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A Pedagogical Imperative of Pedagogical Imperatives

Lewis R. Gordon - Temple University

Let me begin by saying how honored I am to be a recipient of the James and Helen Merritt Distinguished Service Award for Contributions to the Philosophy of Education. Thank you, members of the selection committee, for publicly announcing such recognition of my work, and thank you to James and Helen Merritt for founding this award. A travesty in the academy has been the derision of critical thought, of reflection, in the study of education, especially with regard to its significance for the cultivation of citizenship and human well-being. To choose to honor those whose life work is devoted to thinking, to those activities that transform the human animal into the human being through a transition from sign to symbol, to choose such in times where nothing is more feared in our nation's political life than an informed public, is an act that goes beyond intelligence to the realm of wisdom.

As Dr. Linda O'Neill, a member of the committee, would attest, our correspondence after notification of my selection reveals my profound gratitude for being acknowledged

for what brought me to the academy in the first place. The story is as follows. I was working as a professional musician, playing drums and sometimes piano, before going to college. My decision to go to college was personal, not academic. I wanted to spend more time with my girlfriend. Playing jazz, blues, funk, and being in the orchestra pit for some off-Broadway theater meant

performing on many long nights, and since the income was low, spending many long days in minimum-wage jobs.

At first, I enrolled in many of my girlfriend's classes, but the experience reminded me of how much I loved to write. I had devoted much time to writing in my childhood. That energy was spent on genres ranging from short stories to novellas, and on exploratory essays on matters such as how blood vessels

absorb the pressure of a heart beat and more abstract matters such as whether there would be a pure Being if all material things and all energy ceased.

Good faith is not the opposite of bad faith. What is needed is attention to the critical norms of evidence, of criteria by which good judgment comes about.

Yes, I was an odd kid. I did not realize that, however, because of how absorbed I was with such matters. Today, such interests would seem even more odd in virtue of my also being Black. As

stereotype would have it, there were, and continue to be, too many distractions in the lives of Black children, especially those living, as I had, in the "inner city," namely, the Bronx, that should have made such absorption impossible. But I should add that my own experiences varied because, being raised by my young mother who was also taking care of my brothers and extended relatives, my family moved a lot. I can think of only one home in which I have lived

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Lewis R. Gordon & Helen Merritt

longer than three years, and that occurred in my recent adult life.

Writing, then, functioned as a multitude of things that included the ongoing narrative of life. Reality, in other words, continued through layers of written realizations. Although I never kept a diary, my writing and thinking became one. I even considered music a continuation of writing.

So, attending college, where I was expected to write, and write often, was not a burden but an affirmation of something I held dear.

I took as many courses as I could and was eventually invited to participate in an experimental honors program, the Lehman Scholars Program, an offer I almost declined but for the director's love for jazz. I heard some Charlie Parker (it may have been the composition "Confirmation") playing on his old LP player in his office and struck up a conversation with him on jazz. Two years later, I graduated through that program with the wealth of experience and skills of a liberal arts education, which I have not tired of sharing and from which I continue to learn.

That enthusiasm led to my becoming a New York City high school teacher in the 1980s and to my creating The Second Chance Program, a resource for in-school truants at Lehman High School. Given the challenges raised in teaching such students, the principal had told me that a 10% retention rate would have been sufficient for the success of the program. It was fortunate that I was young, enthusiastic, and naïve.

All that enabled me to try things that many thought would fail, and the results were,

instead, an 85% rate of retention of those students completing high school. I was asked to write up a study of the program, which I did, but it struck me that there were several dimensions of my work with those students that I could not formulate in that report. How does one quantify and thematize, in my limited understanding of social scientific assessment at the time, that my colleagues and I succeeded by respecting the humanity of our students?

The answers were not available to me then. I decided to explore them in the world of philosophy, at the time thinking that Aristotle's theory of potentiality offered much fruit for such inquiry. It was thus the case that problems of philosophy of education and its relation to the human condition, of what it means to be a human being, were preoccupations of mine from the beginning of my graduate school career.

I offer this autobiographical narrative because I see a great deal of commitments have come full circle in my receiving this award. It was announced to me at a time in which I was reflecting on work over the past two decades. You see, my professional academic career was inaugurated by my

dissertation on bad faith and antiblack racism. That work was subsequently expanded and published at a time when there was much pressure to examine human reality in oversimplified extremes of structures without individuals on the one hand and individuals devoid of structural

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realities, negative and positive, on the other. I characterized these extremes as forms of bad faith. They involved allegiance to false views of reality, the consequence of which was a set of lies about ourselves. Social structures without individuals could only exist where they are not dependent upon the activities of living people, of creatures with agency and their day-to-day activities. Individuals without structures would have to have been born "whole," so to speak. That human beings have to acquire language, a social skill, proves that we are developmental and highly social-dependent creatures. Both extremes, in other words, collapse under the weight of their own contradictions.

One of the dimensions of bad faith is that it hates to be revealed as what it is. The closer bad faith comes to seeing itself, the more enraged it becomes. That is because it

is a consciousness that is ashamed of itself. Shame, as we know, is about being seen in doing what we would prefer remain hidden. To be "seen" calls for the perspective of another or others. Bad faith, then, is also about anxiety, and at times fear, of what evidence reveals, for the latter is a species of revelation: It is an uncovering of that which unveils additional things. Acts of disclosure, of unconcealment, bring things to the fore that call for us to make decisions. They exemplify a concept in philosophy of education that is presented perhaps more often than any other, namely, that of being *critical*. The words *critic*, *critique*, *criterion*, and *critical* come from the ancient Greek word *krinein*, which means "to choose" and "to decide." To do this, one must judge or make a judgment. And to make a judgment, one must be informed, so one must consider the things that will compel one's judgment. Thus, the related word *krités* (judge) bring everything together with *kritérion*, which is used to make judgments. A striking thing about the Greek origins is how this unfolding understanding of judgment and evidence, that which appears and compels seeing what needs to be seen, is connected. Another word sharing etymological roots with *krinein* is *crisis*. But here, the more anxiety-ridden dimensions of having to choose come to the fore: In a crisis, we face making decisions we wish not to make. We attempt to freeze time, to stop the future, because that difficult choice lurks within the coming moment.

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In some cases, the choice to be made is not very clear, for the outcomes are unpredictable, but we know that whether good or bad, either instantiation carries with it, by virtue of our *decision*, our responsibility.

Bad faith is an effort to hide from responsibility. For the purpose of this lecture, this anxiety brings an ethical dimension to our epistemological demands, to our theory and practices of producing knowledge. Bad faith here becomes our attempt to hide from the responsibility we have as producers and discoverers of knowledge.

Although I am using the language of ethics, I should like to remind everyone that bad faith is not always unethical and immoral. In a society in which nearly everyone is afraid of judgment, the idea of being criticized as such rallies forces of resistance, of (as is by now obvious) bad faith, but a retreat into bad faith makes sense in abusive situations. It also makes sense in a paradoxical admission: Sometimes we seek bad faith as a refuge against an unbearable fact (e.g., the loss of a loved one). The reflections offered here are not condemnations of people who do such. Most of us must prepare ourselves to take on—which often involves returning to—trauma. The ethical concern here is toward our epistemological claims and their development.

Our epistemological development, what we learn and thereby come to know, is another way of referring to our education. Many of us are familiar with the etymology of *education*, in the Latin infinitive *educare*, to bring up, which in turn is related to *educere*, to bring out or to lead. Both terms suggest assisting another in the process of maturation, of growth. The goal of education, read in this way, is to transform children into adults. But, as our discussion of

bad faith reveals, some, if not most, of us are afraid of the responsibility of adult life. Education, then, is also a struggle against bad faith.

We face the first of many pedagogical imperatives: to make ourselves intelligent.

This task of education is linked to several matters that I cannot develop in this lecture but shall present in short form in the hope of enough discussion time for elaboration. The first is that we may be tempted to reformulate this task as an effort to develop good faith. One can, however, avoid reality in good faith, as I have suggested with trauma. One could choose in good faith never to grow up. As instances mount, the inevitable realization makes its appearance: Good faith is also a form of bad faith. Good faith is not the opposite of bad faith. What is needed is attention to the critical norms of evidence, of criteria by which good judgment comes about. Being evidential, these norms must appear in their nakedness, they must be revealed, which in principle means that they must transcend the self into its relationship with others. They

must, in phenomenological language, be intersubjective.

We are drawn into a dimension of reality when we recognize and respect a world of others. We learn that our inner life echoes outer meaning, and we face bringing in layers of reality as understood within the framework of human experience. Let us call this intersubjective framework of experience *the social world*. In bad faith, we attempt to hide from the social world. A way of hiding from that world is to dehumanize it. We treat it as an ossified structure, as an unyielding force against which our decisions do not matter. If our actions make no difference, how, then, can we be responsible for them? I have never been ashamed to call my work humanistic. It is an admission for which I have received criticism in the postmodern academy. My argument, however, was, and continues to be, that failure to articulate the human dimensions of human phenomena leads to acts of evasion that often collapse into repression. To make human beings into what we are not requires rallying our social forces against us. I characterized this in my first book as *institutional bad faith*. It involves constructing norms, rationalizations, social edifices, symbols, places, and anything that could influence social life in ways that facilitate self-deception and the erosion of the human spirit. As expected, a prime example of this is what has been done to many schools, but especially public ones. The recent emphasis on testing, in, for example, the No Child Left

Behind national policy, is an effort to make thought routine and devoid of critical reflection. The logical consequence of a generally unthinking public is now our fate. And it is so at a time when humanity is facing unparalleled ecological, economic, and political dangers. We face the first of many pedagogical imperatives: to make ourselves intelligent. Jane Anna Gordon and I raised the concept of a pedagogical imperative in our introduction to A

Companion to African-American Studies, which Jane Anna Gordon has also discussed in her article "Beyond Anti-Elitism: Black Studies and the Pedagogical Imperative." It was introduced in the *Companion* to make

explicit what was implicit in the outrage we noticed many students felt toward correlated disciplines that were subfields of African American Studies but of which the latter was often presented as a subfield. For example, African American philosophy is considered a subfield of philosophy, but in African American Studies, philosophy enters as a subfield. In more prosaic form, the discipline of philosophy is supposed to be universal whereas the field of African American philosophy is supposed to be particular. What we noticed was that students were often surprised at the array of critical questions they could discuss in African

American philosophy or in African philosophy courses versus those listed simply as "Philosophy" or "Introduction to Philosophy" or even, as is oddly more acceptable, "Anglo-Analytical Philosophy" or "Continental Philosophy" or "Ancient Philosophy." The last two often require the adjective "European" and "Greek" or "Greek and Latin" to become precise. In African philosophy and African American philosophy courses, students often

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draw upon resources in philosophy beyond things African or African American. In other words, there is a constant reminder of the scope of the inquiry. In the other approaches, the discussion is often offered by proponents as though the other perspectives did not and do not exist, or as though if they were to exist, they would be illegitimate. There, universality is espoused through denial of its limit; it is a rejection of the "outside" by denying its existence. Reality, from such an approach, is constantly contracting. The students' outrage is stimulated, however, by the realization of what I shall call epistemological laziness in the case of some instructors and willful ignorance in those of others. It is from realizing that the educator has not made the effort to learn and appreciate the scope of reality. Rephrased: Part of teaching is learning. To teach, one must learn, but not just learn. One must also learn to learn.

Research and scholarship have received much derision in American political life in recent times. There have been attacks on research universities, especially by political agitators demanding the reprimanding of professors who expect students to expand their historical and political horizons. In typical bad faith, these agents of naysay claim actually to be defending an expansion of civic discourse through what they call "balance." But this so-called balance is often reduced to the political identity of professors, as though one's political identity is like one's racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual identity. Although an exception could always be found for each rule about human communities, we should remember that thinking often challenges one's political views over time, and in other times involves holding a variety of political positions on different issues across a spectrum. A forced "balance" promises to become a superficial imposition of other factors on thought, and the adjustments and at times acts of coercion necessary to create such a result will divert the energies of research to begin with. It is, in other words, a disruption of a relationship by which critical reflection may come about. That there is fear of critical thinking today means that these disruptions are efforts to saturate our educational institutions with bad faith. As many of us already know, there are many scholars who no longer discuss certain subjects in their classrooms, and these are often matters in which they are at times

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the leading experts. Philosophers among us may immediately think of Kant's categorical imperative when I speak of pedagogical imperatives. Kant, as some of us know, thought much about maturation as well, especially in his reflection on enlightenment.

I do not always agree with Kant, but I do agree with him on more matters than I often expect. The question of maturation gains its categorical character from the silliness of posing the question to the immature. To the child, it is a question for which appreciation and gratitude belong to the future self.

Freud, by the way, in his essay "The Relation of the Poet to Daydreaming," reflected:

"The play of children is determined by their wishes—really by the child's *one* wish, which is to be grown-up, the wish that helps to 'bring him up'" (p. 36).

I love Freud's candor. The connection of this observation to the thoughts presented in this lecture should be apparent. He offers some insight to the disruptions, to the bad faith, of which I have been speaking:

[The child] always plays at being grown-up; in play he imitates what is known to him of the lives of adults. Now he has no reason to conceal this wish. With the adult it is otherwise; on the one hand, he knows that he is expected not to play any longer or to day-dream, but to be making his way in a real world. On the other hand, some

of the wishes from which his phantasies spring are such as have to be entirely hidden; therefore he is ashamed of his phantasies as being childish and as something prohibited. (pp. 36–37).

We see here some of Freud's familiar concerns about frustration and repression. But we also see an insight into adult life often overlooked: that adulthood and maturation are not always identical.

A difference between an adult and a child is that the former is responsible for her or his maturation. The child wants it; the adult must, often begrudgingly, accept it. This is so for the adult because of the ever-incomplete reality of being human. The child knows that it must become she or he who in turn is to become something more. But the adult is always not-quite-there, and the determination of what it is to become must be taken on more than given. Reality, the adult discovers, is always bigger than any of us. Save G-d. But we do not have to discuss that here since this is a human story, not a theological or metaphysical one.

In more recent writings, I have argued that a failure to take heed of the pedagogical imperative of expanding our horizons, of taking heed of reality being bigger than we

are, is decadent. I call it *disciplinary decadence*. In its various forms, disciplinary decadence involves turning away from reality through a variety of obsessive absolutes. We could make our methods deontological, by which I mean treating them as absolute imperatives. The problem is that our

methods are often developed as a response to problems posed by reality. But the piece of reality addressed by a method, especially one that generated a particular discipline, may only be part of a larger puzzle, or

worse, may cease to exist, which would make attachment to the method impractical at best and neurotic at worst. In the case of the latter, the method has become a substitute for reality, and the practitioner attempts to squeeze reality into the method, and the discipline, or even more perverse, the subfield of the disciplines. One's perspective, in this instance, becomes the world, and more extreme: all of reality. It logically ceases to be *intersubjective*. Frantz Fanon, the revolutionary philosopher and psychiatrist from Martinique, identified this methodological problem as entailing a form of epistemological colonization. It involves the generation of colonizing practices at the levels of presumed validity of methods.

Thinking through Søren Kierkegaard, one of my favorite writers and, although he would

The ability to know and understand us without harming us is a profound act of love.

espouse otherwise, philosophers, I offer a *teleological suspension of disciplinarity* as an alternative. This means being willing to suspend (not get rid of) one's discipline or perspective for the sake of reality. It means recognizing there is a there that enables each of us to announce a *here*. This at first complicated expression reminds us of purpose, that we should, for example, understand how reality places limits on our ways of learning about and living it. That we are part of that reality means that we should also take seriously the role we play in our own pursuits. Since I have argued for the pedagogical imperative of teachers being learners, which is the spirit of research, it

follows that a teleological suspension of disciplinarity is a pedagogical imperative. It offers learning not only for the researcher, but also for whom he or she educates.

Recent political conflicts, especially those regarding the rhetoric of politicians, have led to much public distrust of political institutions, especially government. Critics warn against inefficiency and other supposed dangers of public (i.e., government-run) institutions such as public schools and national health funded hospitals. Yet in spite

of the many failures of private-controlled institutions of public resources, of their inefficiency and corruption, the public is called upon by ideologues to place more faith in those institutions than those that, by virtue of being extensions of the government, are accountable to the citizenry. As we know with such matters, the collapse of reasoning that leads to the same evidence presented for the future of an

institution in one context is offered for its success in another. The rhetoric in support of the latter often conceals important considerations that would subject it to the same criteria of the former. How can we defend regulatory and de-regulatory practices whose purpose was to make "us" wealthier as they

make most of "us" poorer? How can we do the same when it makes most of "us" less educated, less physically healthy, and more psychologically confused? The hidden answers rest on the meaning of "we" and "us," and this rhetoric is sometimes masked in the language of "understanding." I recall two colleagues arguing over the general stupidity of the American public who seek politicians who are like them. The critic said intelligent people would prefer someone who is not like them, someone from whom they could learn something. The other colleague

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at first agreed, pointing out what at first may seem similar to my point about *educare*, that one should not aim at remaining the same.

My response, however, was that what many supporters of such politicians are saying is that people who are more like them are more likely to understand them and may better be able to serve their needs. This at first sounds good, but it is only so through presuming that the politician who understands them is not simply an opportunist. As many of us know about situations of abuse, it is those who know and understand us most who can harm us the most. Think of how much worse it could be if what they understand is our stupidity. The ability to know and understand us without harming us is a profound act of love. It is no doubt the basis for the profound devotion and overwhelming sense of gratitude Christians have for their god. To walk among humanity with such power and not destroy most around one requires extraordinary forbearance whose effortlessness could only be explained by love. (Some might add disinterest, but that would contradict the whole point of walking among humankind.) Intelligence demands, then, more than a call for understanding. We return here to the argument about critical norms of evidence, about what needs to be teleologically suspended, about the imperatives of learning, about pedagogical imperatives.

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I could very well have chosen examples from a variety of other disciplines and social practices, as I have in *Disciplinary Decadence*, but the context of this lecture is education, so I have focused on that. Education is politically charged today because our society has placed it as a

public good. In many other societies, especially ancient ones, what is to be learned by most is simply to take the place of *their* parents, and what is available to few, which is often connected to replacing their parents,

is knowledge of how to rule. When all, or at least most, are expected to play a role in some dimension of ruling, which amounts to learning how to rule themselves as each other, intersubjectively, taking the place of one's parents is not always clear.

One may take on one's parents' *social role* but with different tasks. The range of things to learn includes activities to master, and among them is clear thinking. Such thinking requires mastery of a list of related things that include language and writing. These affect an essential element of political life, namely, speech. It also affects one's ability to decipher what others are saying, which means knowing, for instance, when one is being had. In a wonderful essay entitled

"Politics and the English Language," George Orwell concluded with the following counsel:

. . . the present political chaos is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at

the verbal end. If you simplify your English, you are freed from the worst follies of orthodoxy. You cannot speak any of the necessary dialects, and when you make a stupid remark its stupidity will be obvious, even

to yourself. Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists [we often forget that left-wing extremism is not socialism but anarchy]—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind. (p. 120)

I began this discussion with some reflections on bad faith because, as I am hoping is now clear, I am arguing against the evasion of reality. An aspect of reality that human beings seem especially to be afraid of is human reality. We seem to be so ashamed of ourselves that we attempt to conceal ourselves from our institutions. The effort to

construct human institutions that could take on the pedagogical imperative of liberating our pedagogical imperatives in many dimensions of human life is an option we are fortunate to have as our choice. It means, echoing Orwell's understated optimism, that there is still much that can be done and, thus, much to do. ■

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