

Title: The Leap of Learning

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Abstract

This article seeks to elaborate the step of epistemological affirmation that exists within every movement of learning. My epistemological method is rooted in philosophical hermeneutics in contrast to empirical or rationalist traditions. I argue that any movement of learning is based upon an entry into a hermeneutical circle: one is thrown into, or leaps into an interpretation which in some sense has to be temporarily affirmed or adopted in order to be either absorbed and integrated, or overcome and rejected. I illustrate this process through a retrieval of the concept of *submission* in pedagogy, particularly with reference to submission in Oriental traditions, as well as pre-modern Christian thought. These *other* traditions are introduced to contrast with the modern liberal Western perspective in which the role of submission has been almost entirely lost.

Keywords

submission, hermeneutics, Ricoeur, tai chi, pedagogy, epistemology

Introduction

The purpose of this article is primarily epistemological. My principal concern is to elaborate the step of epistemological affirmation that exists within every movement of learning. I will argue that one has to engage in a kind of pre-critical ‘primary affirmation’ in order to undertake the kind of learning necessary for a critical engagement with what one learns. That this is in contrast to the empirical tradition of the *tabula rasa* need not suggest an idealist/rationalist approach. Rather my approach is best described as

hermeneutical. I propose that any movement of learning is based upon an entry into a hermeneutical circle:ⁱ one is thrown into, or leaps into an interpretation which in some sense has to be temporarily affirmed or adopted in order to be either absorbed and integrated, or overcome and rejected. Speaking of the level at which we *always already* begin within an affirmed pre-understanding or interpretation, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur describes hermeneutics as proceeding “from a prior understanding of the very thing that it tries to understand by interpreting it” (1967, 352). I intend to illustrate this principle through a retrieval of the concept of *submission* in pedagogy, particularly with reference to submission in Oriental traditions, as well as pre-modern Christian thought. These *other* traditions are introduced to contrast with the modern liberal Western perspective in which the role of submission has been almost entirely lost.

Philosophical context

Within the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics, the hermeneutical circle has been employed to describe the interaction between the structure of our pre-understandings and our perception of things: our pre-understandings give rise to, or constitute our perceptions, while themselves undergoing reinterpretation following those perceptions.ⁱⁱ Prior to this development within modern philosophy, hermeneutics arose to facilitate the complex process of Scriptural interpretation. In this article I will employ the insights of philosophical hermeneutics towards an interpretation of the structure of pedagogy. The significance of these insights for education are broad, though I would suggest at the outset that a proper understanding of affirmation within education can help us to resist the worst excesses of the efforts to secularize the modern curriculum. This is because no curriculum, no educational system, can be entirely free of commitment. A secular curriculum, as much as any, affirms a range of ideas for which there can be no absolute justification; it is a matter of judgement as to where one locates

the step of primary affirmation. The desire of secular liberalism to separate church and state clearly involves particular commitments, which are far from uncontested, about the proper role and scope of the state. The notion that no educational system is without its pre-understandings is important not only to resist the caustic atheism and somewhat more tempered secularism that characterize recent cultural discourse,ⁱⁱⁱ but also to help us in assessing the appropriate contribution that any rooted tradition can make to education, and where that contribution should be seen as excessive or unfounded. To that end, I address in particular those seeking to understand the relations between our embedded cultural traditions (whether that is framed in explicitly Christian, or more broadly liberal terms) and our responsibilities to educate informed, thoughtful, engaged and free citizens.

Returning to the structure of philosophical hermeneutics, I suggest that the process of interpretation/understanding that always precedes critical engagement, what Ricoeur calls a first naïveté (1967, 19), requires a form of speculative engagement that places one in a relationship with the learning that is ‘involved’.^{iv} For early Ricoeur, it is in the field of religious studies that the movement from a pre-critical first naïveté to a post-critical second naïveté is particularly applicable, though this structure applies just as well to the process of understanding and pedagogy more generally, and so is worthy of elaboration. In *The Symbolism of Evil*, Ricoeur describes the first naïveté as the attitude in which religious truths are taken at simple face value. Ricoeur argues that the rational forces of modernity have made this simple relation to religious truth generally untenable, leading us to pass through a phase of critical distance, or *distanciation*. But rather than simply living in a post-critical atheism, Ricoeur argues that it is possible to move beyond this critical stage towards a post-critical *second* naïveté: "Beyond the desert of criticism, we wish to be called again" (1967, 349). The

details of how Ricoeur achieves this post-critical understanding are complex (1967, 1977). But the general structure – the 3-stage movement of affirmation, critique and re-engagement – can provide a model for pedagogy more generally. In his later writings, Ricoeur (1984) reconfigures the three stage interpretive structure through his work on the unity of time and narrative in his “threefold mimesis” (Wallace 1996). Here Ricoeur employs the language of prefiguration (mimesis 1), configuration (mimesis 2), and refiguration (mimesis 3) from *Time and Narrative* (1984), which encourages a clear identification of one’s commitment as the prefigured ‘pre-narrative’ in which any understanding (as narrative) becomes possible. While this later expression is many ways a broader ‘literary’ retelling of Ricoeur’s earlier philosophical hermeneutics, I am keen to recall the more explicitly theological moment captured in the earlier work of *The Symbolism of Evil*.

More directly addressing the step of primary affirmation, Ricoeur describes the structure of the hermeneutical circle in the following terms: “The circle can be stated bluntly: ‘We must understand in order to believe, but we must believe in order to understand.’ The circle is not a vicious circle, still less a mortal one; it is a living and stimulating circle” (1967, 351). Unsurprisingly for Ricoeur, this statement clearly draws upon the theological idea of *faith seeking understanding* in which a step, or leap of faith is part of the process of engagement with something other (God).^v As the philosopher of religion Kierkegaard rightly saw, the leap of faith cannot be organized or made rational (1980). It must involve the total abandonment of what one understands to be the rules of the game such that it can be an authentic response to an impossible question, or an infinite theological demand. Any response to a theological call is, in this sense, a wager.^{vi} We respond to a call made only in the hope, never the secure knowledge, that what we hear is not simply the product of our own pre-understanding.

Nor is the pursuit of scientific knowledge able to avoid the leap of affirmation here defined. Philosophers of science like Michael Polanyi (1958) and Paul Feyerabend (1978) have amply demonstrated the fallacy of the pursuit of objective scientific knowledge. But this does not undermine the power of science; rather it shows the necessary structure in which scientific understanding develops. John Polkinghorne is explicit in his concern to relate the scientist's act of commitment to at least some basic consistency as a presupposition of any scientific research, with an apprehension of divine order in the cosmos: "The scientist commits himself to belief in the rationality of the world in order to discover what form that rationality takes" (1991, 6). But the implication of circularity is not intended to crush scientific progress, but to properly contextualize it, a context which demonstrates the affirmation of understanding: "No one of serious intent can escape the necessity of an intellectual bootstrap to raise himself above the earthbound state of unreflective experience" (1991, 7).

From a pedagogical perspective, the commitment, or leap, exists in the sense that in order to truly understand something beyond mere tautology, one has to enter into the appropriate orientation or perspective. A position is taken prior to any reflective or critical movement. This could be understood in terms of the traditional hermeneutical task of reading a text patiently or sympathetically such that its riches are given a chance to reveal themselves, or in terms of a more foundational epistemological problem of understanding in general. We might call this *the course of understanding* in so far as understanding is not simply arrived at following a direct encounter with some novel aspect of knowledge, but rather emerges dialectically through a 3-stage course or process of primary affirmation, critical reflection and, finally post-critical adoption and adaptation.^{vii} In order to explore this course of understanding within pedagogy I want to make a comparison between what I will crudely characterize as a comparison

between Eastern and Western pedagogy. I acknowledge the limitations of the rather blunt analysis of world history in terms of the dated East/West binary (see Maxwell 2010, 1-32), but will use this analysis as a heuristic tool to make a general point about the structure of pedagogy that, in the final analysis, does not depend upon the fine accuracy of the characterization itself. It could be said that this example itself plays the role of a first naïveté providing a platform for a critical engagement with the ideas I intend it to illustrate. And so, in the spirit of ethnographic inquiry, I present my own experience of learning and teaching Tai Chi in an autobiographical fashion, so that the structure of commitment, along with some of the consequent problems, can be clearly identified and elaborated. The underlying significance here is that structure of pedagogy in Eastern traditions is in stark contrast to the conventional view in Western philosophy of education and educational practice: that the learner must be educated towards absolute autonomy (Bridges 1997).

Tai Chi

When I first discovered the Chinese health art *Tai Chi* at the age of nineteen, I did not know what I was getting myself into. I thought it might be fun to do, good exercise and, knowing that the Master also taught martial arts, I hoped that I would learn some interesting combat techniques. I began with an open mind, but with a sense that there were hidden depths to this ancient art. As the weeks of training rolled on, I become more interested and engaged. The weeks became months, and the months, years, until, in the fullness of time I became a senior instructor running my own branches and training daily, sometimes for hours.

What began as an interest in health and martial arts, became so much more. I realized that *Tai Chi* represented a way of being that engaged the human body, mind and spirit

on many levels. There was no way I could have understood the meaning of the art without spending time engaged in daily practice. And the discipline of daily practice was not easy, but for reasons that are not entirely clear to me, I stuck at it. There is something of a paradox at the heart of this process. I sought some kind of engagement or fulfillment that I both did and did not recognize as present in the practice. I had some inkling that the discipline of daily practice was worthwhile, but there was no way that I could fully comprehend the meaning of what I was beginning to get into.

This article is primarily concerned with elaborating this epistemological structure as it arises in a number of contexts, so that a principle of pedagogy, largely ignored in modern Western educational philosophy, can be identified. The structure has its roots in the Platonic epistemological principle of anamnesis in which our ability to recognize something understood as true, is dependent, on some level, on its prior existence within the soul (Plato 1955; 1961). I have already suggested that this structure is best understood as hermeneutical, which, for the present purposes, could be seen as a reading of Platonic metaphysics. In the context of Tai Chi, this structure expressed itself in a sense that there was something to this art that I recognized despite the fact that I was unable to fully articulate the nature of the perception.

Perhaps I was simply enamored by the force of personality that my master exuded. Indeed it was inspiring to see my master's ability to maintain an inscrutable depth while also presenting a very pragmatic concern for his business as an instructor. But throughout my training I was also torn. My master had certain ways of talking and behaving which seemed redolent of a lost age, from certain formalities within class, to unusual expectations of commitment. I say unusual expectations because modern Londoners did not always adapt well to the structure and rigour that our master sought

to uphold. Yet it was those very expectations that stimulated and energized those who held out to discover the meaning of Tai Chi in suburban London.

I recall a particular incident that, for me, captures something of the spirit of this commitment. It is such a minor incident that it scarcely seems worthy of discussion, but, oddly enough, the insignificance of the event adds, I think, to its broader meaning.

^{viii} (The idea of catching sight of the insignificant, emerges out of the hermeneutical insight that the structures of understanding in the ‘involved’ everyday experience, what Heidegger (1966) calls everydayness, are more illuminating than the *deworlded* knowledge elaborated out of the engaged context in terms of more grandiose theories of knowledge. Having been coming to classes for nearly a year, I had yet to speak directly to the master who primarily instructed senior students who in turn instructed the newer students such as myself - this hierarchy reflected the traditional approach. Then, for a reason that I do not recall, I was invited to speak with the master but had not given any thought to how I might address him. I was aware that students used the Cantonese/Mandarin honorific title *Sifu* to speak about the master, but I had not anticipated addressing him directly in that way. Being unsure, I nervously used his first name, at which point he gave me a look which demonstrably indicated the nature of the faux pas. My initial feeling was one of great embarrassment. This later gave way to a sense of confusion about the way in which Sifu allowed me to feel so dreadfully awkward without so much as a sign or word of relief. Reflecting on the incident that day, I considered that my interpretation of this event was, for me, a decision. I could choose to interpret the lack of sympathy with my discomfort which Sifu seemed to display as a failure of his part: a failure of his approach and/or character, an interpretation which might reinforce a general perception that Sifu was maintaining a hierarchy that suited his self-image. Alternatively, I could choose to see this as an

opportunity to look at my own relation to the world: that Sifu was enabling me to see just how fragile I was, just how overly sensitive my ‘ego’ was to such simple, everyday interactions. In choosing the latter interpretation, my embarrassment and shame became instructive, powerful even, rather than disabling or diminishing. This was the first of many interactions that I could interpret in different ways: often either as denigration or instruction. In affirming the latter interpretation, I was choosing to suspend the critical interpretation of my master in which my difficulties could be safely externalized. I was submitting myself to his approach since he was my teacher. This example is offered as an illustration of what I call the *paradigm of submission* that, broadly speaking, is more characteristic of Eastern pedagogy and expressed itself, in my experience, through the formalities of training as a student with a master.

The Affirmation in Submission

I felt that many of the difficulties that other students had with the more traditional pedagogical style within Eastern arts – the hierarchy, formality and a certain expectation of submission of personal will – could be understood in just the terms expressed above, as the opportunity to look at the movement of the self as the issue to consider. The temptation within Western thought to externalize the problem by assuming it to be a failure of the ‘product’ – the class or the instructors, was thoroughly countered by a sense that most difficulties were actually the natural expression of the anxieties of self-identity, put under pressure both by the unfamiliar formalities, as well as the silence at the heart of the practice itself. The more general philosophical point seemed to be that submission became an opportunity to uncover the self rather than a negation of the self.^{ix} So we arrive at a principle of the master/student relationship that I want to identify, namely submission. The apprentice is required not simply to undertake a rigorous training process having fully understood what is at stake – what

might be understood as a calculated exchange, where the student brings the cash and the teacher brings the knowledge. Rather the student is asked to submit to something that there is no way they can really understand, an irrational commitment that is not incidental within this pedagogy anymore than the leap of faith could be incidental for Kierkegaard. In Tai Chi I had to give up the impression that my master could be fallible or self-seeking in order to proceed along the path. While, speaking objectively, my master may have been as susceptible to egoistic pretensions as anyone else, such an interpretation seemed to intrude upon deeper engagement. It became clear that interpreting the difficulties I was having with my training as a failure anywhere but within myself (e.g. with the master or the organization) was not going to help. Pride and self-interest had to be overcome but at the risk of submitting to a force that I did not have the capacity to fully assess. In this sense, the apprentice must make a leap of commitment in order to undertake the path of understanding. The student cannot know in advance whether the commitment they are making is worthwhile or not. There is, by definition, a vulnerability, risk, or wager to be made by the student. And in Chinese martial arts, in particular Tai Chi, as well as in other Buddhist and Taoist traditions, the student must engage in extensive preparatory training culminating in a ritual initiation to demonstrate that they are worthy for ‘inside the door’ training (Docherty 1997, 61-70).

It is important at this stage to point out that *knowledge* is here not understood simply as a theoretical appreciation of a practice or state of affairs, but rather as lived understanding; that to know something is really meant to imply a unity of knowing and being. Perhaps the archetypal example would be that inferred from Plato’s *Republic*, that in order to know justice one must attain to the virtue of justice, not simply to understand the principles of justice in theoretical form. One attains to justice because

one understands, or perceives the nature of justice and desires the good. Similarly, one can read that Tai Chi has certain health benefits in any number of books, but only through rigorous practice can one really know the benefits of Tai Chi in a direct way (Klein 1984; Docherty 1997; Sutton 1998). It is precisely this epistemological principle that plays the curious role in pedagogy that I want to highlight. For by definition, this real knowledge cannot be gained without engagement. But how does one know what to engage with prior to the illumination (or critical understanding) that follows? Historically this question has been easier to answer since there simply was not the range of traditions and teachings on offer. But the post-modern globalized age presents us with the kind of spiritual supermarket that makes this question especially pertinent (Carrette and King 2005; Karner and Aldridge 2004). How are we today to pick through the range of traditions and ways of life seeking our allegiance? The problem of allegiance relates also to the possibility of exploitation.

A major problem with the pedagogical model that relies upon submission is the potential for manipulation and abuse. When it comes to the realm of spiritual pedagogy, within for example, the ‘Bhakti’ devotional traditions in Hinduism, some of the key dangers of complete submission of the student to guru are reflected in Mary Garden’s account of her experience on the guru trail during the 1970’s:

Eastern mysticism was new and exotic to Westerners, and we were in the vanguard as we traipsed from guru to guru, unable to see that we would have been better to give up on them altogether—at least until we had sorted ourselves out psychologically. But there had been no exposés or warnings of the damage that could be done to our minds and our bodies when we surrendered our critical thinking (and our hearts) to gurus. We were young and gullible, susceptible (Garden 2005).

Nor is this kind of problem specific to Westerners who seek the ancient wisdom of the ‘mystical lands’ of the Orient. The Indian *gurukul* tradition, in which a principal guru or sage teaches according to their own style within an ashram, makes demands upon any student whether they are Western or not. These days the *gurukul* is generally confined to the ancient arts of classical music, Sanskrit, Yoga and other artistic and spiritual endeavors, a tradition in which, to this day students are expected to serve the guru and ashram in all sorts of ways, from cooking and cleaning, to collecting alms. Submission is a principal component of the pedagogical process in which the appropriate orientation of the student provides the right context for sensitive reception of deeper knowledge. As Ozmon and Craver have noted, “the guru might encourage students to do things that seem meaningless and absurd to them but that lead to enlightenment. Thus, students must be able to place great confidence in their teacher” (Ozmon 2008). The more receptive the student, the greater the opportunity to learn, but also the greater the risk of abuse. Scandals surrounding certain Indian gurus have demonstrated some of the risks associated, with notable controversies surrounding ‘Osho’ Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh and Sathya Sai Baba (Milne 1987; Buncombe 2011). My present concern is less with the potential for abuse that exists, than with the inevitable commitment that traditional Oriental pedagogy expects. I regard this commitment as a hermeneutical disposition not confined to Eastern thought, but something that every student, to some extent, must take towards his or her subject of study. Indeed, it is this disposition of commitment, what I have called a primary affirmation, that both creates the possibility of abuse, but also sustains the engagement required to enter into a productive circle of understanding. The hermeneutical circle, in this case, is not simply an inhibiting structure to be escaped, but is equally a structure that facilitates and so is to be acknowledged as a space in which learning is possible.

But as has already been suggested, a problem of critical understanding inevitably occurs. On what basis can the student assess the quality or integrity of the guru? Why should a student enter into any specific form of commitment, when it is an irrational (perhaps arbitrary) decision that leads to their choice of Tai Chi, learning the piano, becoming a physicist, joining a monastic order, or whatever? This question is even more pertinent when the initial decision to enter into a commitment is made on behalf of the child by the parent. In the case of classical Indian music within a traditional gurukul, the student does not have complete access to the full depth of the artistic insight simply through hearing the performance of their guru. Only through extensive applied participation can the student fully understand and appreciate the music. From this point of view knowing and being are indistinguishable. To be sure, the student can appreciate some aspects and depths present in the music (as through a glass darkly the truth can be perceived) and there may be an intuitive sense that the guru is the *real thing*. In the arts there is a certain aspect through performance which can be publically shared. But what of the spiritual guru whose insight is that much less expressive, and is only articulated in a depth of presence impossible to represent. In spiritual matters, there seems to be much less room for maneuver within the hermeneutic circle, and so the vulnerabilities of the student seem that much more acute. But the problem of establishing the veracity of a teacher is not, of course, exclusive to Oriental traditions.

On the whole, the Western philosophical tradition no longer accommodates the authoritarian style of pedagogy characteristic of the oriental world. Whether in the context of the Indian gurukul, the Zen Buddhist training explored in Eugen Herrigel's book *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1985), or the tradition of fellowship that permeates the Chinese martial arts, the strong bond between teacher and student can appear rather peculiar or anachronistic to the uninitiated Westerner. It can appear that the student is

expected to submit too readily to the training regimen that is set out by the master. How can people be expected to put aside their critical faculty and enter into a commitment to some practice for which there is little rational account? But as I have argued, the expectation of a certain orientation or disposition is a prerequisite within the structure of understanding itself. The hermeneutical leap in Eastern thought could be seen simply as having been made explicit; the leap is formalized or ritualized. What purpose could this ritualization of affirmation serve? It is quite conceivable that the ritualization of such a process is not the anomaly. It may be that the affirmative leap is lost to Western pedagogy because of the relatively recent shift towards an assumption of epistemological neutrality and the related rejection of all forms of authoritarianism. Furthermore is not our tendency to ignore commitment the anomaly? Since the scientific revolution, we in the West have tended to regard ourselves as masters of nature. ^x Secularisation has moved forward upon the wave of epistemological objectivity that regards any step of faith or unjustifiable commitment with great suspicion. Insofar as we regard ourselves as rational creatures, we anticipate eliminating any arbitrary commitments that are, in fact, an essential part of the process of understanding. The polarized debates around the relevance of religious studies within modern education in which many commentators demand objective criteria from which to (most often) reject the inclusion of religion, is just one example where an assumption of objectivity is revealed (Hand 2006; Cooling 2010). Moreover, the modern scientist is not at home acknowledging the kind of primary affirmation I have discussed. But Western philosophers and theologians have not always been as metaphysically hesitant. Centuries before the scientific revolution, Western thought too structured a conception of primary apprehension in various ways. Denys Turner's book *The Darkness of God* explores this epistemological structure and process as it occurs in varied writings, from

Plato's allegory of the cave, to the writings of Christian mystics such as St. Augustine and John of the Cross. A clear example of this paradoxical structure is expressed in a recurring theme of St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Early on Augustine asks "whether a man is first to pray for help...and whether he must know you before he can call you to his aid." Augustine goes on to state the heart of the problem: "If he does not know you, how can he pray to you?" (Augustine 1961, 1). How can one commit to something without knowledge of that to which one commits? He who is lost may seek God in prayer, but that prayer may, in some way, be misguided or ill founded. For Augustine this problem is serious but not insurmountable. For God is not to be sought outside, but within, "eternally more intimate to me than I am to myself" (Turner 1995, 59). It is a divine seed within that draws the seeker to God. But the precise nature of this seed, which for Augustine is the source of all human longing, is not something that can be thematically defined or determined. As the source of human desire, God is both knowable and beyond knowledge. The dialectic of desire in Augustine draws upon a rich Neo-Platonic heritage in which the Good (or the One) remains, in some sense, at the apex of human understanding and activity. The condition of human desire is structured by the force of radiation of the Good, and it is our ability to respond to this force that, for Augustine, demonstrates the presence of divinity in humanity. Ultimately, education cannot be dissociated from the process of coming to know God within. This example from Augustinian thought illustrates the Neo-Platonic epistemology that animates the Latin Christian tradition and has therefore been massively influential in the West. One can trace indications of an understanding of primary affirmation from Plato, through Plotinus and Proclus, Augustine, Bonaventure, Aquinas, Eckhart and even up to Descartes (Lewin 2011, 62-63). But a fuller study of this strand is beyond my present scope.

As we saw earlier, from the Oriental perspective, the master-student relation is a complex and necessary one, said to encourage a detachment from the ego by way of surrender. The path of surrender to a master might seem a long way from modern western schools, colleges and universities where often it is increasingly thought to be the job of the educator to adapt and commit to the needs of the student, not the other way around. In these days of rising university fees, the consumer model is no longer simply a theoretical concern for the academy (Bok 2003; Palfreyman 2004). We have moved a long way away from the tradition that once took for granted the providential nature of the world as the basis of education. For the pre-modern mind, education would begin with the affirmation of divine order and providence a point to which I will return shortly.

There is a danger that the temporal distance of the Western theological tradition, and the cultural distance of Eastern thought and practice will render these observations irrelevant to the business of contemporary pedagogy. Indeed, anyone working within state education in the UK today can scarcely be unaware of the 'student-centred' paradigm that currently prevails (Estes 2004). This orientation towards the needs, concerns and proclivities of the student no doubt has much to commend it: it appears to ensure a certain commitment to standards by teachers; it encourages an appropriate synthesis between engagement, entertainment and education, driven by the idea that students learn most effectively when they are engaged; and it is built upon a model of cooperation over coercion which in principle accords with modern sensibilities. This is some way from Indian gurukul tradition that would require months, even years of apparently menial application by the student to demonstrate their commitment thereby ensuring that their interests in education are unsullied by utilitarian or individualistic interests. It is the starkness of the contrast between Eastern and Western pedagogy,

even with the rough caricatures offered here that can prove instructive, because we are then able to glimpse some of our deeper assumptions about the freedom and individualism of our present context, to which I now turn.

Individualism

Philosophically speaking it would seem that the individualism of the West is central to this difference. Freedom is at the heart of our culture, individual creative expression the oil of the Western machine. That conception of individuality finds its historical roots in the slow dissolution of the Christian cosmos that took place following the cultural shift inaugurated by such figures as Galileo, Bacon and Newton. Thomas Hobbes provided the narrative of political liberalism that was built around the priority of the individual, in which social organization exists only above a prepolitical and lawless state of natural isolation (Hobbes 1975; Dupre 1995, 129). At the same time, Descartes (1988) was defining the apex of individualism as the capacity to think and thereby to be sure of self-existence at the inevitable expense of any secure knowledge of the world and other people. Whatever Descartes' intentions, the Cartesian legacy was a self-certain subject severed from passive objects that populate a dead cosmos. Prior to this, the Greek-Christian synthesis understood that a kind of divine intelligence inheres within the cosmos itself and is not solely resident within the minds of human beings.

While speaking to a specific political context, Paulo Freire has described the dire consequences, if not the causes, in his metaphor of the banking concept of education in which students are filled with the objects of knowledge (2000, chapter 2). No longer is education a process of seeking coherence between the human mind and a world suffused with divine intelligibility, as it was for Thomas Aquinas (Aquinas 1952; Milbank and Pickstock 2001), rather education is the about filling of the student with

representational knowledge of world without intrinsic meaning. The consequent secularism is then unsurprising. The deeper relevance here is the sense that an intelligent cosmos calls for a primary affirmation since there is an intrinsic order to things from which understanding the world may begin. In the language of philosophical hermeneutics, the order of things is *always already* understood prior to any movement of learning. Seeing providence in the structure of things always entails a commitment of the mind which, from a skeptical perspective, might seem unjustified, but as noted earlier, is in fact an inescapable presupposition of knowing at all, even in the most secular of scientific approaches. The philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer (1975) sought to explain this presupposition by way of his rehabilitation of prejudice, authority and tradition. As Jeff Malpas puts it, “The prejudicial character of understanding means that, whenever we understand, we are involved in a dialogue that encompasses both our own self-understanding and our understanding of the matter at issue... One consequence of Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudice is a positive evaluation of the role of authority and tradition as legitimate sources of knowledge” (2009). Gadamer saw himself as providing a necessary corrective to the obsession with objectivity characteristic of Enlightenment thought. Clearly Gadamer’s concern to find a positive role for tradition, authority and even prejudice corresponds with my concern to articulate the step of affirmation within education. Along with Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur provide a rich philosophical context for an appreciation of the contextual nature of learning.

Application

This inquiry has offered indications of the structure of learning which itself is rooted in a deeper epistemology. I have suggested that the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer and Ricoeur provide a theoretical basis for understanding what I call the leap

of learning. Beyond purely philosophical reflection, are there any practical implications of this analysis?

In calling for some acknowledgement of the leap of learning, I am not arguing for a paradigm shift in educational theory from individual freedom to a more submissive attitude; still less am I recommending total submission to the authority of a great teacher. But submission is a spectrum, attitude or orientation, rather than a clear-cut state or decision. I argue that an essential component of education is the spontaneous orientation of engagement in which attention is given. My claim ultimately is that a form of submission is essential to every form of understanding whether in the Indian traditional gurukul, the Tai Chi class in London, or the sometimes mundane context of school education up and down the country. The simplest form of everyday submission is the act of listening and paying attention. In other words, attention is submission.

An interesting way to consider the relevance of this for educators today is to find ways of acknowledging affirmation, and one way to do this would be through a consideration of the gift of attention. The moment the student gives the teacher attention they offer a wager, albeit in a small way. Students could be encouraged to see that the gift of attention to a subject of study is just that, a gift. I do not believe that a recognition of the gift character of attention would result in a miserly attitude in which the students measure out their attention, as though conscious of the precious commodity in their purview and wanting to preserve it for things they already know to be pleasing. Students would be better prepared to offer their attention if teachers did more to recognize and appreciate the gift of the student's attention. This simple recognition, even if it is not ritualized in forms akin to the Eastern traditions we have touched upon, would assist students in recognizing their responsibility. Yet the onus is on the educator to acknowledge the gift of attention, of affirmation, that begins the journey of education.

The structures of modern educational policy, from the use of aims and objectives in classes, to the transparency of the curriculum, can sometimes give the impression that educators must give a guarantee of success and engagement in advance of the process (see Dunne 1993). These performative structures may remove some of the risks associated with the leap of learning, but the wager is an essential component of the process itself. The leap would not be the same if a harness supported us. But most seriously, there is a danger that performative structures contribute to a general concealment of this leap and its necessity.

Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that a moment of pure attention, whether listening to music, eating food, or being with friends, is a form of giving up the self, of submission. The strange and the unfamiliar, in a word *the other*, are themselves opportunities for giving of oneself, for what the philosopher of education Krishnamurti (1969) called 'freedom from the known'. While we spend much of our lives engaged with the 'known', the movement of learning described by Krishnamurti is precisely understood as a freedom from the tired representations that constitute our daily experience of the world. For him it is only the quality of attention that makes real education possible.

Conclusion

I have argued that an understanding of the affirmation implicit in education, and in epistemology generally, allows us to dissolve the idol of objectivity that still haunts our conception of the modern curriculum. I have suggested that Eastern forms of traditional pedagogy present alternatives to the Western individualistic conception of liberal education. In the present climate where the notion of a 'neutral' relationship to learning underpins the broadly secular language of school curriculum development in the UK,

the idea of submission could seem radical, scandalous, or absurd. My intention has been to demonstrate the implicit forms of submission that constitute the daily activities of educators and of students, whether or not they regard their activities in neutral terms. My view rests on the assumption that there is no neutral ground in education from which to teach the facts, an assumption that might also seem questionable among certain circles. But I have tried at least to demonstrate the many contexts in which these assumptions would not seem problematic. Indeed I referred to Augustinian thought to suggest a pre-modern form of this structure of pedagogy. I have presented these ‘alternative pedagogies’ in order to evoke the trace of commitment or the leap involved in undertaking any learning at all. Recognizing this commitment encourages us to value our rootedness in tradition while simultaneously calling for a critical engagement with the context of our tradition. It allows for what Ricoeur called ‘Critique and Conviction’ (Ricoeur 1998).

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ⁱ Although Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur are most associated with philosophical hermeneutics, Nietzsche specialists might seek to explain the hermeneutical approach set out here in terms of a Nietzschean philosophy of affirmation. Although I suspect such a connection may be fruitful, it lies beyond my present concerns.

ⁱⁱ This modern sense of hermeneutics develops largely in the wake of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. As Karl Simms has pointed out, Hans Georg Gadamer's book *Truth and Method* "represents the first attempt to develop a fully fledged 'hermeneutics' in the modern sense" (Simms 2003, 39). But Ricoeur's more sustained treatment of hermeneutics is arguably at least as influential today.

ⁱⁱⁱ Along with Alasdair MacIntyre, Ricoeur elaborated the religious significance of atheism by examining the theological significance of the 'great' atheists: Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche (MacIntyre and Ricoeur 1969). This kind of atheism is some way from the resurgent atheism espoused by certain secularists and humanists skeptical of apparent 'post-secular' contemporary contexts.

^{iv} Heidegger's account of 'involved' relations with things is most consistently elaborated within *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1996).

^v For St Anselm, who is most associated with the Christian dictum *faith seeking understanding* (*fides quaerens intellectum*), faith is understood more as an act of orientation or volition. In line with the thesis of a primary affirmation, Anselm understands this formula to indicate: "an active love of God seeking a deeper knowledge of God" (Anselm 2001).

^{vi} Ricoeur adopts the notion of the wager, made most famous by Blaise Pascal, to explore the nature of engaged hermeneutics: The wager is "that I shall have a better understanding of man, and of the bond between the being of man and the being of all beings if I follow the *indication* of symbolic thought. That wager then becomes the task of *verifying* my wager and saturating it, so to speak, with intelligibility. In return, the task transforms my wager: in betting *on* the significance of the symbolic world, I bet at the same time *that* my wager will be restored to me in power of reflection, in coherent discourse." (Ricoeur 1967, 355)

^{vii} Ricoeur calls this a 'long-route' to being via interpretive structures, in contrast to Heidegger's more direct route to fundamental ontology (see Kearney 2004, 22).

^{viii} By contrast to the following account of my own experience, here are words that might otherwise characterize the depth of relation in more substantial terms: "Meeting one's Guru or Master is a Mystery. It is a date with destiny. Those who are lucky enough to stumble upon this seismic encounter may never be the same again. In that meeting one experiences, suddenly or gradually, an ecstatic release into the limitless singularity and depth of one's True Self." (Bampton 2009).

^{ix} Among the best known examples of this formulation of self-understanding is to be found in Luke 9:24 "whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."

^x The infamous image of Francis Bacon advocating the 'torture of nature' may not be historically accurate (Pescic 1999), but the general notion that we have expected nature to yield knowledge is not an unfair characterization of modern scientific and technological practice.