SLOTERDIJK’S NIETZSCHEAN PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper takes up Peter Sloterdijk’s seminal treatment of Heidegger’s ‘Letter on Humanism’ (Sloterdijk, 2009) as a means of re-examining what might constitute a post-modern education for our times. It does so by elaborating and then extending the features of both Sloterdijk’s criticism of Heidegger and his views on Humanism, with references to several philosophical themes drawn from the works of Nietzsche. In particular, the paper aims to examine the educational implications of Sloterdijk’s ideas, presented here and elsewhere (e.g. Sloterdijk, 2013), in light of Nietzsche’s views on morality, metaphysics, the role of the artist, time, and his concept of ‘the eternal return’. Specifically, this paper seeks to combine educational readings of Sloterdijk and Nietzsche to demonstrate the viability of an educational philosophy that is more expansive and artistic than those enacted through contemporary practices in schooling and higher education.

Humanism and a world of friendship

Let us begin with Peter Sloterdijk’s characterization of the “the quintessential nature and function of humanism: It is telecommunication in the medium of print to underwrite friendship” (Sloterdijk, 2009: p. 12). Humanism in this sense is a process of mediation between people, in this case through one of the most ubiquitous, enduring and transportable means of communication since antiquity: the written word. Yet, Sloterdijk’s rendition of humanism as telecommunication should not be interpreted as a nostalgic or romantic attempt to underscore the superiority or the privilege of the written word. Rather his use of telecommunication is meant to capture the importance of media as much as the importance of a (particular) medium in gathering a people. Thus we should see Sloterdijk’s definition of humanism as an historically dynamic one; and moreover, one that challenges us to consider what medium or media might still permit the type of community-gathering function that literary works have made manifest over the past two millennia. This definition also asks us to pay attention to the presence of “friendship” as the object of humanistic telecommunication: not in a trite way, but rather in a profound contrast with the field of human conflict and violence. Humanism is thus a gesture or practice of pacification, of actively reaching out or search for an amicable confraternity or sorority of human beings.

The humanist tradition of reading and writings texts is a telecommunicative activity of a rather peculiar kind. The physical robustness of the written medium allows it to travel further in space and time – to be preserved, passed on, stolen, inherited, lost and found. It is an invitation sent as surely to the distant stranger as the person or persons to whom it was specifically addressed. It is a tradition that survives in the very text you are reading: chances are that you and I have never met and may not ever meet, and still my words found their way to your eyes; my ideas spring forth in your agreement or disagreement with the sense of what is written here: whether or not I have succeeded in my task of writing clearly and poetically. Sloterdijk describes this humanistic tradition of writing thus: “It shoots an arrow into the air…with the objective of revealing an unknown friend and enticing him into the circle of friendship” (ibid, p. 13). For the author there is the risk is that arrow will land in the cold earth – but the small chance of penetrating the heart of someone whose mind yields to one’s own thoughts and puts down her guard, even temporarily, justifies the writer’s every effort and intention. Writing as an act of disarming and pacifying, both the sender and the receiver; of creating friendship against the ever present potential for enmity; it brings the act of writing and reading texts to the field of agápe or love.

Erotically seen, the message represents a case of love at a distance – and this entirely in the
sense of Nietzsche, who knew that writing has the power to transmit love not only to one’s nearest and dearest, but also, through the next person encountered, into the unknown, distant, future life. (Sloterdijk 2009, p. 13)

We take for granted now how the written word has stretched across time and space. Perhaps the Internet has produced a sudden recognition of the spatial-temporal transcendence of communication-in-a-flash whose afterimage has obscured our perception of the slow and steady creep of words. Letters and books were the historical precursor to the contemporary practice of ‘friend-ing’ or ‘liking’ on social media.

In fact, the reader who sits down to a thick book can approach it as an invitation to a gathering; and should he be moved by the contents, he thereby enters the circle of the Called, making himself available to receive the message. (ibid, p. 13)

While references to humanist media and social media are close on this page, it is worthwhile reflecting on an important distinction between the two. For while both media are the means of securing friendship across space and time, the humanist project, as we shall see later, has the telos of overcoming the innate human tendency towards violence and conflict; whereas the gatherings of social media take an already pacified world largely for granted.

In light of the view that humanism can be seen as a literary activity that extends over space and time, so too should we reflect on the fact that humanist education – education that strives against conflict and towards peace – is an historically located activity that has (and continues to use) the written word as a means of binding educators and the educated into a community. While the dominant medium of education remains the written word we might hardly be able to distinguish contemporary education from its ostensibly humanistic antecedent; were it not for the fact that the rhetoric of education remains stubbornly ironic: in a time of peace educationists continue to find something to fight or complain about.

The pax romana that characterizes education today is far from utopian, but not because education has failed to achieve the kind of passivity that could only have been dreamed of in ancient times (it has! – one need only consider how the passivity of the educated and the educators is lock-step with the sleep-walking induced by consumer culture to see how successful education is at overcoming the kind of bestial violence of previous centuries). It is because education as telecommunication-towards-peace exacts a price. The arrow shot into the air means we can never know with any certainty or completeness the true extent of the community to which we have been gathered.

At best we can affirm and re-affirm our membership by retracing the steps that have brought us into friendship with others and to send out invitations to community in new ways. We must constantly ask after the source of our understanding and its significance. We are compelled to seek out the works – and the workers – to with whom we feel an affiliation: intellectually, spiritually and physically. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we find ourselves singing the songs of others whose music brings us peace and comfort. As Emerson reminds us: “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty” (Emerson, 1936, p. 31). So too do we feel the call to send forth words into the world that confirm our membership of a society. If we succeed then our words resonate in sympathy with those to whom we say: “we are Called by the same being” (Sloterdijk, 2009, p. 13); although, if we fail, the risk of excommunication at falls upon us as silence, at best; and at worst, as a violent rejection. The humanist project, whether literary or educational, has written into its very genes the threat of bestial conflict or exile into the wilderness.

There are occasions to be sure when our friendships are not in question, when belonging can be taken for granted. Stanley Cavell expresses this situation lucidly when he writes: “once you recognize a community as yours, then it speaks for you until you say it doesn’t, i.e. until you show that you do” (Cavell, 1979, p 28); and later:

A fortunate community is one in which the issue is least costly to raise; and only necessary to raise on brief, widely spaced, and agreed upon occasions; and, when raised, offers a state of affairs you can speak for, i.e. allows you to reaffirm the polis. (ibid, p. 28)
The risk of conflict or exile are palpable in Cavell’s articulation of what counts as a community, yet the words “community” or “polis”, while capturing the political nature of belonging, do not go far enough in extending the fruits of membership into the broader spatial-temporal domain of the unknown. It is as if the criteria for membership of a community – with criteria here read in the Wittgensteinian sense argued for by Cavell (ibid.) – arise from the language games and speech acts of its members as political agents. While this is certainly in keeping with the Cavellian reading of Wittgenstein’s ‘agreements in judgment’ (see Mulhall, 1994), it does not do justice to the long spatial and temporal reach of the invitation to friendship carried aloft the medium of writing. Sloterdijk’s depiction of humanism calls for an integration over a special-temporal range that makes ordinary language usage appear myopic. Put more forcefully, Cavell’s sense of community is of the right kind but on a limited scale – that is, too restrictive in both space and time.

In order that we understand why we would want to extend the Cavellian sense of community far into space and time, we ought to understand that firstly, such communities may be thought of as worlds in a Heideggerian sense, and should be distinguished from both the World and what I shall refer to later as the Cosmos. We should also hold in mind that dwelling in such worlds is but a stepping-stone towards a more expansive, Nietzschean way of being.

World, world and Cosmos

We have seen how the arrows shot into the air via the telecommunication channels of humanist literature – both in their production through writing and their reception through reading – have opened up the possibility of collecting a people; calling them together through an invitation to friendship. Moreover, the reciprocity between invitation and reception means that the strength of that collective is affected as much in the direction of known or imagined past as it is through the promise of gathering souls from the future. Yet what makes this temporal invariance so important is that the strength of the collective power is vested in the strength of conviction at either end of the exchange. It is the sincerity with which the message is sent and received that marks the endurancce of the gathering. Likewise, the physical limitations of space are overcome by the degree to which one finds an enduring sense of proximity to friends at their respective spatial locations. So, while humanist telecommunication sends threads tied to arrows across space and time, it is the strengths of the knots or tethering at each end that help secure the entire collective enterprise. Seen in this way, the worlds we inhabit are the integration over space and time of the networks in which the threads of telecommunication are in tension.

In the humanist tradition worlds are set up and mediated through the kind of literature that instantiates such strong commitments, and hence secures a community. More generally this mediation occurs through language and this takes us closer to Heidegger’s now famous aphorism that “language is the house of the truth of being” (Heidegger, 1978, p. 217) and also the ‘idea’ of Dasein, which Heidegger took as a special manifestation of Being. Sloterdijk (2009) addresses the question of language, world and the peculiarity of Dasein in two important and original ways that are pertinent to discussions of education. The first concerns itself with the natural history of human beings and the second with their social; both of which, Sloterdijk argues, were underrepresented in Heidegger’s exploration of the distinction between Dasein and other ontological entities.

Sloterdijk reminds us that there is a rather more prosaic foundation to Heidegger’s sense of Dasein being peculiar as an entity other than that it is the being that is able to pose the question of Being. My interpretation of Sloterdijk’s elaboration on Heidegger rests on a distinction between World and world. We might think of the former as the umwelten available to all beings: animals, tress, rocks, as well as the chairs and pieces of wax that skeptical philosophers so fondly refer to. Sloterdijk (2009) argues that our hominid ancestors were once members of this ontological domain (World): one could say that animality dominated the forms of life of our evolutionary ancestors – they were the kinds of beings that could evidently not ask after the question of Being. Yet the evolution of modern humans was characterized by a degree of encephalization that resulted in human infants having to be birthed long before they were mature. That is, human beings are born neotenous; when they enter the World (the
A self-same World of animals, rocks, etc.) they are ill prepared and vulnerable. “Because of his shattered animality, the indeterminate being falls out of the environment and manages to develop a world in an ontological sense” (ibid, p. 20).

What is remarkable about the creative works of human beings is that in concert with this biological evolution of hominids was a co-development of social practices and traditions that created a world within a World, and that world is for Sloterdijk one closely associated with language:

The traditional languages of man make ecstasy of Being-in-the-World endurable in that they showed man how his being in the world could also be experiences as being-alongside-oneself. Insofar as the Lichtung is an event on the border between natural and cultural histories, human coming to the world takes the form of a coming to language. (ibid, p. 21)

It is well worth noting here that the experience of being-along-oneself – what psychologists call a theory of mind – has its origins in the social, historical and evolutionary development of human worldhood. One might say that it is by virtue of being born into a world that Dasein can ask after the question of Being.

What is crucial in the demarcation between World and world is not just the degree to which a world is already prepared for us and available to us in infancy – what Lev Vygotsky thought of as being born into a sea of language – it is also the fact that the world is there to protect us – to inoculate us – against both the shock of the World and the lure of the World. That is, worlds allow us to shut ourselves off from the kind of animality that would expose us to the irrational, contingent and dangerous elements of wilderness. Setting up such worlds has taken countless generations of energetic, innovative and cultural input and has manifested in complex cultural structures like states or religions, literary practices or moral frameworks. It is no wonder then that they take on the aura of a timeless and university certainty. The world of the  infant is, and ought to be, a metaphysical world – a world that promises and delivers transcendence from the animality of the World and towards the humanity of a world. Education too, especially in its manifest tendency towards conservatism, underpins a social and individual commitment to this metaphysics.

Alongside this biological evolution towards the establishment of worldhood, the more recent history of human social evolution as brought forth a novel inflection on the ontological foundations of worlds. For the development and advancement of settled agrarian cultures and the increasing levels of urbanization have cemented a kind of being-in-the-world that hinges on domestication (Sloterdijk, p. 21). The distinction between the interior and the exterior – the dualism of a contemplative inner life versus the wild and dangerous world outside; but also the stark distinctions between the parochial and the global – has deepened the imperative to close ourselves off from the World for our own good (through rationality and the pacifying effects of civilized literary practices). Culture and education, in both high and low forms, are the means by which we are reminded of the risk of slipping back into animality and the beckoning of the ‘natural’ World. Domestication becomes a model for the taming of the self – the art of self-inhibition.

The setting up of worlds in relation to the World might serve us well as necessary metaphysical sanctuaries for neotenous human beings. When the infant is most vulnerable, the necessity of these ontological domains seems most compelling. Perhaps it is for this reason that we consider infant education as quite distinct from that of children. Cavell certainly makes this point with respect to the role of philosophy as ‘education for grown-ups’ (see Cavell, 2012). Yet, the walls of sanctuary are simultaneously the walls of a prison. The gains afforded by excluding animality are diminished by the loss of access to a broader set of ontological possibilities. Moreover, for as long as we assume that the only possibilities cut off from us through taming and domestication are those found in the World, the more reasonable and comfortable one feels like staying inside. The danger for humanist education is not that it sets up collectives that are tethered by literary modes of telecommunication and hence define a social and cultural enclave. Rather the danger of humanist education is that it fails to go far enough in gathering beings from the outside; and by this I do not mean in the manner of the Enlightenment encyclopedists who plundered entities from the World only to secure them in literary or
material wunderkammer prisons.

Given the proceeding exposition of world and World, I want to introduce the word Cosmos to index that distinctive ontological domain, that is neither a world (a linguistic house of being), nor the World (a metaphysically motivated synonym for the ever-present ‘outside’: the dualistic partner to the interior world).

The cosmological artist

Recall that what we have set up here, following Sloterdijk’s interpretation of Dasein, dwelling, the Clearing and other concepts within the complex of Heideggerian thought, in conjunction with the biological and social evolution of human beings, is a picture in which dwelling in modernity has come to be characterized by a domestication of self – a kind of dwelling to be sure, but one that sadly draws a limiting distinction between animality and humanity: between beings and the being that is Dasein.

As suggested earlier, education may take on the role of servant to a powerful and enduring feature that that helps sustain and support this world-World picture. We might think of this as an ontological distinction between human beings and non-human beings. Evolution has resulted in animals that have reached and crossed a critical threshold: once hominid animals were able to pose philosophical questions of the kind “what is the meaning of Being” they were ontologically distinct from animals and mere things.

It is important to note that this distinction can be either strong or weak. The strong version, which Heidegger would subscribe to, has humans inhabiting worlds exclusively. These worlds are occupied with organic bodies, but we cannot ever see these bodies apart from their involvement in the complexes of our world-making and world-dwelling. What is striking about this view is the connotation that somehow humans can (and should) rise to the authenticity of being of Dasein, but not move beyond it, around it or orthogonally to it. The weaker version affords much more continuity between being human and being animal, or indeed non-human. This is the view from antiquity that human beings are rational animals. It is rationality, reason, logic, language – whatever you would care to call – that is that substance or feature that pushes us further away from bestiality. The moral force of the strong case is a positive one towards the authenticity of Dasein, whereas the weaker formulation of the distinction has the negative moral imperative of the fugitive: a flight away from animality. In both the weak and the strong cases, worlds create the conditions of closed interiority that make easier the business of becoming-authentic or ratcheting away from animality through the acquisition of reason. We can see how readily education is able to serve either or both of these positions. Perhaps it is not surprising given the origins of the modern western education system in the cloistered environments of medieval monastic orders.

Earlier I introduced the ontological domain of the Cosmos as something quite distinct from the world or World, and in light of the discussion above, it is evident that both the insular Heideggerian pathway towards authenticity and the enlightened pathway away from animality exclude any movement towards the ‘cosmological’. So what is the cosmological and what kind of activity or ways of being trace a path towards it?

Here I want to call upon the powerful and provocative image provided by Nietzsche in Thus Spake Zarathustra:

Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the superman – a rope over an abyss. A dangerous crossing, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous trembling and halting. What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal: what is lovable in man is that he is over-going and down-going. (Nietzsche, 1909 p. 30)

It is the domain of being on the other side of the abyss that constitutes a Cosmos that is neither the World of the animal, nor the world of humans. Indeed, a return to animality, nature or wilderness will bring us no closer to the cosmological. Remaining human, whether all too human or as an exulted rational being or the authentic Dasein, offers more hope – humanity is a pathway to an overcoming –
but not while being human demands the conditions of dwelling, domestication, and taming.

The *Cosmos* is the ontological domain of the infinite – the open and eternally recurring and inexhaustible field of possibility. The *Cosmos* is an ontological manifold that encompasses the possibility of rationality as well as the possibility of animality. Once we are there we might look back without fear or trepidation to discover the rope, the abyss and the “other” side too have disappeared; absorbed as they are into the welcoming abundance of infinity. Only when we are fearful; when we partition of a part of the cosmos and call it safe and secure, do we start to tremble. If Nietzsche finds humans loveable because they are “going-over” to the *Cosmos*, it is because they are also “going-down” to be consumed by the infinite.

How then are we to access the cosmological? The answer is to live one’s life as artists do: live it not just as if it was part of an infinite universe; but to make one’s life draw upon the infinite possibilities that rest in the universe. Heidegger understood that the poet and artist draw meaning from the earth without every exhausting or using-up its resources. So, too does Nietzsche see the importance of artists in drawing forth and returning possibilities to the chaos of an eternally recurring cosmos: to will is the courage to be an artist!

Such a way of being does not permit dwelling and it is certainly not in search of a kind of education that would have us stay still indoors. Moreover, unlike the humanist who must constantly affirm and re-affirm her membership to a community, the cosmological artist may take for granted her membership of the infinite and timeless *Cosmos*. The infinite thus calls on education too to be the fearless work of artists.

**References**


