we see and to formulate the right response to it, we import ways of understanding and coping that are inappropriate to the new context.” This is not intended to confirm the fantasy that empiricism is the basis of any worthwhile knowledge, but


proper use of experience also involves noticing the propensity of the present and the future to be unlike the past, and a preparedness to be open to the uniqueness of events.7

Practical judgment is not only a matter of learning skills and acquiring competencies, but it is also and more significantly bound up with the kind of person one is. Smith claims that

It is not so much that practical judgement requires certain qualities, even “virtues”, to be in place before it can develop on the basis of them, as that it partly consists of those qualities. These qualities have a cognitive element but they, and so practical judgement itself, have a strongly affective side.8

In practical judgment, knowledge and feeling must draw on each other. Finally, Smith focuses on the place of flexibility in practical judgment and makes it clear that the need for flexibility limits the extent to which we can specify clear and unambiguous rules, procedures, or universal algorithms:

Our judgements have to be adapted to the particularities of the situation rather than relying on general rules or principles exclusively. But there is no basis here for the fantasy that phronesis consists in arbitrary and ungrounded action, perhaps under the sway of gut-feeling. Principles and criteria play their part, but they are revisable.9

What is remarkable about this position, is that, although it does not determine what should be done in a particular case, it nevertheless does not embrace an advice that is so open-ended that it radicalizes otherness or undermines by definition any reference to the bedrock of our acting.

A Different Reading of Foucault

Thus far we have argued through the postmodern critiques that invoking an individual self might not necessarily be justifiable. Before introducing our position with reference to Cavell, it might be useful to first interrogate Foucault’s position on the self in order to ascertain whether he in fact argued for an independent ethical self other than a social self.

Recall that Foucault did not reject the notion of truth, but was particularly interested in the notion of “speaking the truth.” While he explicitly stated that truth does not exist, he paid a lot of attention to the role “speaking the truth” played in shoring up the power of dominant groups by demonstrating how particular discourses directed at silencing others had developed historically. Still, this does not imply an altogether negative understanding of speaking the truth. For Foucault truth does not refer to something, but to someone. In other words, truth cannot be captured in the content of an exposé; rather, it refers to a particular way of acting and speaking that expresses a relation toward the other and the world, an ethos. Unlike many others Foucault did not stick to an absolutist conception of truth but honored a positive pluralism, distancing himself at the same time from those critics who argue in favor of rejecting truth altogether. Though it is correct

7. Ibid., 167.
8. Ibid., 167–168.
9. Ibid., 170.
that such pluralism of truth was not present in Foucault’s writings published in
the 1960s, from the 1970s on his pluralist position becomes increasingly clear.
This shift is closely linked to his development of the (positive) notion of power.

The constitution of the self is a kind of speaking the truth that does not refer
to a form of knowledge or self-awareness, but rather to the care of the self and
one’s relation to the world, that is, the social self. In his earlier work Foucault was
interested in seeing how the power of truth can be loosened from the supremacy
of the structure in which it functions by rereading it as a form of behavior that
determines the truths that are conveyed. This understanding of truth has a negative
connotation, focusing on what is included and excluded, respectively. Foucault’s
later work, however, has a much more positive appreciation of speaking the truth,
particularly in relation to his theory about the formation of the subject for whom
acting and speaking ethically is central — something that is appropriately done in
relation to others. The distinction between inclusion versus exclusion no longer
functions as a repression of the other, nor does it have a normative connotation.
Instead, it indicates the way the self is shaped in relation to the other — in other
words, speaking the truth deals precisely with the self that constitutes itself in
a process of subjectivation to a (true) subject. This is linked to the possibility
distancing oneself, not in the sense of trying to act as a neutral or objective
observer who looks for reasons or explanations for what one is confronted with,
but rather in the sense of displacing the way we look in order to be confronted
with the possibility of change ourselves. The distance Foucault spoke of entails
engaging oneself with the situation in which one risks oneself and in which one is
involved socially. It relates to being touched and confronted with questions such
as “Who am I?” “What do I do?” and “What am I capable of?” In other words, it is
about the experience of not coinciding with what is silently accepted as evident,
which gives rise to the question of what behavior is proper or appropriate in a
given circumstance. Did Foucault mean that one has to start anew without any
prior experiences and meanings? Is it possible to radically bracket the past in this
manner, as if it is not connected to the present?

To think and speak the truth is, Foucault argued, about turning one’s eyes away
from what is experienced as evident; it is about distancing oneself from the place
where one lives, from what has made oneself; it is about being stripped of one’s
background or past — the space we are accustomed to — yet, at the same time,
Foucault implied that one is ultimately thrown back on this background and past.
One becomes a question for oneself, one’s thinking and acting are put to the test
in the sense that the subject is not him- or herself anymore. This transformation,
however, does not elicit a confrontation with one’s past shortcomings, and it does
not represent a rejection of what one despises about oneself. It is an experience
that draws one away from oneself and confronts one with the question “How
shall I go on?” Foucault wrote about the attendance to oneself or conversation
with oneself. This does not involve comparing oneself against some ideal self,
but becoming more aware of the culture, the knowledge and the like, that one
holds — and opening up a conversation about how this knowledge and culture can
take possession of the self, holding it captive in association with others.
Foucault, reverting to the ideas of ancient Greece, wrote about bringing our words (logoi) and our deeds into a harmonious relation, about belief and truth, about the exactitude and comprehensiveness that one must aspire to, about being accountable and looking for a touchstone, and particularly about risking oneself when speaking the truth. In our reading of Foucault’s analysis, these deeds have to be conceived in relation to others and not in relation to a Foucauldian independent self. This is different from the modern epistemological framework where truth is justified belief, and knowledge the precondition to speak truthfully and thus to judge, act ethically, and educate. Truth plays a different role in Greek antiquity: it constitutes the subject, which is consequently a constant object of reflection (in relation to others as well). The parrhesiastes (one who speaks the truth) does not doubt in this sense that he or she disposes of the truth, as this does not refer to an irrefutable proof or “certain” knowledge. What is at stake is the courage to speak the truth in relation to oneself and the others:

The final aim of parrhesia is not to keep the person to whom one speaks dependent upon the person who speaks — which is the case in flattery. The objective of parrhesia is to act so that at a given moment the person to whom one is speaking finds himself in a situation in which he no longer needs the other’s discourse. How and why does he no longer need the other’s discourse? Precisely because the other’s discourse was true. It is insofar as the other has given, has conveyed a true discourse to the person to whom he speaks, that this person, internalizing and subjectivizing this true discourse, can then leave the relationship with the other person. The truth, passing from one to the other in parrhesia, seals, ensures, and guarantees the other’s autonomy, the autonomy of the person who received the speech from the person who uttered it.10

This does not mean, in our opinion, that parrhesia implies that the self is divorced from the other(s), but rather that the self gains the confidence to act independently or more eloquently in relation with others, not by being separated from others. Having developed this independent voice would enable the self to take more risks, as Foucault would argue, but still, we would insist, in relation to others.

Contrary to the orator, the parrhesiastes will not primordially occupy him- or herself with the manner in which the content is conveyed, but with the care for the self. Referring to Seneca as an example, Foucault maintained that this means being prepared to confront what one says and does with what we do and are; this implies work on oneself and risking oneself. According to Foucault,

What is basically at stake in parrhesia is what could be called, somewhat impressionistically, the frankness, freedom, and openness that leads one to say what one has to say, as one wishes to say it, when one wishes to say it, and in the form one thinks is necessary for saying it.11

Thus at stake here is neither a feeling for the needs of the other (in contrast to what the flatterer does), nor an acquisition of techniques (used by the orator), but instead an engagement in a dialogue based on the care of the self and directed toward a self-transformation that will express itself in what one says and does in relation to others. To speak the truth, Foucault argued, is central to this transformation into

11. Ibid., 372–373.
an ethical subject, how someone shapes and gives meaning to his or her life. It has no other purpose. But does this necessarily imply an independent isolated self? Or should parrhesia be conceived as a kind of authoritative speaking of the self upon encountering the other?

"Being touched by the other" already implies an association with others, and "speaking the truth" can be considered as having developed an authoritative voice through which one can articulate oneself frankly, freely, and openly, in the words of Foucault. Thus it is also about conversation and dialogue not just for the sake of the conversation, not just in order to become an ethical subject (how someone shapes and gives meaning to life), but in order to bring about change (and, in this sense, to do justice to the other). This requires reasons and arguments as part of "living a life that is involved," but always as part of social practices, as is evident from Foucault's use of phrases such as "never alone with themselves" and "the Other intervenes" in the following passage:

[Narcissistic selves are] never alone with themselves in the sense that they never have that full, adequate and sufficient relationship to themselves that ensures that we do not feel dependent on anything, neither on the misfortunes that threaten nor on the pleasures we may encounter or obtain from around us. . . . In this non-solitude, in this inability to establish that full, adequate, and sufficient relationship to ourselves, the Other intervenes who, as it were, meets the lack and substitutes or rather makes up for this inadequacy through a discourse, and precisely through a discourse that is not the discourse of truth through which we can establish, fasten, and close up on itself the sovereignty we exercise over ourselves.12

From Foucault's elucidation of parrhesia we can deduce that he was in fact, while underscoring on numerous occasions the social self, actually evoking a position of an independent ethical self — with reference to his use, for instance, of "themselves" and relationships to "ourselves" and "the Other." Foucault did talk about a social self but in fact preferred to couch it in terms of an individual self, a position with which we take issue. Because Foucault's analysis of the self in relation to the other is somewhat contentious, we will now turn to the work of Cavell who develops a more nuanced conception of this relation. We shall argue that Cavell avoids the ambiguity between the self and the other so apparent in Foucault's work and, further, that Cavell's seminal ideas offer a more justifiable elucidation of that relation.

CAVELL: LIVING WITH SKEPTICISM

According to Cavell, the therapy philosophy offers is in some cases about the need to live with skepticism and to withstand our longing to resolve it. It is characterized by an existential attraction, yet it should be respected, even if it seems to go nowhere. Skepticism prompts us to say something noble about the human species. The "ordinary" should not disappoint us, but should give us a sense of peace so that we can give up our craving for criteria, for the general, for idle metaphysical talk.

Cavell warns us to be hesitant about the use of criteria because they may be seen as marks and features that "tell us" when the application of a concept is licensed and, by articulating the grammatical relations among our concepts, that

12. Ibid., 378 [emphasis added].
“tell us” what exactly we have said in any particular instance of applying a concept. On the contrary, Cavell argues, criteria should not be seen as determining what our concepts mean and to what else we [must] have committed ourselves or made ourselves responsible in employing a particular concept.13 Martin Gustafsson interprets Cavell to mean by this “that the traditional attempt to justify our practices from an external standpoint is misguided, since such detachment involves losing sight of those conceptual and perceptual capacities in terms of which a practice is understood by its engaged participants.”14 He approvingly quotes Cavell (from his book Must We Mean What We Say?) who argues that when we learn and teach words in certain contexts, and then are expected and expect others to be able to project them into further contexts, nothing ensures that this projection will take place. The fact that on the whole these projections are made, according to Cavell, a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation — all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls “forms of life.”15 Gustafsson stresses that Cavell’s point is an epistemological one: it remains within the logical space of reasons [rather than within the space of causes]. Cavell seems to think that no matter how philosophically clear-sighted we are, our normal immersion in practices would not be what it is unless the possibility of not being thus immersed could scare the hell out of us — there is a sense in which our very immersion in familiar practices tempts us to disengage from those practices. This is no different from how we are situated in a moral debate. As Stephen Mulhall argues, to present your position in a moral debate is to present it by defining your sense of its relation to other positions, to place yourself in a particular space of moral options, and so to place yourself in relation to those who would plot that space differently or would have you place yourself differently in it. He goes on to observe:

But this placing is yours alone to do: the logic of moral argument offers no impersonal background onto which one’s responsibility not only for the choices one makes but for the range of choices one regards as available can be sloughed off. What it does provide, however, is the possibility of accounting for one’s choices, by engaging in modes of explanation and defence which not only make reasoned agreement on that choice a real possibility, but also ensure that a sense of mutual respect, of mutual moral intelligibility, might survive eventual disagreement over the rectitude of a given choice.16

Cavell claims that without the hope of agreement, argument would be pointless, but that it does not follow that without agreement about a conclusion

concerning what ought to be done, the argument is pointless. He seems to accept that we cannot avoid using criteria, but that these are always applied from a particular place and within a particular context. And this is what we have to come to terms with. In some sense this means that one always embraces a particular stance. Clearly, there is always the relation to the other, and to the otherness in oneself, that shapes our ethical point of view. But one should not deny that one starts from somewhere, nor that one is going, at least for the time being, in a particular direction. This should be qualified in two important ways.

In “Who Is My Neighbour? Skepticism and the Claims of Alterity,” Paul Standish, dealing with the idea of “home,” argues that

In the end it is not attachment to this unique place that is the heart of the matter: what is more important is the combination of attachment with a readiness for departure — before, as it were, it fossilizes, or perhaps comes to be romanticized or to parody itself, before, that is, it succumbs to nostalgia, the pain of home.17

And recalling Cavell’s discussion of Wittgenstein’s remark that “one human being can be a complete enigma to another,” Standish notes that the idea of “fully understanding others” hides the extent to which human beings are enigmas to themselves. He stresses that the assumption that a culture can be transparent to its members is as unwarranted as the belief that another culture can be completely opaque. So the first qualification is this: though the starting point may not only be unavoidable but even cherished to some extent, there must at the same time always be a readiness for departure.

There is a second element we need to qualify our educational efforts. Naoko Saito reminds us of the Cavellian theme that, for Ralph Waldo Emerson, moral constraint is not given by the universal moral law of an “ought,” but by the other as a friend who reminds us of the state of our conformity. Thanks to the friend we are drawn beyond ourselves. Saito reiterates Cavell’s point that the role of friendship in moral perfectionism is both recognition and negation.18 Thus the moral task of a friend is not the full grasp of the other, but remembrance of the other in the realm of the yet-to-be known. For Cavell the self is always attained, as well as to be attained. For this we always need, Saito argues, initiation into and departure from the language community.19 She continues by observing that

Cavellian otherness [via Emerson and Thoreau] centers on the idea of equality with a gap and distance, and encounter in mediation. This is necessary to understand Cavell’s remark: “we are alone, and we are never alone.” You can never own the other, but still you owe responsibility to the other — responsibility neither in deficit nor with the sense of guilt. This starts to destabilize the myth of the relationship of mutuality and reciprocity.20

19. Ibid., 7.
20. Ibid., 8.
Here the presence of the other is seen as a mirror, not the mere representation of the outside world in correspondence, but as what clouds the breath of my life. The other — the actual other as well as the other in myself — confronts the self and thus is turned back upon its own self; thus the other is not simply the friend but becomes the teacher, the possibility of self-transcendence. If this can be taken to be paradigmatic for education, the postmodern criticism may engender, instead of a paralysis, an obligation to be for the other what the other is for me. This necessitates articulating the good life, though in a way that is no longer based on solid metaphysical foundations, fossilized one could say. Yet at the same time such a commitment is not haunted by the eternal quest of avoiding the insurmountable injustice to the other. It accepts responsibility, realizing that there is only “this” to start from.

**SITUATEDNESS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF ONE’S HUMANITY**

Incidentally, a parallel can be drawn between what we have argued here and the position Nicholas Burbules and Kathleen Abowitz developed concerning a situated philosophy of education, which they characterize as follows: looking at the conditions of its own practice (the academic and nonacademic settings in which the work is done); asking questions about the who, when, where, and how of what is officially designated as philosophy of education; examining the educational and reproductive processes by which new participants into the practice are trained, initiated, and socialized; and, finally, examining the effects of the practice of philosophy of education. This conception implies an inversion of the typical relation seen between philosophy and philosophy of education on several fronts. First, rather than regarding philosophy of education as an applied subdiscipline, it asks how it can illuminate the significant educational dimensions underlying all major philosophical problems. Second, it changes the dynamic of philosophy of education and the concerns of educational research, policy, and practice, thus avoiding marginalization of the field. Third, it inverts the usual order of things — that is, the application of philosophical tools to educational problems — by beginning with concrete and richly detailed case studies and examples from education, and then drawing philosophical insights from the analysis of those particulars. Finally, the notion of a situated philosophy of education accepts that one is always subject to a particular practice. This, Burbules and Abowitz claim, should be seen as an argument for a more engaged, collaborative, and interdisciplinary understanding of what it means to do philosophy of education nowadays.21 Interestingly, in another essay Burbules comes to a conclusion concerning postmodernism similar to that which we have argued here:

> But it is harder to see how this perspective sustains a general account of education, one that can address the learning of children, that allows for the mastery of basic literacy and thinking

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skills, that provides a basis of cultural understandings sufficient to posing the kinds of deeply problematizing questions called for by a postmodern sensibility. One needs to know a great deal about one’s own culture and traditions, as well as those of others, in order for a theory of difference to have resonance, for example. In short, it is doubtful whether the capacity for a postmodern approach to things can be developed, educationally, in a consistently postmodern manner. Once again, then, we find ourselves “living with ambivalence.”

Does this solve the question of in which kind of practices one should be initiated? Not quite, but it seems to us that a number of issues can be given a place, such as whether the social practices that educators endorse should have something in mind (a just society, justice for all, the values of democracy, cosmopolitanism) and whether in a situation where social practices are in a constant flow, grand projects to instill particular values can still have a justifiable appeal. It seems to us fruitful to distinguish between the social and the cultural, and between the context of the family, the group to which one belongs (with aspects such as subculture, religion, region or country), and the level of world citizenship. We hold that it is not necessarily impossible to come to a more balanced way of thinking about practices, on the one hand, and qualities that characterize society nowadays (for instance, individualism, competitiveness, and secularization), on the other. Neither is it impossible, in our view, for us to work our way toward something worthwhile that is consistent with justice for all, and that correlative this may set some limitations on social practices that focus (too much) on the private concerns of individuals.

It seems quite apposite to use Cavell’s depiction of one’s relation with the other to attend to the concern raised at the beginning of this essay. Central to one’s connection with the other is the view that one has to acknowledge humanity in the other and that the basis for such action lies in oneself: “I have to acknowledge humanity in the Other, and the basis of it seems to lie in me.” Countering the seemingly boundless hatred Hutus have for Tutsis would require that Hutus begin to acknowledge the humanity in those people for whom they seemingly have no regard as human beings. They fail to acknowledge humanity in Tutsis, as they fail to do in the Congolese women they rape. In order to alter this relation Hutus must, in a Cavellian sense, proceed from the point of acknowledging their own humanity, that is, their own feelings, emotions, and compassion toward those who are vulnerable and whom they only want to harm. Unless their own humanity is brought to the fore, they will inevitably show no remorse when violating the sanctity of others’ lives. This is what we think Cavell means when he states that hedging one’s acknowledgment of humanity in others is hedging one’s own humanity in an effort to protect oneself (CR, 434). Hedging one’s own humanity and in turn not acknowledging humanity in the other actually places a limit on one’s humanity, described by Cavell as “the passage into inhumanity...[of

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which]...its signal is horror” (CR, 434). This makes sense considering the serious restriction Hutus place on their own humanity, leading to the atrocities and acts of horror perpetrated against hapless Congolese women. These Hutus simply do not consider it important to recognize humanity in the other — that is, they feel that they do not owe others respect simply as human beings. Such a failure to recognize the humanity of others, Cavell maintains, “reveals the failure of one’s own humanity” (CR, 434). The point is that in order for Hutus to consider Congolese women as persons whose dignity must be respected, they need first to acknowledge themselves as persons who should consider others as being worthy as persons. In other words, in order to acknowledge others as human beings worthy of respect, one should simultaneously acknowledge oneself as a person who should exercise respect. This is what we think Cavell has in mind when he claims that

Another may be owed acknowledgement simply on the ground of his humanity, acknowledgement as a human being, for which nothing will do but my revealing myself to him [or her] as a human being, unrestrictedly, as his or her sheer other, his or her fellow, his or her semblable. — Surely this is, if anything, nothing more than half the moralists who ever wrote have said, that others count, in our moral calculations, simply as persons; or that we have duties to others of a universal kind, duties to them apart from any particular stations we occupy. (CR, 434–435)

For Cavell, the justice one owes to others (that is, one’s duties) requires acknowledging justice in oneself. In this sense he depicts one’s relation to the other and makes crucial the issue of into which kinds of practices one should be initiated. Having some idea of the social practices that we as educators need to endorse would determine the nature of our relations with the other in ourselves and the other in others. We now turn to the discussion of this point.

**Attachment with a Readiness for Departure:**
Practices Transform and Can Be Subverted

In order to perform one’s duty to others as human beings, should we (others and I) engage in social practices with something morally just in mind — that is, a just society, justice for all, values of democracy, cosmopolitanism, and so on? Of course, as educators we are responsible for effecting changes in the lives of our students, so we teach them to be civil. But this does not mean that we ought to censure students’ actions so that we can know in advance that students have achieved civility or what consequences they may face if they do not practice civility [such as, for example, being repudiated by others]. Teaching our students civility, following Cavell, makes us “open to complete surprise at what we have done” (CR, 325). In other words, educators and students can be initiated into practices about what is morally good for society, but they must understand the possibility that what is perceived as good for society is always in the making, continuously subjected to modifications and adaptations. For instance, it may be morally good for society to engage in belligerent encounters at some stage in its history — and we may want to decide this in advance. But when hostility among people ensues and transforms interactions into distressful confrontations that may result in excluding the other, we may want to suggest that belligerence in deliberations is not always desirable for the public good. In other words, our
practices should be tailored to achieve what is desirable for society, and there should be the option or a readiness to depart from such practices when they no longer serve this end.

To initiate children into social practices aimed at teaching them values (such as honesty, respect, courtesy, love, care, and so on) is still a defensible idea. Why? Cavell, following Wittgenstein, argues that in “learning language” children do not merely learn the names of things but what a name is; not merely what the form of expression is for expressing a wish, but what expressing a wish is; not merely what the word “father” is, but what “a father is”: “In learning language, you do not merely learn the pronunciation of sounds, and their grammatical orders, but the forms of life which make those sounds the words they are, do what they do — e.g., name, call, point, express a wish or affection, indicate a choice or an aversion, etc.” (CR, 177–178). Thus, when we teach children “honesty,” “love,” and “care,” we initiate them into relevant forms of life, that is, showing them what we say and do, and accepting what they say and do as what we say and do. Put differently, educators tell themselves and others (children) how they must go about things though they do not predict, in the sense of manipulate, this or that performance. Cavell makes the point that “the authority one has, or assumes, in expressing statements of initiation... is related to the authority one has in expressing or declaring one’s promises or intentions” (CR, 179). So when children are taught to be honest, they learn what the word means as well as to practice honesty. They have not been taught dogmatically to be honest, but only initiated into a form of life passed on by the educator. This also implies that they (children) can subvert these practices — and they may choose to be honest or even decide to be dishonest. They may be transformed by the practice of honesty and also subvert this practice in order to give other opportunities to themselves — such as those unintended actions (theft, burglary, and hijacking) of the practice.

Responsibility to the Other and Reconstituting the Cultural: Transcending Self-Centered Narcissism and Idiosyncratic Actions

Does owing justice to oneself and to others help us to distinguish fruitfully between the social and cultural practices (with reference to the family and group) to which we belong? Cavell’s remark “we are alone, and we are never alone” is a clear indication that one does belong to a particular group — being alone with others, that is, “we” — and by virtue of being human one bears an internal relation to all other human beings — especially those who might not belong to the same group as one does oneself. This internal relation with my fellow citizens does not ignore my answerability or responsibility for what happens to them, despite not belonging to the same group as them. As a member of a particular cultural group in society I cannot just impose my views (whether religious or political) on others, for that in itself would deny that there are others in different positions (with different cultural orientations) than mine. Doing so would be doing an injustice to others. Being answerable or responsible for what happens to them means that their views are acknowledged, although I might not be in agreement with them. Rather, one conceives the other from the other’s point of view with which one has
to engage afresh [CR, 441]. As a person who belongs to a minority ethnic group in society, I should acknowledge the other majority ethnic group’s views, although I might be in sharp disagreement with those views. But in so doing, I do not compromise my relations with others for that would mean a complete breakdown of society. From my own cultural vantage point I might find another group’s views repugnant, but this does not mean that I view this group as outcasts unworthy of any form of engagement. That would be an abdication of my responsibility. The point we are making is that as a human being I can firmly distinguish between the values that constitute the practices of the cultural group to whom I belong from the values that inform social practices other than mine. But this does not mean that I compromise my human connection to others — a matter of exercising my responsibility to them. If some of my fellow citizens question my observance of certain religious practices, then I ought to find ways to engage them with the intention of getting them to understand what I passionately adhere to, or if I find their ignorance about my practices shameful, I should responsibly make known to them what is seemingly unknown.

Does showing responsibility to the other also imply that we are thinking about practices in a more balanced way, especially considering the individualism, competitiveness, and secularization that characterize society today? In demonstrating one’s responsibility toward others, one immediately acknowledges one’s capacity for intimacy with others — thus limiting one’s idiosyncratic privacy. It is for this reason that Cavell claims that “human beings do not naturally desire isolation and incomprehension, but union or reunion, call it community” [CR, 463]. Our private actions may lead to a betterment of our communal actions. I might privately contemplate doing something to improve security in my neighborhood, but doing so autonomously without also penetrating the thoughts of other community members may not necessarily contribute toward a desired action. If my private act remains restricted to me, with no thought of exercising my responsibility to others, my practices would remain unshared and separated from the people with whom I happen to live. Still, my privacy opens a door through which someone else taps into my thoughts that might be of benefit to society. But if my privacy is constituted of narcissism, the possibility that others might gain something valuable for society might be stunted. If I were to think about social practices in a balanced way, I should acknowledge the private efforts of individuals, yet simultaneously not avoid considering the possibility that their private actions can be of good public use.

Thus far we have argued that our social practices should in some ways transcend the private concerns of individuals. Instead, our private actions should create conditions for something worthwhile to emerge that is consistent with justice for all persons. What follows from this is the idea that one’s private actions should be justified with reasons to other individuals with whom I engage in public (worldly) relations. So, if I privately condemn the atrocious crimes perpetrated by Hutus against Tutsis and Congolese, my idiosyncratic expressions or private thoughts should at least open the door for some form of collective action with others that could potentially lead to morally worthwhile actions that could prevent
and eradicate inhumane acts against any civilian population. In other words, my actions do not only provide precepts of individual conduct, but also possibilities for public (universal) justice. Ensuring universal justice for all (including those who suffer genocide and rape) can most appropriately be addressed if our private and cosmopolitan practices flow into one another.

This brings us to the following question: Should education be focused solely on achieving cosmopolitanism without any connection to the cultural group to which one belongs? If I have a responsibility to provide others with a justification for my actions, and we are all participants in such conversations of justification, then it follows that others should also provide a justification of their actions (which might be against my practices) to me. Put differently, if education places “love of humanity” ahead of “love of group,” and “love of humanity” signifies fluidity between the self and others, then education always has some connection with the group to which one belongs — and, by implication, with its culture. If I merely show hospitality to foreigners and strangers without also attending to the needs of my cultural group, I would be violating the sovereign rights of my cultural group. For instance, if I respect the other’s right to freedom of conscience and religion, others should also respect my individual right and adherence to a particular religious belief system.

Cosmopolitanism and (Un)Virtue: Encounters with the Other, the Case of Developed and Developing Countries

Thus far we have set up cosmopolitanism as some virtuous good that cannot be repudiated. But is that depiction accurate? So far all claims about cosmopolitanism suggest that the notion cannot be separated from virtue, and perhaps rightly so. If one considers the Kantian view that cosmopolitanism signifies “the right of hospitality” that belongs to all human beings insofar as we view them as potential participants in a world republic,24 then cosmopolitanism entails a moral or virtuous claim. This right to hospitality, Benhabib argues, “imposes an obligation on the political sovereign, by prohibiting states from denying refuge and asylum to those whose intentions are peaceful and if refusing them sojourn would result in their demise.”25 In this sense, cosmopolitanism invokes the moral and seems to be related to virtue. But then, following Cavell, cosmopolitanism as virtue must leave itself open to repudiation (CR, 269). It provides the possibility for others to exercise their rights, but it cannot be everything.26 In this way, the possibility exists for cosmopolitanism to be unrelated to virtue. Such an unvirtuous encounter with


25. Ibid., 25.

26. In Cavell’s words, “it provides a door through which someone, alienated [Hutu rapists] or in danger of alienation from another through his action, can return by the offering and the acceptance of explanation, excuses and justifications, or by the respect one human being will show another who sees and accepts the responsibility for a position which he himself would not adopt [Hutu rapists accept forgiveness]” (CR, 269).
others is only possible because we consider cosmopolitanism not to be beyond reproach, as is certainly not the case when it comes up against what Cavell refers to as “the newest evil” — that is, forgiving the unforgivable.

It would be difficult to deny the intellectual advances “Western societies” have made in the realm of technological successes and achievements. Simultaneously, developing countries, particularly those on the African continent, have grappled more with bringing about security and stability on the continent than with expanding their technological achievements — the example of Hutu militias raping Congolese women and perpetrating other atrocities against humanity and how Africans deal with the situation illustrates the point we are making. Thus it would not be unfair to claim that “Western societies” have placed more emphasis on their children becoming highly competitive, intellectually advanced, and economically sustainable, whereas African communities have been constantly exhorting their members to be more caring toward one another with the intent to quell all kinds of inhumanity and injustice. We specifically think about the Ministries of Education of many African countries charging their formal institutions {schools and universities} to develop curricula that connect with ensuring compassionate justice for all Africa’s peoples, families being urged to rear their children with more dignity and concern for the other, and societies being encouraged to cultivate defensible forms of democratic discourse. Considering the line of argument developed in this essay, it may well be justifiable to evoke moments of filling in the good life for others, while simultaneously leaving open the door for occasions of doubt regarding the metanarratives. As Cavell argues, invoking morality by deciding what might be good for others should at the same time establish the possibility for its repudiation. It is with such a view in mind that encounters with the other should not be seen as a new form of universalism or Foucauldian subjectivism, but rather as an opening that creates opportunities both for attachment and detachment, that is, acknowledgment and avoidance. Thus as philosophers of education concerned with illuminating, identifying, and solving major problems in our societies, we are now confronted with having to acknowledge the wrongs in our societies and simultaneously with the challenge of putting into place the means for avoiding such ills.

We started by referring to the situation of the women of East Congo and mentioned the injustice that is done to them and, more generally, by the Interahamwe to the Tutsi. Our argument should not be seen as a new kind of universalism that defines how the other should live not only now but in the future as well. It should however be read as an amended version of the position Benhabib developed and that is so correctly argued for by Cavell, who draws our attention to the idea of encounter. It is time for philosophers of education to embrace a similar position and thus not to produce an alibi {even unwittingly} to those who clearly abuse the other in the name of cherishing otherness as mere difference.